

The “Mad” Engineer: L’Enfant in Early National Philadelphia

THROUGHOUT ITS HISTORY, Philadelphia has boasted the work of notable architects and builders. Yet hardly any were so controversial or left such a mixed legacy as the self-styled “engineer of the United States” during the nation’s founding, Peter (Pierre) Charles L’Enfant. From 1793 to 1800, while the city served as the federal seat of government, L’Enfant lived in Philadelphia and applied his hand to a range of ambitious projects. This period followed his sudden, acrimonious departure from laying out the grand new city on the Potomac. And as in this earlier appointment, nearly all L’Enfant’s subsequent projects were marked with difficulty. Indeed, the climax of L’Enfant’s efforts in Philadelphia saw his masterwork pulled down and demolished by the citizens themselves to make way for more practical construction of a different character. Nor was L’Enfant’s personal life in the city any easier, as he found himself beset and bullied by his housemate, Richard Soderstrom, the Swedish consul. As a result, despite his singular creativity and talents, L’Enfant’s energies in the city would largely be forgotten.

It is worth recalling, though, that memories of L’Enfant became likewise obscure in the District of Columbia until his name and city plan were resurrected at the turn of the twentieth century by a range of design professionals, government officials, and local boosters. Since then, studies of L’Enfant have centered on that earlier episode of the engineer’s life. L’Enfant’s unique plan for the city of Washington, with its radiating avenues, strategic vistas, and monumental sites, commanded belated admiration, and the French-born engineer’s resignation (or dismissal) from

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the project in February 1792 became equally storied. Biographers and art historians then tended to gloss over his years afterward in Philadelphia as a curious, embarrassing postlude.¹

But the engineer himself did not see it that way upon his arrival. He entered the city, then the cosmopolitan center of the nation, still sure of his abilities and his future. Only later, after attempting a fort, a dancing hall, and, most importantly, a monumental town house in the Quaker City, among other projects, did the trajectory of his career take a decided fall. He departed the city under a much darker cloud than when he came, doomed to die impoverished and unknown.

The time seems right to review L'Enfant's work in Philadelphia. Edward Lawler's recent, transformative work on the president's executive residence during the 1790s has renewed attention to neglected aspects of the city's federal-era landscape. And scholars have increasingly demonstrated the importance of French ideas and immigrants to the early American republic, of which Philadelphia was a key hub. We can now trace the broad impact of French-inspired designs (whether aristocratic, revolutionary, or empire) on American fashion, behavior, decorative arts, and architecture. And we can follow the political and economic contributions of French immigrants and refugees. L'Enfant stood somewhat aloof from this community, and his designs did not always draw from French precedents, but his uneven command of the vernacular did matter in the end. His failure to conform to Philadelphia's closed building traditions, or to present an architectural vision that corresponded to the more democratic element of the city, among other missteps, cost him his immediate reputation and career. None of his Philadelphia constructions have survived, but given

¹ Among those responsible for the revival of interest in L'Enfant in the District of Columbia at the turn of the twentieth century were James Dudley Morgan, an area physician who had come into possession of L'Enfant's papers; landscape designer Frederick Law Olmsted Jr.; President Theodore Roosevelt; the French ambassador Jules Jusserand; the American Institute of Architects; and the Senate Park Commission. Major studies of L'Enfant's career and legacy include J. J. Jusserand, *With Americans of Past and Present Days* (New York, 1916), 137–98; Fiske Kimball, "Pierre Charles L'Enfant," in *Dictionary of American Biography*, ed. Dumas Malone, vol. 6 (New York, 1933), 165–69; H. Paul Caemmerer, *The Life of Pierre Charles L'Enfant, Planner of the City Beautiful, the City of Washington* (Washington, DC, 1950); Kenneth R. Bowling, *Pierre Charles L'Enfant: Vision, Honor, and Male Friendship in the Early American Republic* (Washington, DC, 2002); and Scott W. Berg, *Grand Avenues: The Story of the French Visionary Who Designed Washington, D.C.* (New York, 2007). Berg's excellent study noted in traditional form the timing of L'Enfant's fall: "Every task L'Enfant took on after his final exchange of letters with George Washington in February 1792 went wrong" (208). This may be true, but it was not apparent to L'Enfant nor to his audiences at the time.

their distinctiveness, and the rebirth of his reputation elsewhere, we should explore why his time in Philadelphia has been so overlooked.²

An Auspicious Arrival

L'Enfant entered Philadelphia in 1793, heeding the call of Robert Morris, the wealthy merchant and statesman who was one of the city's greatest players. "Dear Sir," the financier teasingly wrote to L'Enfant that May, "I had like to have stopped my House for fear of wanting money, that difficulty being removed, it will now be stopped for want of Major L'Enfant." Morris, with his large family and large appetites, was ready to advance work on his extraordinary new home, for which he had given L'Enfant the commission. He sent the letter to Paterson, New Jersey, where the major was concluding his short-lived duties as superintending engineer for the new Society for Establishing Useful Manufactures. The invitation from Morris excited L'Enfant, who was then feuding again with his employers, so he took up residence in a Philadelphia boardinghouse the following month.³

² For Lawler's work, see Edward Lawler Jr., "The President's House in Philadelphia: The Rediscovery of a Lost Landmark," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 126 (2002): 5–95; Lawler, "The President's House Revisited," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 129 (2005): 371–410; and Seth C. Bruggeman, "The President's House: Freedom and Slavery in the Making of a New Nation," *Journal of American History* 100 (2013): 155–58.

For the importance of French ideas and immigrants in federal Philadelphia, see Frances Sergeant Childs, *French Refugee Life in the United States, 1790–1800: An American Chapter of the French Revolution* (Baltimore, 1940); Roger G. Kennedy, *Orders from France: The Americans and the French in a Revolutionary World, 1780–1820* (New York, 1989); Andrew J. Brunk, "'To Fix the Taste of Our Country Properly': The French Style in Philadelphia Interiors, 1788–1800" (master's thesis, University of Delaware, 2000); Gary B. Nash, *First City: Philadelphia and the Forging of Historical Memory* (Philadelphia, 2001); Susan Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames: Women and Political Culture in Early National Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 2001); Cynthia R. Field, Isabelle Gournay, and Thomas P. Somma, eds., *Paris on the Potomac: The French Influence on the Architecture and Art of Washington, D.C.* (Athens, OH, 2007); and François Furstenberg, *When the United States Spoke French: Five Refugees Who Shaped a Nation* (New York, 2014).

³ Robert Morris to Major [Peter Charles] L'Enfant, May 9, 1793, box 1, James Dudley Morgan collection of Digges-L'Enfant-Morgan Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC (hereafter cited as JDM-DLM Papers). For Robert Morris, see Elizabeth M. Nuxoll, "The Financier as Senator: Robert Morris of Pennsylvania, 1789–1795," in *Neither Separate nor Equal: Congress in the 1790s*, ed. Kenneth R. Bowling and Donald R. Kennon (Athens, OH, 2000); Charles Rappleye, *Robert Morris: Financier of the American Revolution* (New York, 2010); and Ryan K. Smith, *Robert Morris's Folly: The Architectural and Financial Failures of an American Founder* (New Haven, CT, 2014).



Figure 1. The only known image from life of Peter Charles L'Enfant. Silhouette by Sarah DeHart, ca. 1785. Courtesy of the Diplomatic Reception Rooms, US Department of State, Washington, DC.

L'Enfant knew the city well, having spent time there as early as his first arrival in the country in 1777. Born in Paris in 1754, L'Enfant grew up around the courts of Louis XV and XVI as the son of a painter affiliated with the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture. In turn, his father secured a place for him at the Royal Academy, where he would receive years of versatile training. L'Enfant studied drawing and painting, as well as landscapes, architecture, and fortifications, given the military subject matter preferred by the French royalty and the intended settings of its art. At the conclusion of his studies, when an American agent in Paris offered the twenty-two-year-old L'Enfant the chance to join the American cause, the young man took it and entered the Continental army's corps of engineers at the rank of captain. His subsequent enthusiasm for the craft of military engineering soon won him the esteem of Baron von Steuben and other commanding officers. Over the course of the war, L'Enfant passed through Philadelphia several times, received a serious leg wound in a southern campaign, served time as a British prisoner, anglicized his name from Pierre to Peter, and gained the rank of major. Six feet tall, he carried himself with what one observer called "military bearing, courtly

air and polite manners" (see Figure 1). He also got to know Morris, who served Congress as superintendent of finance and therefore wrote out the young officer's pay.⁴

At the close of the war, L'Enfant landed his first major architectural commission. When the French minister, the chevalier de La Luzerne, announced the birth of the dauphin in April 1782, he tapped L'Enfant to supervise and construct a lavish setting for a formal celebration of the event. It would be the greatest party the city had yet seen. Any tension underlying the new American republic's salute to French royalty did not show in L'Enfant's hand. Working at the minister's rented Philadelphia residence on Chestnut Street, L'Enfant constructed a large colonnaded pavilion outside the main house, set within a lamp-lit garden. He added rich illustrations and tableaux with weighty national symbols, including a rising sun, thirteen stars, and solemn Indians. On the evening of the fete, July 15, perhaps ten thousand people descended on the site, either as groomed, invited guests or as part of the celebrity-struck citizenry. The fete gave L'Enfant valuable exposure for his talents, and the French War Ministry covered the \$5,000 bill. It was the first hint of L'Enfant's ease with excess, though the Quaker City voiced no complaint. Further, it also demonstrated that L'Enfant—who never adopted the rare, formal title of "architect"—felt comfortable moving among design projects of different types and mediums.⁵

More national honors lay in store for L'Enfant. In 1783, he joined other officers in founding the Society of the Cincinnati, and he designed its eagle-themed heraldry. With the peace, he settled in New York City, the newly named seat of government, where he oversaw various projects and agitated for command of a permanent military corps of engineers. He remained in contact with associates in Philadelphia, fielding an invitation in 1787 from William Temple Franklin to design a large structure

⁴W. W. Corcoran, quoted in Wilhelmus B. Bryan, "Something about L'Enfant and His Personal Affairs," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* 2 (1899): 117. L'Enfant also added an apostrophe to his surname Lenfant after his arrival in America. His initial commander, the ill-fated officer Tronson du Coudray, thought little of his engineering skills and saw him instead as an artist. See Bowling, *Peter Charles L'Enfant*, 1–5, and Berg, *Grand Avenues*, 19–48.

⁵See Benjamin Rush, "The French Fête in Philadelphia in Honor of the Dauphin's Birthday," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 21 (1897): 257–62; Bowling, *Peter Charles L'Enfant*, 5–7; and Berg, *Grand Avenues*, 48–50. Charles Brownell observed that L'Enfant "worked in the waning Renaissance tradition of the universal artist, and symbolism was his forte." See Charles E. Brownell, "L'Enfant, Pierre-Charles," in *James Madison and the American Nation, 1751–1836: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Robert A. Rutland (New York, 1994), 235–36.

for the city, for which L'Enfant proposed incorporating Parisian features, including a shop-filled gallery on the ground floor. This proposal never materialized. Rather, the adoption of the new federal Constitution in 1788 further spurred L'Enfant's fortunes in New York, as he orchestrated that city's grand parade to celebrate ratification and transformed its city hall into the lavish and symbolic "Federal Hall" to serve as home for the new Congress. Federal Hall was such a success that when Pennsylvania's congressional delegation succeeded in removing the federal seat from New York City to Philadelphia in 1790, the delegates immediately floated L'Enfant's name as a desirable candidate for their own federal buildings. "Major Lenfant . . . is here," Representative Thomas Fitzsimons wrote from New York to Philadelphia city officials in July, "and would be very glad to give plans or superintend the Improvements with you" for the accommodation of Congress. According to Fitzsimons, L'Enfant was to be favored over Philadelphia's local builders because he was "well acquainted with the present taste in Europe." Surprisingly, in almost comic contrast to L'Enfant's subsequent reputation, Fitzsimons also promoted L'Enfant as "a man of mild unassuming manners." It is unclear if the city engaged L'Enfant for the ensuing rearrangement of "Congress Hall," next to the State House.⁶

All of these honors and invitations built L'Enfant's reputation as one of the nation's few expert artists and planners, one whose vision of the country's future surpassed that of even the most optimistic leaders. L'Enfant's biggest prize was the permanent federal seat, for which he had been lobbying as early as 1784. When President Washington appointed him to this Potomac commission in 1791, the major was ready to build it, as he had suggested, "in such a manner as to give an idea of the greatness of the

⁶Thomas Fitzsimons to Miers Fisher, July 16, 1790, Miers Fisher Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (quotations); Jusserand, *Americans of Past and Present*, 145–61; Minor Myers Jr., *Liberty without Anarchy: A History of the Society of the Cincinnati* (Charlottesville, VA, 1983), 32–34; and Louis Torres, "Federal Hall Revisited," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 29 (1970): 327–38. Caemmerer reprints L'Enfant's letter of Jan. 29, 1787, to William Temple Franklin, in which the engineer proposed surrounding the outside of the intended building "with small shops under cover of a gallery" as seen in the piazzas around "the comedie francaise at Paris" and those around the Royal Palace, in *Life of Pierre Charles L'Enfant*, 264–65. Bowling suggests that Franklin's project may have been that of the new city courthouse, which would become Congress Hall in 1789, next door to the Pennsylvania State House. See Bowling, *Pierre Charles L'Enfant*, 12–14. In the 1920s, Joseph Jackson found that "It is possible, even probable, that L'Enfant drew the plans for the enlargement of old Congress Hall in this City [Philadelphia]." Jackson cites the inconclusive journal of William Maclay as among his evidence. See Joseph Jackson, *Early Philadelphia Architects and Engineers* (Philadelphia, 1923), 87–88.

empire as well as to engrave in every mind that sense of respect that is due to a place which is the seat of a supreme sovereignty." As work there commenced, his efforts confirmed his design genius, his nationalism, and his flair for what he called "sumptuousness," but they also confirmed his sensitive temperament. Over several months, L'Enfant chafed under the directions of the city's three commissioners, who were responsible to the local landowners and city investors as well as to the miserly federal government. L'Enfant had little tolerance for the foolishness of superiors who wished to build his plan around the whims of local proprietors and with funds raised at auctions. Wooden stakes still marked the ground for blocks and avenues when the city commissioners decided in February 1792 that they could no longer tolerate L'Enfant's insubordination—his hiring and dismissal of teams of project workers in defiance of orders and his refusal to allow a plan of the city to be printed and distributed when he felt it was not yet ready.⁷

By then, L'Enfant had sadly reached the same conclusion. His final separation from the project occurred that month, while he was in Philadelphia arranging for his own engraving of the plan. President Washington, still a supporter but by then exhausted, concluded L'Enfant would continue in his ways to remain "under the controul of no one." Engineering responsibility for the city was officially transferred from L'Enfant to the project's surveyor, Andrew Ellicott, on February 27, 1792. Many of those L'Enfant left behind were bitterly disappointed at this turn of events. "We lament extremely," a group of landholders around the federal city wrote in a joint letter to the departed engineer, "that the city of Washington will lose the benefit of your future services." They held hope for his return, and, although it would come to nothing, they appealed to Secretary of State Jefferson for L'Enfant's reinstatement into the spring.⁸

L'Enfant's companion Isaac Roberdeau, who had served him loyally for the past year as secretary, assistant surveyor, and housemate, told a Potomac

⁷ L'Enfant, quoted in Kenneth R. Bowling, *The Creation of Washington, D.C.: The Idea and Location of the American Capital* (Fairfax, VA, 1991), 6 (first quotation); and Pierre-Charles L'Enfant to George Washington, June 22, 1791, in *The Papers of George Washington*, ed. W. W. Abbott et al. (Charlottesville, VA, 1987–), Presidential Series, 8:287–93 (second quotation) (hereafter cited as *PGW*) (online at <http://founders.archives.gov/about/Washington>). See generally Bowling, *Peter Charles L'Enfant*, 21–33; Berg, *Grand Avenues*, 117–99; and Bob Arnebeck, *Through a Fiery Trial: Building Washington, 1790–1800* (Lanham, MD, 1991), 24–111.

⁸ Pierre L'Enfant to George Washington, Feb. 27, 1792, and George Washington to Pierre L'Enfant, Feb. 28, 1792 (first quotation), in *PGW*, Presidential Series, 9:603–6; Proprietors to P. C. L'Enfant, Mar. 9, 1792, box 1, JDM-DLM Papers (last quotation).

acquaintance that the pair would now “go to Pennsylvania that they had offers from thence and could be employed when they pleased.” This was not idle bragging; a few months earlier, Governor Thomas Mifflin had invited L’Enfant, then still at work on the Potomac, to prepare a plan for the new executive mansion the state was erecting in Philadelphia in an attempt to strengthen the federal government’s attachments there. L’Enfant may have submitted some ideas, but when the builders broke ground on Ninth Street in April 1792, employing a large, boxy, somewhat clumsy neoclassical plan, it seemed clear that any hand L’Enfant may have had in its design was slight. After recouping in Philadelphia over the summer, L’Enfant instead chose a second attempt at city building in northern New Jersey. He called for Roberdeau, and, at the behest of Alexander Hamilton and his manufacturing society, the two turned to the falls of the Passaic River, where they were charged with laying out the company town and constructing its factories.⁹

Hamilton assured his society’s directors that L’Enfant was the ideal engineer for their job. He explained, “from much experience and observation of him, I have a high opinion of the solidity of his talents” and training. L’Enfant received a one-year contract in August 1792, promising his patron Hamilton to remain mindful of the society’s finances. But again, L’Enfant quickly became ensnared in the differences among the society’s directors, and he feuded with rival managers. As early as February 1793, the society’s staff had seen enough. Peter Colt, a factory overseer, complained to Hamilton that several buildings were then needed to shelter the operations, but “Majr. L’Enfant, to whom this part of the Business has been confided,” was no longer present. Factory production slowed to a near standstill, and in March, a director exclaimed to Hamilton, “What can be the Cause of Maj. L Enfant’s extraordinary long Absence? Will you speak to him and advise him to come forward immediately?” L’Enfant returned to Paterson at the end of the month, justifying his progress to Hamilton and bristling at the directors’ decision to consult one of his rivals regarding the waterworks. Still resolute in his own abilities, he fretted about the scenario unfolding yet again around him and despaired in his chopped

⁹ Roberdeau, quoted by Abraham Faw, in Arnebeck, *Through a Fiery Trial*, 90; Bowling, *Peter Charles L’Enfant*, 34–37; “Executive Minutes of Governor Thomas Mifflin,” Oct. 11, 1792 [1791], in *Pennsylvania Archives*, ser. 9, ed. Gertrude MacKinney, 10 vols. (Harrisburg, PA, 1931–35), 1:242; Damie Stillman, “Six Houses for the President,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 129 (2005): 419–23; and George B. Tatum, *Penn’s Great Town: 250 Years of Philadelphia Architecture Illustrated in Prints and Drawings* (Philadelphia, 1961), 45–46.

English "that my whole labour is likely once more to be made a mean to gratify the petit Interest of some men to the Expulsion of me and the Subversion of all my views." After an antagonistic meeting with the directors in April, they became "Seriously alarmed" at his "extensive plans & views" and chose not to renew his one-year contract. So in June 1793, the engineer left his newest antagonists at Paterson, whom he saw shackling his artistic vision, and moved to Philadelphia.¹⁰

Coming on the heels of two blowouts with key employers, L'Enfant's arrival in the city might have given some clients pause. Not Robert Morris, the city's greatest patron. In June 1793, Morris was a US senator and rumored to be the wealthiest man in America. He rented his own home on Market Street to his friends the Washingtons for the executive residence, while he and his family lived next door in what had previously been their rental property. As a longtime city merchant, Morris was a hero of the Revolutionary cause and a signer of the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation, and the Constitution in addition to his former role as superintendent of finance. Some grumbling remained that his wartime exploits were more villainous than heroic, as he had been able to amass a great deal of wealth while holding the public's empty purse, but this hardly slowed him down. Indeed, he was lauded locally as the one who had recently dislodged the federal seat from New York and returned it, temporarily, to Philadelphia. He was a stalwart clubman, devoted to the pleasures of the table, and an enterprising speculator. He owned an industrial works on the Delaware River, traded across the oceans, dealt in bank notes and government securities, and, most of all, speculated in lands. With his new partner John Nicholson, soon to be joined by James Greenleaf, he was busy signing his name to millions of acres from upstate New York south to Georgia in an effort to chase supreme riches and leave

¹⁰"Draft Minutes of a Meeting of a Committee of the Directors of the Society for Establishing Useful Manufactures," Aug. 1, 1792; Alexander Hamilton to the Governor and Directors of the Society for Establishing Useful Manufactures, Aug. 16, 1792 (first quotation); Pierre Charles L'Enfant to Alexander Hamilton, Aug. 21, 1792; Alexander Hamilton to James Watson, Oct. 9, 1792; Peter Colt to Alexander Hamilton, Feb. 28, 1793 (second quotation); Nicholas Low to Alexander Hamilton, Mar. 4, 1793 (third quotation); Pierre Charles L'Enfant to Alexander Hamilton, Mar. 26, 1793 (fourth quotation); Peter Colt to Alexander Hamilton, May 7, 1793 (last quotations), all in *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Harold C. Syrett, 27 vols. (New York, 1967–), 12:140–42, 216–18, 262–63, 538–40, 14:170–71, 189, 248–49, 419–21 (hereafter cited as *PAH*) (online at <http://founders.archives.gov/about/Hamilton>); Caemmerer, *Life of Pierre Charles L'Enfant*, 249–54. See also Nicholas Low to Alexander Hamilton, June 27, 1793, and Pierre Charles L'Enfant to Alexander Hamilton, Oct. 16, 1793, in *PAH*, 15:30, 363–65. Evidence that L'Enfant could be found "at Robert Morris's" in Philadelphia by June appears in Isaac Roberdeau to Major L'Enfant, June 18, 1793, box 1, JDM-DLM Papers.

a baronial legacy to his family. He was also technically broke—“wanting money”—for while he could still shoulder enormous personal credit, he also had become embroiled in a series of earlier failures that continued to shadow his otherwise sunny outlook.¹¹

A few recent land sales convinced Morris that his tide was turning, so in 1792 he had begun to plan a more suitable town house. He had a prime site in hand—an entire, undeveloped city block bounded by Seventh, Eighth, Chestnut, and Walnut Streets. It was close to the expanding heart of the city and only two blocks west of the State House and Congress Hall. Morris and the storied L'Enfant seemed to have struck up a mutual grandiose vision for the site sometime in the winter of 1792/93, while the latter was absent from Paterson. John Fanning Watson, Philadelphia's early annalist who drew much of his source material from hearsay, recorded in 1844 that a “gentleman was present at R. Morris' table when L'Enfant [*sic*] was there, and first broached the scheme of building him a grand house for 60,000 dollars.” Cost aside, their resulting design would be like none other in the city. L'Enfant intended it to command the whole block, unlike the other narrow row houses that lined the city's perpendicular streets and alleys. L'Enfant modeled the residence on the wide *hôtels particuliers* of his Parisian memories, which sat back from the street front and boasted broad rear gardens, bringing an element of the pastoral into the city. The house for Morris would be perhaps the biggest private house in the new republic, suggesting palatial ambitions.¹²

¹¹ Smith, *Robert Morris's Folly*; and Nuxoll, “Financier as Senator.” Interestingly, L'Enfant's latest replacement on the federal city project, Samuel Blodget Jr., visited Philadelphia in July 1793 and reported back to his colleagues that L'Enfant's recent episode in New Jersey “has confirmd the Public in your opinion of this eccentric gentleman but Robt Morris did not know this when he contracted with him for his new house[.] he now begins to [become] alarmd & wishes he had never seen him.” None of Morris's behaviors or letters support Blodget's statement. The unflappable Morris had known L'Enfant for a decade, and only two months earlier, in May, he had called for L'Enfant's presence via letter. See Samuel Blodget Jr. to Commissioners of the District of Columbia, July 27, 1793, Letters Received, vol. 3, M371, reel 9, Records of the Commissioners for the District of Columbia, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC; and Arnebeck, *Through a Fiery Trial*, 168. In contrast to Blodget, George Washington had mentioned to one of the DC commissioners only seven months earlier that L'Enfant was “said [to be] performing wonders at the new town of Patterson.” George Washington to David Stuart, Nov. 30, 1792, in *PGW*, Presidential Series, 11:452–55.

¹² John F. Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania, in the Olden Time; Being a Collection of Memoirs, Anecdotes, and Incidents of the City and Its Inhabitants, and of the Earliest Settlements of the Inland Part of Pennsylvania, from the Days of the Founders* (Philadelphia, 1844), 1:409. This story of L'Enfant's proposal over dinner did not appear in the earlier 1830 issue of Watson's work. See Smith, *Robert Morris's Folly*. Some art historians have found that in 1791, L'Enfant had a hand in designing the Philadelphia house of John Nicholson, Morris's partner in land speculations. See Kimball, “Pierre Charles L'Enfant.” None of Morris's correspondence with Nicholson mentions the commission.

News of their plans spread quickly. A seemingly accurate report circulated as early as mid-March 1793, as reported by the Quaker matron Deborah Logan upon her visit with a neighbor near Germantown. There, Logan saw Henry Hill, a city merchant, who, she wrote, "told us Robert Morris is going to build a superb house on the lot he purchased of cousin [John] Dickinson[.] it is designed to be 140 feet front." Hill himself owned one of the finest freestanding mansions in the city, located on Fourth Street in Society Hill and measuring 48 feet wide by 48 feet deep, with 6,900 feet of living space in its three stories. The Masters-Penn house, in which President Washington lived, had even more space, though it measured only 45 feet wide. Morris's new 140-foot front would overshadow even the Pennsylvania State House, at 107 feet, to say nothing of the new President's House under construction on Ninth Street, at 100 feet. Clearly it was intended to surpass William and Anne Bingham's famous "Mansion House," also at 100 feet, which oversaw a third of a block in Society Hill and was modeled after a London town house. Though L'Enfant had moved on from the federal city and the Paterson factory town, his desire to deliver a national landmark was intact.¹³

A Series of Stumbles

L'Enfant needed an auspicious start for the project. Surely Morris's commission would pay well, but for the moment, the engineer was occupied with what he would call "the distress of my affairs." He had earlier balked at the compensation offered him for his work at New York's Federal Hall and at the city of Washington, deeming both offers insufficient. And he had left Paterson without receiving his full salary. Further, the thirty-nine-year-old engineer was now without his friend and former assistant Isaac Roberdeau, who had recently married Susan Shippen Blair of Philadelphia and then found a job with the state of Pennsylvania in the department of canals and turnpikes. So L'Enfant began joining Morris for breakfast regularly, at the latter's request, to discuss work on the house. He

¹³ Deborah Logan to Mary Norris, Mar. 25, 1793, box 2, Maria Dickinson Logan Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. See also Amy H. Henderson, "A Family Affair: The Design and Decoration of 321 South Fourth Street," in *Gender, Taste, and Material Culture in Britain and America in the Long Eighteenth Century*, ed. John Styles and Amanda Vickery (New Haven, CT, 2006), 267–91; and Henderson, "Furnishing the Republican Court: Building and Decorating Philadelphia Homes, 1790–1800" (PhD diss., University of Delaware, 2008), 84, 88–90.

sometimes brought design drawings, which Robert's wife, Mary, reviewed with them.¹⁴

Morris appointed his longtime contractor Burton Wallace, a master bricklayer, to supervise the daily laborers when ground was broken on the new house in May 1793. Wallace and L'Enfant worked well together in a burst of activity that summer. Teams of workers moved loads of earth, sorted through the arrival of supplies, and began laying foundations. In all, Morris was paying the workers around £800 Pennsylvania currency a month, or \$2,144.¹⁵

The appearance of yellow fever on the waterfront that July soon disrupted L'Enfant's start. The disease moved through panicked neighborhoods, killing hundreds and then thousands. In the words of one merchant, "the wealthy soon fled; the fearless or indifferent remained from choice, the poor from necessity." The Morrises abandoned the city for their retreat at the Delaware Works. In turn, L'Enfant left his duties at the construction site and made for New York City. Morris, shaken by the horrors of the pestilence, wrote his absent architect in early October to rest "perfectly easy on the score of my building. I had rather it should stop than you or any other person should be exposed to the Contagious Fever which has proved so fatal to many worthy Citizens." Morris thought it best to close the site for the season, until the winter frosts allowed the city to reassemble.¹⁶

¹⁴ L'Enfant, account dated 1804, box 1, JDM-DLM Papers; Smith, *Robert Morris's Folly*; Bowling, *Peter Charles L'Enfant*, 20, 30, 33; Pierre Charles L'Enfant to Alexander Hamilton, Oct. 16, 1793, in *PAH*, 15:363–65. For mention of drawings, now lost, and Mary's involvement, see entry for Apr. 26, 1798, in Benjamin Henry Latrobe, *Virginia Journals*, Benjamin Henry Latrobe Collection, Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, MD (also available in *The Virginia Journals of Benjamin Henry Latrobe, 1795–1798*, ed. Edward C. Carter II [New Haven, CT, 1977], 2:376–68).

For Roberdeau, see Roberdeau Buchanon, *Genealogy of the Roberdeau Family, Including a Biography of General Daniel Roberdeau . . .* (Washington, DC, 1876), 104–22; and *An Historical Account of the Rise, Progress, and Present State of the Canal Navigation in Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1795), 58–59. The historian Bob Arnebeck emphasizes the possibility that L'Enfant engaged in homosexual relationships in "To Tease and Torment: Two Presidents Confront Suspicions of Sodomy," at <http://bobarnebeck.com/L'Enfant.htm>, accessed Oct. 17, 2013. Bowling's careful account is agnostic on the question of L'Enfant's sexuality, though he does explore the nature of his emotional relationships with men. See Bowling, *Peter Charles L'Enfant*, 50–52. L'Enfant's sexuality seems never to have been a factor in his relations with Morris.

¹⁵ For activity on the site, see entries for 1793 in *Journal, 1791–1801*, Robert Morris Business Records, Historical Society of Pennsylvania; and Smith, *Robert Morris's Folly*. L'Enfant's first order is registered on April 18, 1793.

¹⁶ H. E. Scudder, ed., *Recollections of Samuel Breck with Passages from His Note-Books (1771–1862)* (Philadelphia, 1877), 194 (first quotation); Robert Morris to P. Charles L'Enfant, Oct. 3, 1793, box 24, folder 8, Society Small Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (last quotation); Mathew Carey, *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever, Lately Prevalent in Philadelphia*, 4th ed. (Philadelphia,

Upon L'Enfant's return to the city in early 1794, he moved in with a curious friend: Richard Soderstrom, the consul from Sweden. L'Enfant would make his home with Soderstrom for the remainder of his time in Philadelphia. He had first crossed paths with the Swede in New York in 1786 or 1787, whereupon L'Enfant immediately lent Soderstrom money. A few years later, in 1790, L'Enfant again came to Soderstrom's aid and bailed him out of New York's debtor's jail. Morris was likewise entangled in Soderstrom's affairs, having made sizable advances to him in trading ventures after the Revolutionary War and going so far as to acquire a ship named *Soderstrom*. L'Enfant lodged at the same boardinghouse with Soderstrom for a short while in 1793 until the yellow fever chased L'Enfant out. When in early 1794 Soderstrom rented a house on Filbert Street between Eighth and Ninth Streets, only three blocks from Morris's construction site, L'Enfant decided to settle there. But problems arose almost immediately. Though L'Enfant paid half the house's \$200 annual rent, he maintained a sparse existence. He occupied only two rooms, one containing a pine bedstead and small table, the other, two old chairs and a broken table. L'Enfant tended to his own few clothes and his own rare fire, while he would later charge Soderstrom with "luxurious habits" in the remainder of the house—having numerous servants, multiple fires, horses and stables, a fine parlor room, free-flowing liquors, and wild entertainments, including a "number of Harlots" for his friends. L'Enfant would accuse his companion of other wrongs, obliquely claiming that "when I wanted either to go to New York or elsewhere, he rather in anticipation of the time when I intended contrived to keep me distressed for money & prevented the Journey, then officiously proposed to me to give him power to recover for me." And Soderstrom would embarrass L'Enfant by telling friends that he had taken in L'Enfant charitably and was aiding him at great expense. Still, for the time being, the two managed to balance their lives in the house, loaning each other money and entering into their own speculations together and with their mutual friend Morris while the house project continued.¹⁷

1794); J. H. Powell, *Bring Out Your Dead: The Great Plague of Yellow Fever in Philadelphia in 1793* (Philadelphia, 1949).

¹⁷ L'Enfant, account dated 1804 (quotations); James Hardie, *The Philadelphia Directory and Register*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia, 1794), 144. Soderstrom is listed as the "Consul general from Sweden," though his position beyond the northern states had not yet been confirmed. See Florence Anderson, "Richard Soderstrom: The First Swedish Consul in Boston," in *American Swedish Historical Foundation: Yearbook 1958*, ed. Adolph B. Benson (Philadelphia, 1958), 4–5; Bowling, *Peter Charles L'Enfant*, 31, 42–45; and

Despite his seeming reliance on his European housemate, L'Enfant did not always mix eagerly with the growing numbers of French refugees then beginning to shape the city in the wake of the revolutions in France and Saint-Domingue. This diverse lot tended to cluster near the waterfront, setting up bustling French bookstores and coffee houses on the opposite end of town from L'Enfant's residence on the western edge of the city's neighborhoods. French notables who spent time in Philadelphia, including Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, viscount Louis-Marie de Noailles, Médéric Louis Elie Moreau de Saint-Méry, and duke François Alexandre Frédéric de La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, made no mention of meals with their onetime countryman, nor did they take much notice of his increasingly visible work in the city. Still, in L'Enfant's sparse neighborhood, the city directories did list one "French boarding house" at the corner on Eighth Street, plus a scattering of other individual Frenchmen on Eighth among the other English blacksmiths, carters, and coachmakers there. Morris himself employed at his Market Street home a French cook, a French maid, and French tutors, while doing business with French speculators. He could have offered an additional entrée into that community if L'Enfant had so desired.¹⁸

Initially, as with Burton Wallace, L'Enfant's primary construction contacts were local. During the winter, the major set up a contract with a local stonecutter, John Miller & Co., whose yard was near Tenth Street. L'Enfant also worked directly with the project's master carpenter, John Sproul, who was recently elected into the tradition-bound Carpenters' Company of

Smith, *Robert Morris's Folly*. For examples of Morris's advances and payments to Soderstrom, see entries throughout Journal, 1791–1801, Robert Morris Business Records, including Dec. 31, 1791, Apr. 3, 1792, July 14, 1792, and Feb. 2, 1793, and also Ledger, folio 55, Robert Morris Business Records.

Soderstrom had at least one son, as mentioned in Morris's Oct. 3, 1793, letter to L'Enfant. J. Thomas Scharf and Thompson Westcott, in their *History of Philadelphia, 1609–1884* (Philadelphia, 1884), 2:923, declare that Soderstrom married a Philadelphia woman and had children with her, but the date of this marriage is unclear. For an interpretation of L'Enfant and Soderstrom's relationship as one involving a sexual component, see Bob Arnebeck, "To Tease and Torment." Arnebeck cites John Trumbull's papers to say that "friends like the artist John Trumbull thought of the two as a pair." For a more cautious exploration of the two men's relationship, see Bowling, *Peter Charles L'Enfant*. For background, see Claire A. Lyons, "Mapping an Atlantic Sexual Culture: Homoeroticism in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 60 (2003): 119–54; Thomas A. Foster, ed., *Long Before Stonewall: Histories of Same-Sex Sexuality in Early America* (New York, 2007); and Richard Godbeer, *The Overflowing of Friendship: Love between Men and the Creation of the American Republic* (Baltimore, 2009).

¹⁸ Edmund Hogan, *The Prospect of Philadelphia, and Check on the Next Directory*, part 1 (Philadelphia, 1795), 60 (quotation), 83; Hardie, *Philadelphia Directory* (1794); *Stephens's Philadelphia Directory, for 1796* (Philadelphia, 1796); Smith, *Robert Morris's Folly*; and Furstenberg, *When the United States Spoke French*.

Philadelphia. By March 1794, carters around Chestnut Street were bringing in load after load of stone and other new materials—lime, bricks, pine boards, and large wooden spars, plus new wheelbarrows and more fencing—in preparation for the year's work. The lot soon rang again with the banging, hammering, scraping, and shouts of gangs in a large work crew. At one point during the project, while L'Enfant was away visiting New York, Wallace took up his pen and addressed the engineer: "As I presume nothing can be more pleasing to you at present than to hear how your building is going." The letter revealed no sense of rivalry or confusion—to Wallace, it was "your building." Proudly, he detailed how L'Enfant's specific orders regarding construction, outbuildings, and landscaping were being carried forward. In closing, Wallace wished L'Enfant "perfect health" and the long continuance of "every other happiness." The builder's obvious admiration for L'Enfant grew from his own close experience with the house's design, his knowledge that L'Enfant was capable of bringing a superlative building to Philadelphia, and L'Enfant's devotion to his crew.¹⁹

With Morris's project underway, L'Enfant took on side projects around the city. Some have claimed he assisted at the fashionable New Theatre on the next block down Chestnut Street, which had opened in February 1794 after a year's construction costing \$135,000. If L'Enfant's hand showed anywhere on that building, it was in its fashionable elliptical interior, with three tiers of box seats, gilt railings, and an eagle hung above the stage (see Figure 2). Two months after opening night, the theater's proprietors called on L'Enfant when a bench broke during a performance, creating an alarm regarding the building's safety. L'Enfant and two other men were called to survey the structure, with their results published in the newspaper to reassure the wary public. After "a strict examination," the named committeemen could confidently pronounce the structure secure. L'Enfant's opinion still commanded a share of respect; the plays went on.²⁰

¹⁹ Burton Wallace to Major L'enfaunt, Feb. 6, [1794 or 1795], box 1, JDM-DLM Papers (quotations); entries for 1794 in Journal, 1791–1801, Robert Morris Business Records; Hardie, *Philadelphia Directory* (1794), 146; Sandra L. Tatman and Roger W. Moss, *Biographical Dictionary of Philadelphia Architects, 1700–1930* (Boston, 1985), s.v. "Sproul, John."

²⁰ Wignell & Reinagle, "To the Public," *Philadelphia Gazette and Universal Daily Advertiser*, Apr. 9, 1794. The suggestion that L'Enfant played a role in the design of the New Theatre, also known as the Chestnut Street Theater, comes from Richard D. Stine, "The Philadelphia Theatre 1682–1829: Its Growth as a Cultural Institution" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1951); and James D. Kornwolf, *Architecture and Town Planning in Colonial North America* (Baltimore, 2002), 3:1421. For the theater itself, see Heather S. Nathans, *Early American Theatre from the Revolution to Thomas Jefferson: Into the Hands of the People* (New York, 2003), 64–68, 72–73; John R. Wolcott, "Philadelphia's Chestnut Street Theatre: A Plan and Elevation," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 30



Figure 2. “Inside View of the New Theatre,” on Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, built in 1793. Above the stage, a decorative eagle carries an inscription: “The Eagle Suffers the Little Birds to Sing,” a reference to the controversial nature of theatergoing in the young republic. This engraving, by J. Lewis, originally appeared in the *New York Magazine* in April 1794. Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

In April, L'Enfant was drawn into yet another local commission. Congress had finally appropriated funds to stiffen the nation's coastal defenses, and protecting the capital city became a primary concern. Secretary of War Henry Knox named his fellow Cincinnatus, L'Enfant, to the position of temporary engineer for the defenses of Philadelphia and Wilmington on April 3, which mostly involved upgrading the makeshift Mud Island battery known as Fort Mifflin in the Delaware River. Though immersed in the Morris project, L'Enfant took this new commission to heart, as it brought him back into military affairs. It also more closely matched his own description of himself in that year's Philadelphia city directory, as “engineer of the United States.” He set to it immediately, surveying the existing fort and then deeming its defensive angles and earthen walls use-

(1971): 209–18; Tatum, *Penn's Great Town*, 61, 169; Thomas Clark Pollock, *The Philadelphia Theatre in the Eighteenth Century* (Philadelphia, 1933), 53–55; Scharf and Westcott, *History of Philadelphia*, 2:970, 1076; and George O. Seilhamer, *History of the American Theatre: New Foundations* (Philadelphia, 1891), 151.

less. In its place, he insisted, an entirely new fortification must rise on the swampy land. Accordingly, over the summer months, he directed a campaign of demolition, re-trenching, and infill. The island soon became so cut up "that a cart could scarcely be driven in any part of it," one resident recalled.²¹

Visitors, including Governor Thomas Mifflin and the French minister Jean Antoine Joseph Fauchet ventured to the site to see the progress. And just as quickly, other state and federal officials voiced growing unease over L'Enfant's doings. In late June, Tench Coxe, a US revenue commissioner, worried that "material injury to the Piers" and Philadelphia's harbor "will be produced by the new Works constructing by Major L'Enfant," due to the latter's dramatic leveling and dumping. Beyond concerns over potential harbor damage, some critics were even faulting the military effectiveness of the new design itself. "Some of our state officers," Coxe prodded Knox in July, thought "that Mr. L'Enfant's plan is injudicious," given the works' reduced height. Further, the major used up all his allocated \$12,000 by the end of the summer and was requesting more funds from the state and from the federal treasury.²²

With a crisis approaching, the Pennsylvania legislature appointed a committee to investigate the project. By this point in his life, L'Enfant must have become accustomed to critics and the politics involved in government contracts. But, as always, he stood his ground and appealed to the highest authorities. In mid-September he put the matter directly to Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton: "After all possible exertions on my part, to progress the fortification at and near Mud Island," constrained by the "limited" means assigned, "it is with the greatest con-

²¹ Hardie, *Philadelphia Directory* (1794), 89 (first quotation); Deborah Logan to John F. Watson, in Letters and Communications to John F. Watson, box 2, p. 184, John Fanning Watson Collection on the Cultural, Social, and Economic Development of Pennsylvania, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (last quotation) (hereafter cited as John F. Watson Letters); Copy of a letter from Major L'Enfant to the Secretary of War, Apr. 19, 1794; Copy of a letter from Major L'Enfant to the Secretary of the Treasury, Sept. 15, 1794; Copy of a letter from Major L'Enfant to the Secretary of War, May 16, 1794; From Major L'Enfant to the Secretary of War, July 2, 1794; From Major L'Enfant to the Governor of the State of Delaware, July 1, 1794, all in *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, ed. Walter Lowrie and Matthew St. Clair Clarke (Washington, DC, 1832), 1:82–87 (online at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lwsp.html>); Jeffery M. Dorwart, *Fort Mifflin of Philadelphia: An Illustrated History* (Philadelphia, 1998), 70–73.

²² Jacob Cox Parsons, ed., *Extracts from the Diary of Jacob Hiltzheimer, of Philadelphia, 1765–1798* (Philadelphia, 1893), 206–7; Tench Coxe to Alexander Hamilton, June 30, 1794 (first quotations), and Tench Coxe to Henry Knox, July 9, 1794 (last quotations), in *PAH*, 16:538–40; Bowling, *Peter Charles L'Enfant*, 41–42.

cern I am to inform you that those means, by proving too small, have long since forced me to relent of the progress.” Without further funds, “the whole must stop before any part is brought to that state of perfection necessary to be guarded against winter, and answer to some object of defence.” It was an ultimatum. The complaints regarding the quality of his work, he felt, were not worth addressing. Yet Hamilton would not again come to his aid, and L’Enfant’s efforts at Fort Mifflin collapsed. Pennsylvania’s committee to investigate the controversial project met with L’Enfant in September and questioned his plans, which he naturally found insulting. L’Enfant saw his efforts as being thwarted by the maliciousness and disobedience of those around him. Hamilton directed another \$1,000 toward the project, but it was not enough. Sometime that winter, L’Enfant quit the project in frustration, to be replaced by another engineer. Work on the fort continued in fits and starts, with the secretary of war reporting in 1796, in an echo of L’Enfant’s previous clients, that the plan was now “much more circumscribed than was at first projected.”²³

Still another project was giving L’Enfant and his clients fits that summer. This one involved the City Dancing Assembly, which had been seeking to build a dedicated hall for its functions since the early 1790s. Robert Morris, Henry Hill, and others opened their pockets to the project, and by 1794 the group was ready to make an attempt at construction. Deborah Logan, who had heard the first rumors of Morris’s house, would later recall that “a number of Gentlemen” engaged Major L’Enfant in 1794 “to build for them a dancing hall. They bought a Lott and raised by subscription the money deemed requisite for its erection, which he entirely spent before he got the building raised.” In turn, the gentlemen “were angry and disappointed and would not raise any more funds but sold the lott and building.” Morris was silent on the effort, and the Dancing Assembly remained stationed at Oeller’s Hotel. Nevertheless, the group might have been able

²³J. Hiltzheimer to Charles L’Enfant, Sept. 11, 1794, box 1, JDM-DLM Papers; Parsons, *Extracts from the Diary of Jacob Hiltzheimer*, 207; Logan to Watson, box 2, p. 184, John F. Watson Letters; Pierre Charles L’Enfant to Alexander Hamilton, Sept. 15, 1794, *PAH*, 17:236 (first quotations); Timothy Pickering, quoted in appendix: “Fort Mifflin,” in *Pennsylvania Archives*, ser. 1, ed. Samuel Hazard, 12 vols. (Philadelphia, 1852–56), 12:411 (last quotation); Dorwart, *Fort Mifflin of Philadelphia*, 71–75. Dorwart suggests that L’Enfant may have “designed a Greek Revival style commandant’s house and constructed an esplanade” behind the fort’s walls. Earlier that summer, L’Enfant had called on the assistance of Tench Francis, Philadelphia’s port agent and a War Department contact, to help clear the “maneuvering” involving supplies of stone and logs that had served to “delay and frustrate the accomplishment of” work on the project. See P. L’Enfant to Tench Francis, [ca. July 1794], box 1, JDM-DLM Papers.

to salvage something out of the attempt. It seems that L'Enfant's talents may have been turned to the interior of the Dancing Assembly's customary room in the hotel, where he refurbished it with elegant decorations, including wallpaper "after the French taste," pillars, and "groups of antique drawings."²⁴

A final blow was in store for L'Enfant that summer. Stephen Girard, the French-born merchant and philanthropist who stood so tall in Philadelphia, had purchased a Water Street lot in the spring for the construction of a new town house. He thought of L'Enfant for the commission and wrote a mutual friend in Baltimore to request a formal letter of introduction. A few months later his friend finally responded with a decided lack of enthusiasm. "Enclosed you will find four lines to L'Enfant which you may use if you see fit to do so. You do not need to be warned by me not to allow yourself to be drawn into too great expenditure," he cautioned. The warning made an impression. Girard's resulting row house, finished the following year, was a plain, three-bay, four-story brick structure. It fit squarely within the traditional Philadelphia mold, suggesting that Girard had taken his friend's advice and avoided L'Enfant's creative but extravagant hand (see Figure 3). At least the major may have been spared the knowledge of this loss. Surely, L'Enfant's recent frustrations—with the Dancing Assembly and the Mud Island projects shut down and the Paterson and the federal city debacles still fresh—were enough. The progress being made on Morris's house buoyed L'Enfant's spirits during these seemingly inescapable conflicts. It may have been the only place of solace for him that year.²⁵

²⁴ Logan to Watson, box 2, p. 184, John F. Watson Letters (first quotations); entries for Dec. 20 and 31, 1792, in Journal, 1791–1801, Robert Morris Business Records; Henry Wansey, *The Journal of an Excursion to the United States of North America, in the Summer of 1794* (Salisbury, UK, 1796), 132 (last quotation); "Notes and Queries," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 21 (1897): 122–23; and James F. O'Gorman, *Drawing toward Building: Philadelphia Architectural Graphics, 1732–1986* (Philadelphia, 1986), 42–43. Joshua Francis Fisher corroborated L'Enfant's connection with the Dancing Assembly's commission and Logan's story. Fisher added that the Dancing Assembly's "lot on 5th Street was next South of St. Thomas African Church, and was for a long time covered by a shell of a building, perhaps the superstructure to Major L'Enfant's cellars" there. See Joshua Francis Fisher, "A Section of the Memoirs of Joshua Francis Fisher, Philadelphia Social Scene from the Time of the Hamiltons to the Early Part of the Nineteenth Century," ser. 9, box 552, folder 7, Cadwalader Family Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. It is unclear exactly when (and even if) L'Enfant refurbished the assembly's room at Oeller's, but if he did, it must have been between 1792 and 1794. Historians who attribute his hand there include Kimball, "Pierre Charles L'Enfant," and Caemmerer, *Life of Pierre Charles L'Enfant*, 264.

²⁵ John Bach McMaster, *The Life and Times of Stephen Girard: Mariner and Merchant* (Philadelphia, 1918), 1:278–79 (quotation); Kennedy, *Orders from France*, 99.



Figure 3. Stephen Girard's house built on Water Street, Philadelphia, after his decision not to hire L'Enfant as his architect. "The Dwelling and Counting House of Stephen Girard as it Appeared at the Time of his Death, Dec. 26, 1831," watercolor by B. R. Evans, 1888. Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

The Final Folly

In early 1795, Morris consulted with L'Enfant and the two concluded that the family would move into its new house by December. Yet it was not to be. L'Enfant, having been charged by the financier to build monumentally, lavished layer after layer of ostentation on the structure. His inability to complete it, coupled with Morris's dwindling resources, effectively ended his architectural career.²⁶

One extravagance L'Enfant pursued was the use of master stonecarvers. The building's rising façade exhibited thick, brick walls curved in the outline of two massive wings connected by a central hall (see Figure 4). Here, L'Enfant saw the possibility of surpassing local stonecarving traditions, in which marble was used mainly as door and window surrounds. Even the Bingham had made do with fabricated "Coade stone" reliefs on the exterior of their Mansion House. In contrast, L'Enfant was able to secure the skills of a pair of recent arrivals from Italy, presumably broth-

²⁶ Robert Morris to George Hammond, Mar. 23, 1795, Private Letterbook, vol. 1, 1794–1796, Robert Morris Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

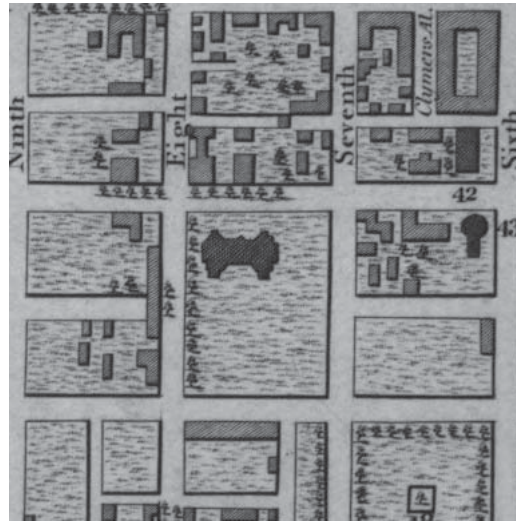


Figure 4. The footprint of Morris's house on the block bounded by Chestnut, Walnut, Seventh, and Eighth Streets, Philadelphia. Detail from John Hills and John Cooke, *This Plan of the City of Philadelphia and it's Environs . . .* (Philadelphia, 1797). Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

ers, listed in Morris's accounts as "J. & A. Jardella," who arrived on site in late spring 1795. "Joseph" (Giuseppe) and "Andrew" Jardella (or Iardella) went on to produce a series of marble bas-reliefs for the house, while more stoneworkers cut and set marble up huge portions of the exterior walls amid the brick, around each window opening, and throughout the interior. Alongside the stoneworkers, L'Enfant commissioned an Italian stucco worker named Giuseppe Proviny (or Provigny) to improve upon the Philadelphia plastering tradition for mantle surrounds, ceiling medallions, and other interior decorations.²⁷

Such innovations drew plenty of attention, most of it negative or incredulous. Isaac Weld, a Dubliner visiting America in 1795, ranked Morris's project among the only three Philadelphia houses "that particularly attract the attention," but "little beauty is observable in the designs of any of

²⁷ Entries for Jan. through Sept. 1795 and Feb. 1796 in Journal, 1794–1801, Robert Morris Business Records; Smith, *Robert Morris's Folly*; and Henderson, "Furnishing the Republican Court," 94–97. The first time the Jardellas showed up in the Philadelphia directories was in 1802. See James Robinson, *The Philadelphia Directory, City and County Register, for 1802* (Philadelphia, 1802), 10, 129. That the Jardellas executed the surviving sculpted reliefs, and that they did so onsite, is a longstanding supposition; the pieces are not signed. Proviny did not appear in Philadelphia's city directories for 1794, 1795, or 1796.

these. The most spacious and the most remarkable one amongst them," he discovered, "stands in Chesnut-street, but it is not yet quite finished. At present it appears a huge mass of red brick and pale blue marble, which bids defiance to simplicity and elegance." Moreau de Saint-Méry concurred that pride was at work in the construction. That year, he informed his readers: "Only a few houses in Philadelphia deviate from the regulation shape and size that characterize all of them, but some are much larger; and some, even, are decorated with marble." He named Robert Morris's house as one such building, but concluded that it and others "which Americans build for ostentatious display are not sufficiently beautiful to merit the name of mansions. Never can marble columns . . . beautify the gloom of a brick structure. Pride can make an effort in this respect, but good taste will always nullify it." One might have expected Saint-Méry to have a more sympathetic view of the gesture, but it seems that L'Enfant's translation—especially his rare accommodation by using some brick—struck him as awkward. The most extraordinary report came from Edinburgh, Scotland, where an American medical student commented on a letter he had just seen from Philadelphia. The letter, he wrote, "surprised me a good deal. It was this[,] that the large house building at present by Robt. Morris was desired for the reception of George 3rd in case the French should drive him from Great Britain."²⁸

Here, the palatial house figured as a literal palace. Others confirmed the impression. The year before, Alexander Hamilton's wife, Elizabeth, had received a letter from her sister Angelica Church in London, who wrote simply: "Mr. Morris is building a palace, do you think Monsieur l'Enfant would send me a drawing of it? Merely from curiosity, for one wishes to see the plan of a house which it is said, will cost, when furnished £40,000 Sterling." This figure translated to nearly \$200,000, at a time when Philadelphia laborers earned perhaps \$300 yearly and could rent a small brick dwelling for under \$80 a year. In that freighted word "palace," Church and other commentators pointed to the dilemma of great wealth among Americans. In a nation recently established on republican principles, what did it mean for Morris and his family to presume to live in such

²⁸ Isaac Weld Jr., *Travels through the States of North America, and the Provinces of Upper and Lower Canada, during the Years 1795, 1796, and 1797*, 2nd ed. (London, 1799), 1:8–9 (first quotations); Moreau de Saint-Méry, in *Moreau de St. Méry's American Journey, 1793–1798*, trans. and ed. Kenneth Roberts and Anna M. Roberts (Garden City, NY, 1947), 363 (second quotations); and Edward Fisher to Benjamin Rush, Apr. 15, 1795, vol. 5, p. 30, Correspondence of Benjamin Rush, Rush Family Papers, Library Company of Philadelphia, housed at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (last quotation).

a manner? His and L'Enfant's willingness to strike such a pose called up all the worst fears of the Jeffersonians, to say nothing of, say, a war widow in Philadelphia scraping along on twenty cents a day. In the local papers, the Democratic Society of Pennsylvania insisted that its members were "no longer dazzled with adventitious splendor" and would "erect the temple of LIBERTY on the ruins of palaces and thrones."²⁹

Perhaps coincidentally, in the latter half of 1795, Morris showed the first hint of modesty regarding the house. And it brought about his first serious strain with L'Enfant. That such a strain should develop was hardly surprising, especially given the financial duress under which Morris was laboring. In 1793, one of his trading partners left \$100,000 of his notes protested in London, and the chaotic tide of the French Revolution and European wars swept away most of Morris's prospects for further land sales. His local partners Nicholson and Greenleaf did him no favors, either, by misappropriating his funds and abetting his creation of flimsy paper schemes such as the North American Land Company. All the while, Morris kept writing notes for his construction project's tremendous expenses. On July 21, for example, Morris gave Burton Wallace \$1,000 for two weeks' worth of laborers' wages alone, to say nothing of materials or artisans' pay. He was paying high rent for his current residence, which he had sold on the expectation of his impending move, and he faced the prospect that its new owner might want it "before I have a place to go into." Meanwhile, Morris was attempting to foist North American Land Company shares onto L'Enfant in place of cash. There were no more friendly breakfasts.³⁰

In September, the situation exploded in a fight. Morris confronted his architect to demand that a roof be placed over the structure that fall, which was essential in order for the interior work to be finished the following year. When Morris returned to the site shortly thereafter, the duo exchanged words. The following day, Morris reminded L'Enfant of his "assurance six weeks ago that the House should be covered this Fall" and ex-

²⁹ Angelica Church to Elizabeth Hamilton, July 30, 1794, printed in *The Intimate Life of Alexander Hamilton*, by Allan McLane Hamilton (New York, 1910), 259–60 (first quotation); Democratic Society of Pennsylvania, "Principles, Articles, and Regulations," May 30, 1793, reprinted in *National Gazette*, July 17, 1793 (last quotation); "Palace," *Oxford English Dictionary* online (<http://www.oed.com>). For common Philadelphia housing stock, see Billy G. Smith, *The "Lower Sort": Philadelphia's Laboring People, 1750–1800* (Ithaca, NY, 1990), 7–39, 150–75; and Donna J. Rilling, *Making Houses, Crafting Capitalism: Builders in Philadelphia, 1790–1850* (Philadelphia, 2001).

³⁰ Entry for July 21, 1795, in Journal, 1794–1801, Robert Morris Business Records; Robert Morris to L'Enfant, Sept. 24, 1795, Private Letterbook, vol. 1, 1794–1796, Robert Morris Papers (quotation); note for five shares of the North American Land Company, Mar. 24, 1795, box 1, JDM-DLM Papers; Smith, *Robert Morris's Folly*.

plained that he did not have the leisure then to keep monitoring L'Enfant's progress. "Consequently," Morris continued, "when I came yesterday and found both by my own observation & by the answers obtained to questions which I put to Mr. Wallace that there was no chance of getting the whole building covered," the financier was outraged. Morris seized upon his architect: could the west wing, at least, be covered soon or not? "To this question you very abruptly told me to ask Miller if he could do his work in time and that a roof could not be put on without the outside wall. This answer," a sarcastic one, Morris fumed, "I think was extremely improper from you to me." Unlike L'Enfant, Morris was slow to feel insults, but now he threatened that "if you do not think I am entitled to receive satisfaction from you, it is high time to part."³¹

This spat pointed to the larger fault line developing between them. According to Morris, "although it was not my intention or desire to have the marble you have introduced into this building, yet an inclination to indulge your genius induced me to permit so much of it (before I knew the extent to which you meant to carry it) as seemed to call for the remainder." Thus the troublesome, extensive stonework had been L'Enfant's design. Morris, somehow unaware of its extent, went along with the plans due to his confidence in his architect; now he could no longer afford the time or funds to "indulge" L'Enfant's genius. Increasingly harried, he drew a distinction between what he called "my intentions instead of your own." L'Enfant responded in kind, revealing again his delicate sense of honor, by accusing Morris of wishing to sacrifice the architect's fame and fortunes. But Morris, the patron extraordinaire, would have none of it. "I do not wish you to sacrifice any thing to or for me," Morris retorted, "but if I am to pay, I am entitled to every information I may think proper to ask"; he had a right to expedite his building. L'Enfant, in turn, envisioned himself guiding the equivalent of a Parisian nouveau riche. Still, he valued Morris's patronage, he believed in this creation, and he did not want to lose either one. So after flinging one more insult about Morris's slow payments, he agreed to expedite construction.³²

After another whole year of construction, the diarist Jacob Hiltzheimer visited the site in 1796 and heard one of the workmen testify that the

³¹ Robert Morris to P. C. L'Enfant, Sept. 24, 1795, Private Letterbook, vol. 1, 1794–1796, Robert Morris Papers.

³² Robert Morris to P. C. L'Enfant, Sept. 25, 1795, Private Letterbook, vol. 1, 1794–1796, Robert Morris Papers.

house "could not be finished under five summers." Despite the tens of thousands of dollars then being expended on it, progress was still maddeningly slow. Getting a roof over it was still presenting a problem. Part of the difficulty lay in the design of the roof itself, for which L'Enfant had chosen a mansard, which featured steeply sloping sides covering part of the building's top story. In 1796, such a roof was unheard of in America. Certainly these Philadelphia builders had never completed one. In May, the hands began erecting the roof's frame, which Morris intended to cover with slate, another Philadelphia anomaly. Workers, including Burton Wallace, finally began walking off the site from lack of pay. Many would never receive their payment in full, and their names appeared among lists of unsatisfied creditors. Others continued for the remainder of the season, including the stone dealer Miller, the Jardella brothers, and the plasterer Proviny. A few steps were taken inside, as carpenters began making mahogany installations and preparing lath and plaster walls, while painters, including the Frenchman Peter Beauvais, plied their brushes in adding color and decoration. Morris helped motivate the hands with occasional barrels of rum and gin.³³

The biggest challenge to the house's completion involved Morris's relationship with Major L'Enfant. An earlier associate working with L'Enfant at Paterson, New Jersey, had complained that the engineer could not confine "his views to those things which are essential instead of what is ornamental." As in that episode, L'Enfant, confident in his training, driven in his goals, restless in his private life, and uncompromising in his executions, could not adjust his visions to Morris's reverses. A signal achievement must have felt tantalizingly within his reach. Although Morris could not even properly pay L'Enfant's own fee, the engineer proceeded to build and shape so long as there were men and materials to command. In August 1796, Morris flew into a rage when he saw the latest work on his building, "astonished" at the new marble put up on the house. Morris had reached a point on the project that he called "intolerable" and accused L'Enfant of being naïve in regard to the availability of money. "If you persist in exposing yourself to censure & me to ridicule by alterations and additions," he prophetically warned, "you will force me to abandon all Expectations of

³³ Parsons, *Extracts from the Diary of Jacob Hiltzbeimer*, 228 (quotation); entries for Aug. 1795 and Feb., Mar., Apr., July, Aug., Oct., Nov., and Dec. 1796 in *Journal, 1794–1801*, Robert Morris Business Records; Smith, *Robert Morris's Folly*. For Morris's debts, see [Robert Morris], *In the Account of Property* (Philadelphia [1801]); and Case of Robert Morris, No. 42, BA1800-PA, microfilm 993, reel 7, Records of the US District Court of the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, Bankruptcy Act of 1800, Record Group 21, National Archives Mid-Atlantic Region, Philadelphia.

getting into the House and to stop the work.” He still clung to expectations. In response, L’Enfant wondered that his patron had suddenly urged economy and dispatch. It struck him as a new note. L’Enfant reminded Morris of earlier conversations regarding the marble in question, prompting Morris to acknowledge that “your Explanation . . . is satisfactory, except that you seem to tax my memory with serving badly.” Thus the cycle of the pair’s relationship continued, mutually enabling one another’s flights, even to the onrushing end of construction.³⁴

That winter, Morris was forced to dismiss all the laborers except for a few carpenters. He then dejectedly mortgaged the house as it stood to some creditors in Amsterdam in order to prolong their patience. Into the new year, Morris, along with other visitors, continued to stroll by and stare at the dark, uninhabitable, now-quiet edifice, at what would have been “the most expensive & grandest private Building in the U. States,” in the words of one visitor. Proviny set up shop on Second Street, to exhibit wax figures and advertise for his composition work. One of the Jardellas ventured south to the city of Washington. And so the Chestnut Street mansion’s career as a public morality lesson began. “You may judge how sufficiently I am Chastized for my folly,” Morris explained to a friend. “Morris’s Folly” was born, and L’Enfant proved unable to distance himself from the resulting disgrace.³⁵

The remaining contact between L’Enfant and Morris dealt with money, not art. In May 1797, they acknowledged to each other that “that unfortunate building in Chesnut Street” would not continue. Morris had borrowed thirteen shares of valuable bank stock from L’Enfant, and he also owed him for his services. L’Enfant never delivered Morris a formal account, but he did seek some payment and the return of his bank shares, to which Morris could only reply, “sorry I am that it is not in my power to comply instantly with your Wishes,” while deflecting some blame back on the “extravagant expenditures” of the construction. Oddly, L’Enfant showed signs of land fever at the time and made a few proposals along these lines to the

³⁴ Peter Colt to Alexander Hamilton, in *PAH*, 14:419–21 (first quotation); Robert Morris to Major L’Enfant, Aug. 15, 1796 (second quotations), and Robert Morris to Major L’Enfant, Aug. 16, 1796 (last quotation), *Private Letterbook*, vol. 2, 1796–1797, Robert Morris Papers.

³⁵ *In the Account of Property*, 11; James Kent, “Journal of a trip to Washington, D.C., December 5, 1793 to January 3, 1794,” reel 1, vol. 1, James Kent Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress (first quotation); Robert Morris to Gustavus Scott, May 10, 1797, *Private Letterbook*, vol. 2, 1796–1797, Robert Morris Papers (last quotation). For Jardella’s departure, see entry for July 30, 1797, in *Journal, 1794–1801*, Robert Morris Business Records. For Proviny’s new shop, see Cornelius William Stafford, *The Philadelphia Directory for 1798* (Philadelphia, 1798), 115.

failing Morris in late 1797. Morris arranged for a lien in L'Enfant's name on some land investments, but this was the best he could do, as he was sent to the Prune Street debtors' prison the next year. There, Morris's attitude towards L'Enfant's services would increasingly harden, and by 1801 he would describe his project on Chestnut Street as one "upon which Major L'Enfant was erecting for me a much more magnificent house than I ever intended to have built." Still, Morris acknowledged his debts to the major and felt them, especially as he saw that L'Enfant was also in financial distress. Richard Soderstrom took up the role of intermediary, while L'Enfant lapsed into depression.³⁶

The End for an "Eccentric"

In April 1798, four months after the sheriff sold Morris's Folly at a public auction for the original price of the lot alone, the architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe wandered onto the quiet construction site. Having arrived in America only two years prior, he was a true peer for L'Enfant in terms of international exposure and training. He had heard about the house while in Virginia; intrigued, he made a point to investigate it during a visit to Philadelphia. His conclusion was simple. "It is impossible to decide which of the two is the maddest, the architect, or his employer," he observed in his journal. "Both of them have been ruined by it."³⁷

Latrobe liked nothing about the house and its rococo features. Nor could he make sense of its arrangement, for although he attempted a rough sketch of its plan, he could not delineate anything inside its "complicated, unintelligible, mass." He found its features "violently ugly." For example, its irregular porches were "irresistibly laughable things." The windows were "cased in White Marble" with sculptured moldings "mixed up in the oddest and most inelegant manner imaginable" (see Figure 5). Along the house's rear bow, four columns stood in niches, "as in the front of St. Peters at Rome, from which I hope [L'Enfant] copied them, as such a madness in modern architecture stands in great need of a powerful apology."

³⁶ Robert Morris to Major L'Enfant, May 15, 1797 (first quotations), July 20, 1797, Oct. 18, 1797, and May 16, 1802, and account dated 1804, all in box 1, JDM-DLM Papers; *In the Account of Property*, 11 (last quotation), 63. Morris and his son Thomas would assist L'Enfant in the latter's petitions for past payment from New York City and the US Congress into the 1800s. See Smith, *Robert Morris's Folly*; and Bowling, *Peter Charles L'Enfant*, 48–49.

³⁷ Entry for Apr. 26, 1798, in Latrobe, *Virginia Journals* (quotation); and Talbot Hamlin, *Benjamin Henry Latrobe* (New York, 1955), 128–32.



Figure 5. Latrobe's sketch of the Folly's windows and window casings. Detail from Benjamin Henry Latrobe, *Virginia Journals*, entry for April 26, 1798. Courtesy of the Maryland Historical Society.

Soffits were “inriched with pannels and foliage,” while the “Capitals of the Columns are of the worst taste.” Nor did the mansard roof impress him. In the end, Latrobe satisfied himself that beyond the ruin of the structure’s patrons, “It is now sold to Mr. [William] Sansom of the Pensylvania [*sic*] bank, who means to convert it, as I was told into five houses.” The “palace” would not stand.³⁸

What was the root of Latrobe’s outrage over the house’s aesthetics? It may have signaled some jealousy on the part of the ambitious newcomer, who would soon purchase loads of its “wretched sculpture” and stone to decorate his own commissions in the area. And it may have indirectly involved politics; while in Philadelphia, Latrobe—a newly minted Virginia democrat—observed that political “fanaticism” was at its peak, and he suffered the scorn of the Philadelphia Federalist establishment, with which Morris was closely identified. But most likely, Latrobe’s vitriol really did come down to a question of taste. There was nothing of the baroque in Latrobe. L’Enfant’s vision was entirely out of step with the clear volumes

³⁸ Entry for Apr. 26, 1798, in Latrobe, *Virginia Journals*. Earlier, for the celebrated Federal Hall in New York City, L’Enfant had invented designs for the capitals of the building’s pilasters, drawing together an assemblage of foliage, drapery, and a patriotic star with rays. See Jusserand, *Americans of Past and Present*, 155–56.

and lines Latrobe demonstrated in his own work. And the neoclassical forms popping up in towns across the nation testified that Latrobe was not alone. Only one year later, Latrobe would establish his reputation in the city with the Bank of Pennsylvania, a striking tribute to the Greek temple form.³⁹

Latrobe recorded these thoughts in a private journal, but his recoil from the house's extravagance was already commonplace among the public, as demonstrated in its paltry sale price. Most commentators targeted Morris's hubris, but L'Enfant came in for his share of blame. After lambasting Morris, Polish traveler Julian Niemcewicz explained that Morris "took as his architect another fool, Major Enfant. He built for him a real confection which was to be covered with white marble. The undertaking was abandoned in that state most suitable to show all its extravagances." The artist William Birch was more ambivalent; he would capture the look of the abandoned house for his series of engraved views of Philadelphia in 1800, titling one of these twenty-eight plates "An Unfinished House, in Chesnut Street" (see cover image). Birch populated this view, washed clean of any direct reference to Morris or L'Enfant, with a variety of curious onlookers. It was an odd choice of subject for the series of otherwise polished city attractions. In the meantime, building contractors and stray citizens hauled chimneypieces and other prizes out from the building's demolition. By 1801, it had been dismantled and replaced, as Latrobe had noted, with rows of standardized, speculative houses commissioned by the lot's new owner, the Quaker merchant William Sansom (see Figure 6). In turn, the *Philadelphia Directory* commended the rows and praised Sansom's "well laid plans," which had "greatly improved the City."⁴⁰

³⁹ Entry for Apr. 20, 1798, in Latrobe, *Virginia Journals* (first quotation); "A Farce and a Fire," *Porcupine's Gazette*, Apr. 3, 1798; Hamlin, *Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, 129–30; Tatum, *Penn's Great Town*, 40–43; William H. Pierson Jr., *American Buildings and Their Architects*, vol. 1, *The Colonial and Neoclassical Styles* (Garden City, NY, 1970); and Damie Stillman, "City Living, Federal Style," in *Everyday Life in the Early Republic*, ed. Catherine E. Hutchins (Winterthur, DE, 1994), 137–74. Latrobe's views of L'Enfant's work would not soften over time. He later declared that everything in Washington, DC, "was badly planned and conducted. L'enfant's plan has in its contrivance every thing that could prevent the growth of the city." He named it all "this *Gigantic Abortion*." Latrobe to Philip Mazzei, May 29, 1806, in *The Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, vol. 2, 1805–1810, ed. John C. Van Horne and Lee W. Formwalt (New Haven, CT, 1987), 225–31.

⁴⁰ Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz, *Under Their Vine and Fig Tree: Travels through America in 1797–1799, 1805, with Some Further Account of Life in New Jersey*, trans. and ed. with an introduction and notes by Metchie J. E. Budka (Elizabeth, NJ, 1965), 37–38 (first quotation); W[illiam]. Birch & Son, *The City of Philadelphia, in the State of Pennsylvania North America; As it Appeared in the Year 1800* (Philadelphia, 1800); James Robinson, *The Philadelphia Directory for 1804* (Philadelphia, 1804), 8 (last quotations).

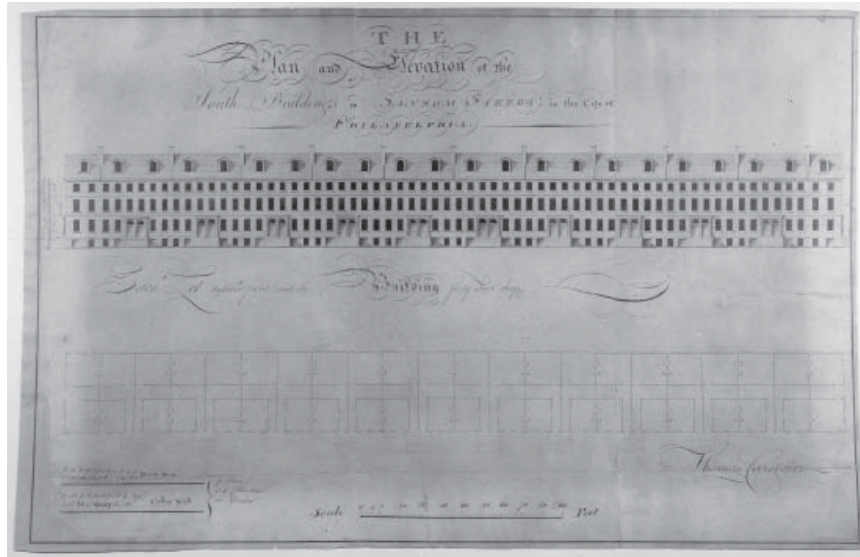


Figure 6. Front elevation and floor plan of William Sansom's row house project on Sansom Street, newly cut through Morris's original block. Thomas Carstairs, "The Plan and Elevation of the South Buildings in Sansom Street, in the City of Philadelphia," ca. 1800. Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

As L'Enfant suffered this dismantling and shaming, he tried to reassert his military connections. First, in early 1798, he looked up his old comrade Alexander Hamilton for back pay due, as he saw it, for the Federal Hall project in New York City. When nothing came of this, he turned to his original patron, General Washington, then in the midst of preparing a newly authorized army to guard against a rumored French invasion at the behest of President Adams. Washington ignored L'Enfant's application for a commission into the army. Via a message conveyed by Soderstrom, Alexander Hamilton, angling himself for second-in-command during the Quasi-War, insulted L'Enfant by questioning the latter's "political prin-

For additional negative reaction to the Folly, see Thompson Westcott, *Historic Mansions and Buildings of Philadelphia, with Some Notice of Their Owners and Occupants* (Philadelphia, 1877), 360–61, though Westcott attempts to restore L'Enfant's reputation, asserting that he had "been made the scapegoat for Mr. Morris's imprudences." For the dismantling of the Folly, see Articles of Agreement between Patrick Dougherty and John Reed & Standish Forde, Feb. 26, 1800, and list dated Mar. 1–Apr. 19, 1800, Robert Morris section, folder "Reed & Forde/Robert Morris Papers/1800/February–December," Reed and Forde Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania; and Smith, *Robert Morris's Folly*. For Sansom, see Tatum, *Penn's Great Town*, 47–48, 164; and Rilling, *Making Houses*, 79. Interestingly, Latrobe himself provided designs for one of Sansom's rows on the site, for the south side fronting Walnut Street.

ciples or connections" in relation to the French ministry. Hamilton also, according to the shocked engineer, questioned "the Conduct in my former public employment." L'Enfant protested, apparently to little effect.⁴¹

No war came, and when Washington died at home the following year, his passing worked a strange effect on the wounded L'Enfant. It seemed to free him to begin petitioning the federal government for what he believed to be proper compensation for his services in the federal city. After Washington's death, L'Enfant took up his pen to seek payment for what he called the "laborious pursuits of twenty two years services to the United States." His housemate Soderstrom, sensing the possibility of new income, was eager to help. In September 1800, the pair set up in a Washington tavern, and L'Enfant's first formal petition landed in the House of Representatives a few months later. He asked for nearly \$100,000. The petition was denied, but L'Enfant remained at the Potomac to continue pleading his case to Congress for the next twenty-five years.⁴²

What did L'Enfant leave behind in Philadelphia? Certainly not a welcome home. In 1804, Soderstrom brought suit against L'Enfant in a District of Columbia court, claiming over six years' worth of back rent and expenses amounting to \$7,300. The infuriated major, still hampered by his language skills, scrambled to draft a statement in response. He sputtered out his disbelief at the audacity of his onetime spendthrift roommate to accuse him of financial irresponsibility. Had he not loaned him money regularly, even from the date of their first acquaintance? Had Soderstrom not used L'Enfant's name and assets to his own benefit? L'Enfant wondered at "the impertinence of the tale which he affects to tell every one—that all he has done for me was not charity," and pointed to "real advances I made him for what I received from him." L'Enfant did acknowledge he had been negligent in his own record keeping, leaving himself open to the purportedly petty, opportunistic Soderstrom. The major had even offered to submit their dispute to gentlemen, including Robert Morris, for arbitration, but Soderstrom declined and pressed his case forward. L'Enfant vented his passions and painted himself as a prisoner, largely helpless against Soderstrom's many manipulations. Soderstrom would prevail.

⁴¹ Alexander Hamilton to Pierre Charles L'Enfant, Mar. 20, 1798, and July 3, 1798; Pierre Charles L'Enfant to Alexander Hamilton, July 1, 1798 (quotations), and July 6, 1798, all in *PAH*, 21:367, 523–24, 527–28, 531–32; George Washington to James McHenry, Feb. 6, 1799, in *PGW*, Retirement Series, 3:360.

⁴² L'Enfant to Alexander Hamilton, July 1, 1798, in *PAH*, 21:523–24 (quotation); Bowling, *Peter Charles L'Enfant*, 45–46; Arnebeck, *Through a Fiery Trial*, 564–66, 604.

When Congress in 1808 finally authorized a settlement with L'Enfant for \$4,600 plus a city lot, the Swedish consul took over \$4,000 of that sum by lien. Most of the remainder went to L'Enfant's lawyer and creditors. So L'Enfant nursed yet another wound.⁴³

Around that time, Latrobe, who had by then taken over many of the design responsibilities in the city of Washington, described seeing the "miserably poor" L'Enfant wander daily as "the picture of famine." "He is too proud to receive any assistance, and it is very doubtful in what manner he subsists," Latrobe observed. In 1812, members of President James Madison's cabinet offered L'Enfant a post at West Point as a professor of engineering. L'Enfant was flattered but declined—he was "not fond of youth" nor of faculty blowhards, he explained. L'Enfant was soon offered the task of supervising the reconstruction of Fort Warburton on the Potomac River in 1814, which devolved into the familiar litany of personal complaints and failed progress. Just as quickly, L'Enfant was mustered out of service from his final commission, to live on the generosity of his Maryland landlords until an anonymous death in 1825. A single, short obituary in the *National Intelligencer* mentioned his French origins, his Revolutionary War exploits, and his authorship of the federal city plan, acknowledging him as an "interesting but eccentric gentleman."⁴⁴

The Philadelphia papers did not take notice. Rather, L'Enfant was recalled by antiquarians largely as the man responsible for ruining Robert Morris during his time in the city. John Fanning Watson consolidated the tales circulating about Morris's house for his first edition of the *Annals of Philadelphia* in 1830. Watson opened his piece on the house by calling it "This great edifice, the grandest ever attempted in Philadelphia for the purposes of private life." The house proved, in Watson's words, "a ruinous and abortive scheme, not so much from [Morris's] want of judgment to measure his end by his means, as by the deceptive estimates of his architect, Major L'enfant—a name celebrated in our annals for the frequent disproportion between his hopes and his accomplishments." L'Enfant's

⁴³ L'Enfant, account dated 1804, JDM-DLM Papers; Bowling, *Peter Charles L'Enfant*, 42–45, 48–50.

⁴⁴ Entry for Aug. 12, 1806, in *The Journals of Benjamin Henry Latrobe, 1799–1820*, vol. 3, *From Philadelphia to New Orleans*, ed. Edward C. Carter II, John C. Van Horne, and Lee W. Formwalt (New Haven, CT, 1981), 71–72 (first quotations); L'Enfant, quoted in Bowling, *Peter Charles L'Enfant*, 50, 53 (second quotation), 54–55, 60; "Died," *National Intelligencer*, June 25, 1825 (last quotation); "Pierre Charles L'Enfant," *American Architect and Building News* 10 (Oct. 22, 1881): 192–94. In 1810, Congress granted L'Enfant \$666.67 with interest from March 1, 1792.

name had become a joke. Morris indeed had found it difficult to rein in L'Enfant when prudence appeared necessary, but the house's cost—perhaps \$600,000—was only a portion of the millions of dollars Morris owed to creditors. Watson did not mention Morris's vast land speculations; instead, after telling of its extensive grounds, its massive underground vaults, and its marble ornament—a “palace in effect”—he pointed to Morris's “ruin in the above building.” Two years later, the Philadelphia magazine *Atkinson's Casket* ran the same story on “Morris' Folly,” repeating Watson's version of the tale. The story continued to circulate that decade, while a local printer reissued William Birch's engraving of the house, presumably to capitalize on the curiosity.⁴⁵

Other Philadelphians would recall L'Enfant's work on Fort Mifflin and the Dancing Assembly's hall. Deborah Logan wrote disparagingly of both to Watson as the latter was preparing his *Annals*, asserting that “complaints were constantly made in every building in which this architect was employed.” In 1864, Joshua Francis Fisher heaped scorn on L'Enfant (“a French Officer”) and his works, charging him with culpability for being “skilled in the art of seductive estimates.” Fisher tore into the Folly and the Dancing Assembly's erstwhile hall, in addition to L'Enfant's earlier “abortive performances” in Washington, DC.⁴⁶

It is little wonder, then, that modern Philadelphians have not recognized L'Enfant as one of the city's formative builders. The lack of a single surviving structure in Philadelphia attributable to L'Enfant has surely contributed to the engineer's subsequent fall from local memory. Two small relics of Morris's Folly, bas-reliefs done by the Jardellas, sit quietly in a private, residential sunroom on Delancey Place (see Figure 7). L'Enfant would receive brief entries in Joseph Jackson's *Early Philadelphia Architects and Engineers* (1923) and in Sandra L. Tatman and Roger W. Moss's ex-

⁴⁵ John F. Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia, Being a Collection of Memoirs, Anecdotes, and Incidents of the City and its Inhabitants from the Days of the Pilgrim Founders* (Philadelphia and New York, 1830), 355–36 (quotations) and 424; “Robert Morris' Mansion,” *Atkinson's Casket* 7 (1832): 73; [Robert Desilver], *Life of Robert Morris, the Great Financier; with an Engraving and Description of the Celebrated House, Partly Erected in Chesnut Street, between Seventh and Eighth, South Side* (Philadelphia, 1841). See also Deborah Dependahl Waters, “Philadelphia's Boswell: John Fanning Watson,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 98 (1974): 3–52. For more references to the house, see *Blackbeard: A Page from the Colonial History of Philadelphia* (New York, 1835), 2:67; William Sullivan and John T. S. Sullivan, *The Public Men of the Revolution* (Philadelphia, 1847), 141; “Philadelphia in Olden Times. No. IV: Morris' Mansion,” in *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Apr. 20, 1853, newspaper clipping in C. A. Poulson Scrapbooks, Library Company of Philadelphia; and Smith, *Robert Morris's Folly*.

⁴⁶ Logan to Watson, box 2, page 184, John F. Watson Letters; Fisher, “Section of the Memoirs of Joshua Francis Fisher.”



Figure 7. “Music” stone relief, attributed to Giuseppe Jardella, ca. 1795, measuring 36 × 72 inches. Courtesy of Mark E. Rubenstein.

pansive *Biographical Dictionary of Philadelphia Architects* (1985), but his name is nowhere to be found on the city’s streets. In turn, this absence was reinforced by the belated celebration of L’Enfant in Washington, DC, which culminated in the engineer’s dignified reburial at Arlington Cemetery in 1909 and the commitment to reestablishing his original city plan there. As a result, the “engineer of the United States” is almost exclusively identified with the Potomac, although he lived and worked almost as many years in Philadelphia and in New York.⁴⁷

Though L’Enfant’s damnation in Philadelphia did involve architectural ideas which were alien to the city’s vernacular, his loss of favor had little to do with his French origins per se. Many other emigrants at the time, Stephen Girard included, found a welcome home there. L’Enfant did gravitate toward international elements, as with his housemate Soderstrom, his Continental craftsmen, and his apparently good relations with the French ministry. But he identified equally with his role in the American Revolution and with his vision for the future of his adopted nation. He spent little time trying to please the likes of Moreau Saint-Méry or Louis Philippe.

⁴⁷ Jackson, *Early Philadelphia Architects and Engineers*, 85–93; and Tatman and Moss, *Biographical Dictionary of Philadelphia Architects*, 474–75. Jackson observed that “the failure of this project [“a wonderful mansion for Robert Morris”] seems to have virtually ended the professional career of the French engineer and architect.”

Beyond the Jardellas’ bas-reliefs, several additional examples of which are held outside Pennsylvania, surviving relics of the Folly also apparently include marble chimneypieces at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and at Lemon Hill mansion. See Smith, *Robert Morris’s Folly*.

Interestingly, French architects following L'Enfant gained a great deal of popular recognition in Philadelphia, as with Anne Louis de Tousard, who upgraded Fort Mifflin and had his name mounted thereon, and Napoleon Le Brun of French ancestry, who added to the city's churchscape.⁴⁸

So we are left to judge L'Enfant's time in Philadelphia in terms of what might have been, both for the city and for the engineer himself. It would be difficult to overestimate the impact of the failures of the Morris project, which ended up exacerbating all L'Enfant's other false starts in the 1790s. Even if Morris's grand house had been completed and inhabited, it is likely that the wary public still would not have viewed it as the pair had intended, as a major advance for the arts in America and as the just rewards for Morris's long and successful career. While Benjamin Henry Latrobe, William Strickland, Frank Furness, Louis Kahn, and other notable architects can be judged by the effect they have had on the city, L'Enfant must be judged by the reaction he provoked, which had both artistic and political aspects. His own brash personality drew down a great deal of anguish upon himself, but this only signaled the beginnings of his so-called "madness" in the midst of an anxious new republic. Today, somewhere belowground at the block of Chestnut, Seventh, and Eighth Streets, the surviving foundations of L'Enfant's final vision sit waiting to answer Latrobe's legacy of neoclassical refinement and row house proportion. L'Enfant's triumphal city plan was resurrected in the city of Washington; in Philadelphia, though civic boundaries have since loosened, he will likely remain "unfinished."⁴⁹

Virginia Commonwealth University

RYAN K. SMITH

⁴⁸ Dorwart, *Fort Mifflin*, 76–78; Samuel John Klingensmith, "The Architecture of Napoleon LeBrun: The Philadelphia Churches" (master's thesis, University of Virginia, 1976). In contrast, Mary N. Woods finds a common pattern of problematic attitudes and working methods among early French architects in America (L'Enfant, Maximilian Godefroy, and Stephen Hallet) that clashed with the building market "dominated at one end by builders and at the other by a few master artisans and gentlemen-architects." Mary N. Woods, "The First Professional: Benjamin Henry Latrobe," in *American Architectural History: A Contemporary Reader*, ed. Keith L. Eggner (New York, 2004), 117.

⁴⁹ Robert Ellis Thompson, "Lessons of Social Science in the Streets of Philadelphia," *Penn Monthly* 11 (1880): 929, reported that "those who have occasion to dig down into the yards of" the houses on Morris's old block "sometimes come upon the remains of the vast foundation walls of what was long known as 'Morris's Folly.'"

In queries to Philadelphia city government offices with the assistance of the Philadelphia Historical Commission, I have been unable to obtain information on any findings during underground utility work in the area.