NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

A Latrobe Letter in the William Jones Collection

This letter from Benjamin Henry Latrobe\(^1\) ends conclusively the controversy over the designer of the Second Bank of the United States. Those interested in the architectural history of Philadelphia and of this country have been eager to have the question settled, since the building, completed in 1824, has long been considered both by Americans and Europeans one of the finest in this country. The Second Bank of the United States is significant for intrinsic merits of proportion and construction, and because it was one of the first attempts to copy the Parthenon in Athens—hence it is a landmark in the course of the Greek Revival.

The building housed the Second Bank of the United States from April, 1824, until 1836, when Andrew Jackson refused to renew the charter of the Bank. Next it served as the banking house of the United States Bank of Pennsylvania until the failure of that institution in 1841. In 1844, it was bought by the Federal Government and used as a Customs House from 1845 to 1934. Now a National Historic Site under the supervision of the National Park Service, it has been repaired and restored by WPA funds, and in 1941 it was leased to the Carl Schurz Foundation.

This building has been attributed both to Latrobe and to Strickland.\(^2\) Even the bronze tablet put up by the National Park Service

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2 In the private collection of Ferdinand C. Latrobe of Baltimore there are twenty volumes of letters, polygraphic copies of B. H. Latrobe’s correspondence, 1800–1820. Unfortunately, it has been impossible to check whether a copy of this letter is in that collection or how many other letters touch upon this subject. For an account of the various attributions, see “Latrobe vs. Strickland,” by Agnes Addison, *Journal of the American Society of Architectural Historians* (July, 1942), II, no. 3.
states: "A notable example of Greek Revival Architecture, this building follows in many regards Latrobe's design of 1818. It was erected 1819-1824 by his pupil, Strickland." After the war, the tablet is to be changed to state that William Strickland was the architect. Latrobe was responsible for the uncertainty of authorship, for his misleading assertion in Ackermann's Repository, January, 1821, was widely read. The sentence was, "Mr. LaTrobe adds, that the bank of the United States now building by one of his pupils, Mr. Strickland, is his design, but that the principal room is a deviation from it." The following letter, recently acquired by The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, presents some of the background for Latrobe's statement and shows clearly how misleading it was.

Springfield, Massachusetts

AGNES ADDISON

Capt. John Meany

Philadelphia, Sept. 23, 1818

Dear Sir,

The very kind interest you have taken in the success of my design for the Bank of the UStates, and your question whether I had called upon the president of Bank, requires that I should be very candid with you on this subject.

3 This letter was among the papers of William Jones, now in the Uselma Clark Smith Collection. Philadelphian, 1760-1831. In Navy during Revolution and became lieutenant. Served in Merchant Marine, 1790-1793. Successful shipping merchant in Philadelphia. In U. S. Congress, 1801-1803. Secretary of the Navy, 1813-1814, during a difficult period, the War of 1812 and the attack upon Washington. May, 1813-1814, acting Sec'y of the Treasury. First President of the Second Bank of the United States, 1816-1819, when forced to resign in disgrace. His mismanagement of the Bank was due to ignorance rather than to veniality. Secretary of the American Fire Insurance Co. and Collector of Customs, Philadelphia, 1827-1829. Author of Reflections upon the Perils and Difficulties of the Winter Navigation of the Delaware, 1822. This pamphlet was important as the first step in bringing about the erection of the Delaware Breakwater, which greatly helped the port of Philadelphia.

4 Captain John Meany, Philadelphia merchant. Listed in the Directory for 1817 as at 9 Walnut—dwelling Walnut, 7 doors above Ninth.

5 The Second Bank of the United States was chartered April 10, 1816. Notices first appeared in the Philadelphia newspapers May 12, 1818, inviting "Architects of science and experience" to submit plans by August 1. On July 28, the time for handing in "appropriate designs and elevations for a Banking House" was extended to August 31.

6 William Jones. See note 3 above.
My design of the Bank was submitted with a perfect knowledge of all the mortification that it would make me suffer.—I was warned by a director in July last, that if I entered the lists, & produced the most unexceptional plan possible, a plan far, & evidently inferior to the rest, still it would be rejected. The reasons why this would be the case were pointed out. But I received also encouragement from another quarter, and I adventured in this lottery with my eyes open.—I cannot therefore reasonably complain of my fate, nor could I have complained had my design been entirely rejected, and the worst of the whole collection adopted.—

But since my arrival now in Philadelphia, I have been made acquainted with circumstances, that, if true,—throw a very different shade upon the situation in which I stand. They are stated to be as follows:

Mr. Strickland offered to the Bank a design, the Sketch of which has been shown to me. The principle features were: A basement

7 Nine drawings of Latrobe's design for the Bank are preserved in the H.S.P. They are inscribed as follows:

3. Section of the U. S. Bank from N to S, July 21, 1818 BHL (inking poor and washes harsh, not finished by Latrobe)
4. Plan of the principal Floor, U. S. Bank, July 22, 1818—BHL
5. Plan of the second storey Bank U. S., July 22, 1818—B.Henry Latrobe (Signed with a flourish.)
6. Section of the U. States Bank E & W July 22nd 1818. B.H. Latrobe
7. Elevation of the Flank Bank U.States (no date or signature)
8. Drawing with no inscription, date or signature. Appears to be section through Stockholders room.
9. Design for the Bank UStates, the Elevation and Section on a diminished scale as above transmitted Sepr 19 1818, to Wm Jones President B.H. Latrobe

(The date has been changed. Fiske Kimball reads it as the nineteenth. It could not have been that originally, for Latrobe always used a straight downward line for nines and this is curved. It appears originally to have been a five and then a small one inserted and a circle added to the head of the five.)

In Washington, D. C., in the Office of the Supervising Architect of the Treasury, there are also drawings by Latrobe of the Second Bank of the United States, namely, thirteen large drawings dated August 1-24, 1818, of which ten are signed “J.H.B.L. del.” There are also two memoirs, one dated Aug. 1, 1818, the other Aug. 24, 1818. Both are signed. See “The Bank of the United States 1818–1824,” by Fiske Kimball, *Architectural Record* (1925), LVIII, pt. 2.

8 This paragraph is expressive of Latrobe’s inverted sense of humor, touchy vanity and petulance.

9 William Strickland, 1789–1854. Pupil of Latrobe. Architect of Merchants Exchange, St. Stephens Church, Naval Asylum and many other buildings now torn down. Railroad
story 20 or 24 feet high, rusticated, with a single door in the center, windows in the sides, and a compleat Doric entablature all round. Upon this basement was mounted an Ionic temple very much resembling the Bank of Pennsylvania but without a Dome.—

The whole principle of such a design of which the exterior & interior contradicted each other would be erroneous, however well digested in detail, & a board of Architects would instantly have rejected it. But such it was when the drawings were opened on the 1st of Sept.

After that day, & before the 14th when the choice was made, Strickland had permission to withdraw his design & he produced one the external elevation of which is said to be very similar to that presented by me.— Mr. Jones is accused by public opinion of having thus favored the individual, whose project was greatly inferior to the beautiful model of Mr. Bridport, and to that of Mr. surveyor, and in charge of the construction of the Delaware Breakwater. Architect of Tennessee State Capitol. Painter of view of Christ Church exhibited in hall of H.S.P. Etcher, engraver and aquatintner, many examples of his work are to be seen in the Manuscript Department of the H.S.P.

None of the large Strickland drawings has been found. In the collection of Strickland drawings in the State Library, Nashville, there are a few small drawings of details of the bank. Prints of the front elevation and ground plan appeared in magazines. The front elevation, "Designed by W. Strickland Archt," in the Analectic Magazine (March, 1819), XIII, no. 3. An elevation and ground plan in the Port Folio, September, 1821, with a description "from the pen of the ingenious architect, Mr. William Strickland, by whom the plan was designed."

With the omission of the Doric entablature, this design of an Ionic temple on a rusticated Doric base was used for the Capitol in Nashville.

One of the first buildings in Philadelphia designed by Latrobe. Erected 1799-1801, often cited as one of the first examples of the Greek Revival in this country, but still using the Roman Dome.

Since the result of the competition appeared in the Philadelphia Gazette on Saturday, September 12, it is certain that the choice was made before the fourteenth, when the same notice was copied by the other Philadelphia papers. Evidently, Latrobe did not see the original notice.

The Bank and the Latrobe drawings are similar in that both have Doric porticos on basements with wide steps leading to the main entrance. There are differences in proportion and detail.

Hugh Bridport, artist and engraver from England, was in Philadelphia at this time and with his brother, George, had a drawing academy at 6 S. Eighth Street. He engraved the plates for The Builders' Assistant by John Haviland (Phila., 1818). George Escol Sellers, in his manuscript memoirs, recalls Bridport and his model, which after the competition was put in the garden. It was evidently a very fine architectural model. Both Hugh and his brother exhibited in the annual exhibitions of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.
Hadfield, & which in fact, would have disgraced the city and the present state of the arts in this country.—

If the facts are as stated to me by 6 credible witnesses who have seen the drawings, then have I and all the other artists been most unfairly treated, and had I not received the awarded second premium before I learned these particulars, I certainly would have made a more particular enquiry before I had resigned my right to the design which I had submitted, under the expectation that nothing unfair would occur.

It is very evident that I cannot venture prudently to enter into conversation with any officer of the Bank on this subject, & be-

16 George Hadfield, 1764-1826. Studied in England under James Wyatt and won travelling fellowship to Rome. Gave promise of great brilliance. Superintendent of the building of the Capitol at Washington, Oct. 15, 1795-May 28, 1798. Had great difficulty with Thornton and, owing to lack of practical experience, was not successful in supervising the construction. Stayed in Washington and designed many buildings there, but his spirit seemed to be broken by his early failure and he never became the outstanding architect that his youthful promise suggested.

17 See, Anniversary oration pronounced before the Society of Artists of the United States, May 8, 1811, by B. Latrobe.

18 Some of the “credible witnesses” may have been members of the building committee, who, at the laying of the cornerstone on April 19, 1819, were Nicholas Biddle, John Connelly, James C. Fisher and Joshua Lippincott.

19 No complete list of the architects competing has been found, but the following are known to have entered plans: John Haviland, Maxmilian Godefroy, Robert Mills, in addition to Bridport and Hadfield, Latrobe and Strickland.

20 Second premium was $200. The first premium received by William Strickland was for $500.

21 It is doubtful whether it was evident to Captain Meany why Latrobe could not “venture prudently to enter into conversation with any officer of the Bank” on the question of the competition. Owing to the material in The Historical Society, it is clear that Latrobe was immensely eager to win this competition, for he had just been forced to resign his position of architect of the Capitol and was in need of money. He did everything that he could to win; he talked with the directors in the summer, but one was very discouraging. He made a small set of drawings to hand in by August 1 (those are in the H.S.P.). When the time was extended, he had his son make large drawings in August (the ones in Washington). Soon after the first of September, evidently someone friendly to his interests pointed out to him that the ground plan of his design required 15,330 square feet instead of the 10,000 or 11,000 square feet advertised for. Therefore, he made the design on a diminished scale which then brought the area of the Bank to 11,289.6 square feet. This is the drawing No. 9 in The Historical Society, listed in note 7 above. It seems to have been first dated September 5. In that case Latrobe tried to do the very thing that Strickland did—change his design between the opening of the drawings and the making of the award on September 12. Owing to the change of date, it appears that Latrobe was unable to hand in to Jones his diminished design until September 19. Since Latrobe had heard no favorable news by the twenty-third, there was nothing to do but return
lieving it to be utterly impossible that a Gentleman of Mr. Jones's high standing personally and officially, & long a friend by acquaintance with me could have had any share in the transactions,—I must beg you to make to him the best apology of which the case admits, for my leaving Philadelphia without seeing him. Yrs with sentiments of sincere obligation to you and respect

BHLatrobe

John Meany Esq.

P.S. I am just setting off in the steamboat & lest I should be unable to see, I have thought it best to put what I have to say in writing, because I would wish to preserve the character of candor, if I cannot that of prudence.

to Baltimore. He could not make a public accusation of favoritism to Strickland for permitting him to change his design, since he himself had tried to do the same thing. He could, however, cast aspersions on the originality of Strickland's design. This letter shows how unfounded the accusations were and most effectively clears up the question of the architect.