ESSAY REVIEW

Latrobe, His Papers, and His Peers


In April 1797 a man six-feet two-inches tall, thin, and with wire-rimmed spectacles, came to Broad Rock Island, which lies within sight of Richmond, with a sheaf of paper and a set of water-color paints, to record the work of other architects. Latrobe made a wonderful water-color sketch that day of the Virginia State Capitol, designed by Thomas Jefferson and Charles-Louis Clerisseau. With a little artistic license, he depicted it as a Parthenon set in a shantytown, gathering into a picturesque cluster around it the little houses of the millhands who had produced flour for William Byrd III, an improvident Tory squire who had failed to make much of the water-power available where the James pitched sharply downward. Though Latrobe had a genius for water-powered machinery and might have done better with the site, he, too, seemed a failure at that moment. He was then an engineer and architect trying to start again after a failed practice and bankruptcy. Of uncertain nationality, with a French name, an English passport, and a largely German education, he had been disappointed in his expectations of an estate in Pennsylvania left by his American mother. His prospects did not seem bright.

The Capitol building he sketched was even more exotic than he. Designed by a Frenchman trained in Italy and by an Albemarle County squire living in Paris, it was a loose version of the “Maison Carrée,” a Roman temple situated in southern France. It was the only temple-form building in the Western Hemisphere, the precursor of the neoclassical age in America of which Latrobe was to become the foremost practitioner.

Latrobe was a true multinational who became a passionate American
patriot. He was born in Yorkshire, the son of a Moravian clergyman descended from French Huguenot refugees. His mother, Anna Margareta Antes, was a Pennsylvania German, but a granddaughter of a Roman Catholic abbot and an abbess who became Protestants, married, journeyed to America, acquired large landholdings, and supported the missionary activities of the Moravians. Latrobe thought of these lands as an endowment, but they disappointed him when he came to Pennsylvania to claim them, for their value was much less than he had hoped.

Latrobe had studied in Moravian schools in Germany between the ages of twelve and twenty, traveled in Italy and France, and then returned to England to become an apprentice, first to the engineer, John Smeaton, and subsequently to the rising architect, Samuel Pepys Cockerell. (Among the useful information now made accessible by the Latrobe Papers is a document called “Remarks on the best form of a room for hearing and speaking,” apparently dated around 1803, and containing references “from memory” of the acoustic qualities of “a few of the buildings which I have seen.” They included the Pantheon, in Rome, “churches in Italy, France and Germany,” the Anatomical Theater in Paris, and the “Hal au bled or Corn Market” in the same city.)

In the early 1790s, he struck out on his own. He designed two distinguished country houses, but the revolution in France and the world war it provoked destroyed the independent practices of many architects. Lacking the necessary political connections to obtain commissions-of-state like John Soane's Bank of England, Latrobe went bankrupt. His wife died, and his children were taken from him to be raised by her relatives. In the fall of 1795, he boarded the American ship Eliza, at Gravesend, to start again. He thought he was bound for Philadelphia, but bad weather or a better chance for captain’s profits sent the Eliza to Norfolk, Virginia.

A man signing himself “B. Henry Latrobe Boneval,” and speaking in the accent of a childhood spent more upon the continent of Europe than in England, caused some confusion among the merchants of Norfolk. These seafarers had seen many men of many nations in many places, but never before an engineer, poet, playwright, diarist, watercolorist, and artist of architecture and invective. After picking up a few odd jobs in Virginia, in 1798 Latrobe received the commission for the Bank of Pennsylvania, in Philadelphia, and his career was launched. The bank building Latrobe designed in Philadelphia was consummately beautiful—a domed, arcaded temple-form building that provided the American classical revival with its first example of the combination of Roman domes and vaults with Grecian porticoes. It set the pattern for innumerable “Greek Revival” public buildings.

Latrobe's first American masterpiece has been destroyed, as have the
series of private houses he built in Philadelphia. The Philadelphia Waterworks, Latrobe's most successful combination of engineering necessity and architectural elegance, has been succeeded by the present acropolean assemblage, of which I think he would have approved. To appreciate Latrobe's significant contributions to Philadelphia's, and America's, early development, it is best to turn to Latrobe's drawings and writings, as faithfully and amply reproduced in the *Latrobe Papers* under review.

Philadelphia was the seat of fashion. Compared to New York, however, it was also very conservative in its residential architecture—despite Latrobe's best efforts. In Philadelphia the Carpenters' Company was entrenched in its role as construction syndicate, guardian of tradition, and guild. Latrobe could not break the company's grip on the city's style. He left Philadelphia for more open architectural environments. His more neoclassical work was done in rising, boisterous Baltimore to the south, and in Washington.¹

Americans aspiring to rise above the vernacular learned much of what they knew about architecture from books, not buildings. But after 1793, Latrobe, George Hadfield, and the French brought to American practice the benefit of direct exposure to the living Renaissance tradition. Latrobe's work also sustained the spirit of theatrical virtuosity of Sir John Vanbrugh, Nicholas Hawksmoor, James Gibbs, and the architects of the western Midlands. Latrobe's English work, with its baroque cast—"Ashdown" and "Hammerwood Park" of the early 1790s to the Commandant's Quarters at the Pittsburgh Arsenal in 1814—suggests that it was to this British tradition, not to that of Jefferson's beloved Burlingtonians, that he belonged. This is not a majority view, but a recent re-exposure to "Ashdown" and "Hammerwood," to his drawings, and to the opinions he expresses in the *Papers* confirms it.

Latrobe is best known, perhaps, for his Cathedral in Baltimore and for some interiors in the national Capitol. He was a friend of Thomas Jefferson and through him had a strong influence upon the design of the University of Virginia. For another friend, Henry Clay, he provided the plans to make Lexington, Kentucky, a classical village. Aaron Burr also sought to draw Latrobe into his western ambitions. For Burr, he might have designed the

¹ Latrobe's interests lay in Philadelphia and the burgeoning towns to the south and west. He had little personal contact with New England architectural development. Boston was falling behind in commerce and in architecture; Latrobe's career did not coincide with Boston's best years, despite the presence there of the thoroughly competent Charles Bulfinch, who succeeded Latrobe as the federal government's chief architect. The *Latrobe Papers* have much to tell us about the intersections of those two dissimilar characters, Latrobe the splenetic, insecure, exotic genius, and Bulfinch the smooth, charming, insinuating local product—and survivor.
neoclassical capital of an empire, or, at least, of a satrapy. If Burr’s plans for a western power-base had been consummated, Latrobe might have done for Eldorado, Arkansas, what Le Corbusier did for Chandigarh, and Walter Burley Griffin did for Canberra.²

Latrobe was also a formidable traveller, and thanks to the wondrously illustrated volume of his “American Sketches,” one of the series under review, we can travel with him to see the United States in its neoclassical age through his eyes. In the Latrobe Papers he is revealed as a good companion, wise and full of anger at the right things, despising the right enemies, loyal to the right causes and to the right friends. He had his infirmities. He was a man obsessed with status. He thought himself a gentleman architect-engineer, not a mere carpenter-artisan-builder or artist-designer. He had come into a society which had driven off much of its colonial leadership in the bar, the church, the landowning gentry, and the governing bureaucracy, and in which status was very precarious. His reporting suffered from this anxiety: often he seemed to have a desire to place himself, first, before he got around to describing what could be seen. Notwithstanding this imperfection as a reporter (an imperfection not limited to him or his age), the Latrobe Papers have made it possible for him to provide probably the most important single source of impressions of the physical and social environment of America in his time.

He was also a very competent engineer and architect—preeminent among the visiting faculty that guided the early republic through that period in which it had not yet produced architectural talent sufficient to its needs. The Latrobe Papers make it easier to catch the interactions of these visitors, and to note as well that those Americans who had shown a talent for painting or architecture, prior to 1776, were, almost to a man, opposed to independence.

The Latrobe Papers, because of their amplitude and the depth of their annotations, also invite a reappraisal of the relationship of Latrobe to his peers. The Papers document the presence in the early republic of a group of well-trained Europeans who served as trustees of the Renaissance tradition until America grew, under their tutelage, its own practitioners. Philadelphia in particular and Pennsylvania in general are fortunate in sustaining some of the best of their work, especially that of Latrobe and his immediate circle. These foreign visitors were something more than “trustees”; they were regents (a good term if it would not confuse things with a roughly congruent,

² On Burr’s overtures to Latrobe, see my Orders from France (New York, forthcoming in December 1988).
but otherwise unrelated period in British political history). For America, they provided an architectural "regency."

In New York, the most important of the trustee-regents were French. The first to arrive had been Pierre-Charles L'Enfant, artist son of the "Painter Ordinary" to King Louis XVI, and an artist, like Latrobe. As a volunteer to the American Revolutionary army, he came as a painter, not as a military engineer. He drew beautiful portraits of generals and useful depictions of fortresses, and became a great favorite of George Washington. After he returned to the United States in 1784, he was given a series of commissions for buildings, beginning with temporary pavilions and culminating in the remodelling of Federal Hall, the first Capitol building of the new republic, in New York, in 1788. At the same time Richmond was being graced with Thomas Jefferson's Roman temple for its Capitol, L'Enfant provided the first taste of an American style, with the stars on his columns and entablature. L'Enfant's work, at its best, was sober, stripped, and economical, but he was not up to the professional standards of the highly trained French neoclassicists who followed him to New York. Etienne Hallet, Pierre Pharoux, the brothers Mangin, and Adrian Boucher gave that city an advanced taste that remained predominantly French until the departure of Joseph-Jacques Ramée in 1816.

Pharoux visited Philadelphia, which he thought too rectilinear and bricky. His own taste was demonstrated in a set of city plans for the Hudson Valley; it was more romantic, more relaxed. Ramée did no Pennsylvania work, though he lived for a while in Philadelphia, but, in the four years from 1812 to 1816 he was the only true competitor to Latrobe and to Latrobe's contemporary and friend, George Hadfield. Ramée created the finest garden and estate designs to be seen in the Western Hemisphere, a church, villas, ice houses, city mansions, and country houses. His Union College campus, begun in Schenectedy in 1815, was the first to be laid out in pavilions around a rotunda. The University of Virginia, four years later, followed Ramée's pattern. Notes for the Latrobe Papers give us more solid information about these Frenchmen than any other source.

The competitor and contemporary for whom Latrobe had the most consistent praise was George Hadfield, born in 1763, in Florence. Hadfield has been less celebrated and documented than Latrobe (there do not seem to be any Hadfield Papers to attract funding by the National Endowment for the Humanities), but the Latrobe Papers give several glimpses of him. He was thought in his youth to be a prodigy, as Latrobe was not. Swept early into fashionable circles by his ambitious mother and sister, he attended the Royal Academy, where he "received all the . . . prizes." A fellow student, the American painter John Trumbull, found him another prize, the superintendency of the U.S. Capitol, but it turned out to be a poisoned
gift. The inexperienced young genius fell among squabbling commissioners and the same jealousies that ultimately vanquished Latrobe after he took on the job. To Trumbull, Hadfield was “a man of modesty and amiable qualities as well as talents”; to Latrobe, he was a gentleman-architect whose presence was reassuring but whose competition was never so keen as to lead to the loss of a commission. There are a few undocumented villas around Washington which could be either Latrobe’s or Hadfield’s work, so similar were their styles, and Latrobe’s papers manifest his continuous respect for a colleague who gave the Capitol what coherence it had before the advent of his own reordering.

Just before Latrobe left the disappointments and frustrations of his eastern practice and embarked to start a new life in the Mississippi Valley, a new group of British architects arrived. Headed by the “Somerset Four” (William Jay, John Chislett, John Haviland, and William Nichols), they had grown up in the same county, around Bath, and spread the neoclassical style from Philadelphia to the Mississippi. Haviland replaced Latrobe in Philadelphia, which was now ready to accept the Greek Revival style. The two went head-to-head in Latrobe’s last great competition—that for the Second Bank of the United States. Among the other competitors were Hadfield and the winner, Latrobe’s student, William Strickland, who enjoyed the fortunate friendship of Nicholas Biddle. Latrobe had vehement opinions about all this, stated in his Papers, but it is odd that he never seems to have noticed Biddle, whose influence upon the practice of architecture was already evident by the time of the Second Bank competition in 1817-1818.

All this may seem far afield from a review of a set of volumes of the papers of Latrobe. Yet those papers are of much greater interest than would be the record of a single architectural career. Scarcely one of the foregoing sentences could have been written without access, first, to the volumes of papers and the attendant volumes of engineering drawings and illustrations of his travels. The annotations provided by their editors have created an archive of related, and indexed, information of central significance to the writing of American history. Anyone with a serious interest in the social, economic, psychological, or architectural history of the period between the adoption of the Constitution and the inauguration of Andrew Jackson must consult these volumes.

In an uncharacteristically crabbed review of the first two of them, a historian situated upon the West Coast lamented the inclusion of so much material that was not directly useful in the needle-work of architectural monographia. Architectural history would occupy a more exalted place

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within contemporary literature if its practitioners were not embarrassed by fresh air. There are smiling meadows beyond the windows. Latrobe strode across those meadows, sketchbook in hand, playfully inserting European analogies, drawing upon his classical learning, commenting, noting, meeting everyone of curiosity or significance wherever he travelled. Had he never seen a drafting table, these volumes would have been eminently worth producing.

In the company of such an observer, we are better able to see buildings as real objects in real places. Before Latrobe died in the New Orleans yellow fever epidemic of 1820, he wrote a record of his time, now to be treasured and savored in the Latrobe Papers. What the editors have added has increased immeasurably its utility and delight. Some readers might find the footnotes in the Papers taxing, but such a criticism would miss the significance of the editors’ annotation. The notes offer insights into such matters as the political party broils of the period, hieroglyphics, anthropology, alcoholism, religious practice—so many subjects that informed and interested Latrobe the traveller and observer of life in the young republic. The editorial work is the result of a well-managed scholarly enterprise, and of the intense and discriminating scholarly application of the considerable talents of the editors, their associates, and editorial board. The Maryland Historical Society, the Yale University Press, the American Philosophical Society, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the descendants of Benjamin Henry Latrobe can be very proud of themselves.

Latrobe was a great man. Yet the utility of these Papers does not lie only in the revelation of his greatness. Because he was also a good reporter, he gave us means to assess the qualities of others, including that remarkable group of colleagues, French and British, who, as our mentors, got America started on an architecture of its own.

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