

Washington:

A European Capital City in the Early American Republic

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With the Peace of Paris in 1783, the United States achieved *de jure* independence from Great Britain and began the monumental task of nation building. One of the most pressing priorities was the establishment of a permanent seat of government. Philadelphia and New York City, as the two largest cities in the new country and major centers of commerce and culture, were obvious contenders. However, these places were all-too-recently hubs of British imperial authority, and their northerly locations were deemed by many Southern citizens as unsuitable for the new American republic. Therefore, for the first time since antiquity, a new capital city would be planned and built from the ground up.¹

Nonetheless, this new city would have to be constructed on a grand scale, to project America's vision for the future and rival the great cities of Europe. Newly-elected President George Washington insisted to Thomas Jefferson that "The buildings...ought to be upon a scale far superior to anything in *this* country."² For this bold dream to become a reality, trained architects and urban planners would be needed. However, the burgeoning United States had no schools for architecture, and native artists lacked either the sophistication or the confidence to tackle such an ambitious plan, so government leaders again looked to Europe.³ Men like Washington and Jefferson consciously understood that the adoption of European urban designs was a means of giving grandeur, authority, and European-style refinement to the new capital. Even though the goal of the founding generation was the creation of a new America separate from Europe, they sought to build a capital city to embody its republican ideals using European

¹ Patricia Kelly, "Washington in Ruins," *American Art* 25, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 117, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/663956> (accessed November 8, 2014).

² Ron Chernow, *Washington: A Life* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2010), 665.

³ C. M. Harris, "Washington's Gamble, L'Enfant's Dream: Politics, Design, and the Founding of the National Capital," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 56, no. 3 (July 1999): 539, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2674560> (accessed November 8, 2014).

designers and architects and injecting European aesthetics into the federal city. Therefore, the United States during the Federal Period was reliant upon European culture to frame its growth.

The designer who was entrusted with the design for the new capital city turned out to be a Frenchman. Pierre Charles L'Enfant was born in Paris in 1754 and trained as a painter at the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture.⁴ In the midst of the Revolution, he immigrated to the United States to offer his services to the Continental Army, serving as a military engineer under General George Washington. After the war, L'Enfant elected to remain in America. In 1788, with the national capital relocated to New York City, the old city hall was requisitioned by the federal government as the new headquarters of Congress and L'Enfant was selected to remodel the building. With the passage of the Residence Act in 1790 that decided that a new, permanent capital would be located on the Potomac River, a designer for the new city was suddenly needed. Washington's former officer L'Enfant, whose design of Federal Hall was admired by the President, applied and was selected as the city's planner and architect.⁵

With the Residence Act stipulating that the federal capital must provide "suitable" buildings for Congress, the President, and "the public offices" by December 1800, planning began in earnest.⁶ Major L'Enfant wrote Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson requesting "The number and nature of the publick building[s]...[and] what Ever map may fall within your reach, of any of the differents grand city now Existing such as for Example, as London, madr[id], paris,

⁴ Chernow, 662.

⁵ J. L. Sibley Jennings, Jr., "Artistry as Design: L'Enfant's Extraordinary City," *The Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress* 36, no. 3 (Summer 1979): 225, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29781817> (accessed November 8, 2014).

⁶ Harris, "Founding of the National Capitol," 539.

Amsterdam, naples, venice, genoa, [and] florence...” to look to for inspiration.⁷ It is significant to note that all but two of the cities that L’Enfant requested plans of are located in southern Europe. He recognized that the climate, topography, and horticulture of these cities were more akin to this new city on the swampy banks of the Potomac.⁸ As L’Enfant began laying out the city, he incorporated designs that had already been successfully used in the courts, palaces, and public works of Europe.⁹ Building height would be restricted, as it was in Paris, to a height of forty feet, which would not only keep the streets light and airy but also reduce the danger from fires.¹⁰

He placed the Congress House (the Capitol) on the brow of the highest spot in the city, known as Jenkins Hill, which he praised as “a pedestal waiting for a superstructure.” “This building would be the visual centerpiece of the city, with broad, diagonal thoroughfares radiating outward.” As had been done in his boyhood home of Paris, these diagonal streets would provide “contrast and variety” and serve as express lanes, shortening the distance between places.¹¹ Public squares, like those seen in Venice, Madrid, Florence, and in Paris at the place des Vosges, place du Palais-Royal, and the place du Théâtre Français would also be situated throughout the city.¹² Connected to the Congress House by one of these grand boulevards (Pennsylvania Avenue) L’Enfant positioned the President's House (the White House) on a commanding hill. Between these two structures, he designed a "Grand Avenue" (the National Mall) based on the

⁷ Pierre Charles L’Enfant to Thomas Jefferson, Georgetown, April 4, 1791, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, 1 April-4 August 1791*, ed. Julian P. Boyd (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 83-84.

⁸ Jennings, 232.

⁹ Chernow, 662.

¹⁰ Jennings, 249.

¹¹ Chernow, 662.

¹² Jennings, 240.

gardens at Versailles, where an equestrian statue of George Washington was planned.¹³ An individual standing at any one of these locations would be able to see the other two distinctly. Similarly in Paris the Place Louis XV, featuring a statue of the king on horseback, was created to join the Tuileries Gardens with the Champs-Élysées.¹⁴ In the end, L'Enfant's plan covered fifty square miles, providing for a city of 800,000 citizens, the size of eighteenth-century Paris. "The American city was, like Versailles, conceived of as an outdoor palace in which the viewer moved out from major centers harmoniously through one visual experience after another."¹⁵ However, for "a republic so often proclaiming the equality of men and the virtues of democracy, there appeared something incongruous in adopting as a plan for its capital the architectural and landscape forms brought to perfection first in ancient Rome and then in eighteenth-century France under the most autocratic of regimes."¹⁶

One of the main public buildings that initially needed to be erected in the new federal capital was a grand residence to house the President, which L'Enfant clearly marked on his first plan of the city in 1791.¹⁷ Secretary of State Jefferson, preferring the building to be in the French taste, wrote to the Major, "Whenever it is proposed to prepare plans... for the President's house I should prefer the celebrated fronts of modern buildings, which have already received the

¹³ Ibid., 272.

¹⁴ J. P. Dougherty, "Baroque and Picturesque Motifs in L'Enfant's Design for the Federal Capital," *American Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (March 1974): 29, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2711565> (accessed November 10, 2014).

¹⁵ James Thomas Flexner, "The Great Columbian Federal City," *American Art Journal* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1970): 37, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1593863> (accessed November 14, 2014).

¹⁶ John W. Reys, *The Making of Urban America: A History of City Planning in the United States*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 263.

¹⁷ Pierre Charles L'Enfant, "Plan of the city intended for the permanent seat of the government of t[he] United States : projected agreeable to the direction of the President of the United States, in pursuance of an act of Congress, passed on the sixteenth day of July, MDCCXC, 'establishing the permanent seat on the bank of the Potowmac' : [Washington D.C.] /," *The Library of Congress*, <http://www.loc.gov/item/88694205/> (accessed November 15, 2014).

approbation of all good judges. Such are the Galerie du Louvre, the Gardes meubles, and two fronts of the Hotel de Salm.”¹⁸ The Frenchman envisioned a vast palace, five times larger than the residence that would eventually be constructed.¹⁹ When L’Enfant refused to compromise on his plan and was dismissed from his post in early 1792, Jefferson recommended a nationwide contest be held to decide the design for the President's House. Advertisements were placed in all of the major newspapers, offering a \$500 grand prize. The winning design was that of James Hoban, an Irish émigré to South Carolina. Hoban had trained with the English builder and architect Thomas Ivory and studied at the Dublin Society architectural school before coming to America and designing the county courthouse in Charleston, which George Washington had admired on his tour of the south.²⁰ The plan called for a relatively small, unadorned three-story Georgian structure, articulated by a plain temple front marked by four Ionic columns. The building would be very similar to Leinster House in Dublin, of which Hoban was familiar, but with the addition of a neoclassical oval room in the rear, based upon the designs of Scottish architect Robert Adam.²¹ “Hoban’s design borrowed heavily from the work of Italian Renaissance theorist and architect Andrea Palladio, specifically his reworking of Roman orders and vocabularies” and the influential British architect James Gibbs’ *A Book of Architecture* (1728).^{22 23} However, after consulting with President Washington, it was decided that the

¹⁸ Thomas Jefferson to Pierre Charles L’Enfant, Philadelphia, April 10, 1791, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, 1 April-4 August 1791*, ed. Julian P. Boyd (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 86-87.

¹⁹ The White House Historical Association, “Overview,” *White House Tour*, <http://www.whitehousehistory.org/history/white-house-facts-trivia/tour-overview.html> (accessed November 22, 2014).

²⁰ Damie Stillman, “Six Houses for the President,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 129, no. 4 (October 2005): 426, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20093818> (accessed November 28, 2014).

²¹ Stillman, 429.

²² Kelly, 118.

building would be twenty percent larger with more Federal-style ornamentation, including Palladian motifs and an eagle amid arrows, but have only two main floors.²⁴ Additionally, due to costs and material and labor shortages, brick made at the construction site would be used to line the Virginia sandstone facades.²⁵

Later that year on October 13, 1792, the cornerstone for the President's House was laid, beginning construction on the first public building in the city. Hoban, at Washington's urging, brought over skilled stone carvers and craftsmen from Scotland, Ireland, and other European nations to adequately execute the building's European design.^{26 27} However, progress was frustratingly slow. When President John Adams moved into the home on November 1, 1800, not one of the thirty rooms of what First Lady Abigail Adams called a "great castle" were completed.^{28 29} Just four months later, President Thomas Jefferson took up residence in the sparsely furnished home that he quipped was "...big enough for two emperors, a pope, and the grand lama."³⁰ Nonetheless, Jefferson had a passion for basing American buildings on the best European sources.³¹ As chief executive, he devoted more attention to the President's House and the Capitol than any other president, before or since. "He enlarged and embellished the

²³ Flexner, 44.

²⁴ Stillman, 429.

²⁵ The White House Historical Association, "Overview," *White House Tour*.

²⁶ Flexner, 45.

²⁷ The White House Historical Association, "James Hoban – Architect of the White House," *Building the President's House*, <http://www.whitehousehistory.org/presentations/james-hoban-architect-white-house/james-hoban-architect-white-house-04.html> (accessed November 28, 2014).

²⁸ Harris, "Founding of the National Capital," 531.

²⁹ Kelly, 118.

³⁰ The White House Historical Association, "Overview," *White House Tour*.

³¹ Flexner, 44.

presidential residence and its appendages, albeit in the manner of a country villa.”³² By the end of his presidency in 1809, he had colonnades built on the east and west sides of the mansion and added the south portico, possibly based on the Château de Rastignac, which he may have visited during his term as minister to France.^{33 34}

Equally important to the new federal city was the Congress House, renamed the Capitol by Jefferson after the temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus on the Capitoline Hill in ancient Rome.³⁵ L’Enfant wanted the Capitol to have the proportions and character of the Garde-meuble.³⁶ However, due to his dismissal, a competition was held in 1792 to decide the building’s design, with the prize being \$500 and a prime lot in the city. After receiving lackluster proposals, the plan of Dr. William Thornton, an English physician and amateur architect from the West Indies, was selected in 1793. As Thornton was formally untrained in the art of architecture, he likely received assistance with the plan from his friend John Jacob Ulrich Rivardi, a Swiss engineer who had served in the Russian army.³⁷

³² C. M. Harris, “Washington’s ‘Federal City,’ Jefferson’s ‘Federal Town,’” *Washington History* 12, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2000): 52, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40073432> (accessed November 29, 2014).

³³ Rubil Morales-Vázquez, “George Washington, the President’s House, and the Projection of Executive Power,” *Washington History* 16, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2004): 48, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40073580> (accessed November 29, 2014).

³⁴ Michael Johnson, “A chateau fit for a president,” *The New York Times*, September 15, 2006, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/15/opinion/15iht-edjohnson.html?_r=2& (accessed November 29, 2014).

³⁵ Fergus M. Bordewich, “A Capitol Vision From a Self-Taught Architect,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, December 2008, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/a-capitol-vision-from-a-self-taught-architect-91773428/?no-ist> (accessed November 29, 2014). For an in-depth discussion into the early Capitol, see Donald R. Kennon’s *A Republic for the Ages: The United States Capitol and the Political Culture of the Early Republic* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999).

³⁶ Jennings, 267.

³⁷ William C. Allen, *History of the United States Capitol: a chronicle of design, construction, and politics* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2001), 20, Hathi Trust, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/umn.31951d02020559a> (accessed December 1, 2014).

Thornton's design was an amalgam of the emerging neoclassical style and orthodox, high-style Georgian.³⁸ It was composed of three parts: a central section and two wings flanking it. The central section featured a domed rotunda fronted by a Corinthian portico with twelve columns standing in a one-story arcade. The dome and the portico were a close replica of the Pantheon in Rome, built in the second century A.D. The two wings flanking this section were designed in "...a conventional Georgian manner with a rusticated ground story supporting Corinthian pilasters and a full entablature..." with curving pediments topping the main floor windows.³⁹ Thornton studied examples of classical architecture by Andrea Palladio and Sir William Chambers as well as *Vitruvius Britannicus* (1715) by Colin Campbell, which featured the great houses of Britain, to come up with his plan.⁴⁰

Because of Dr. Thornton's unfamiliarity with construction, his design was criticized as unworkable. Therefore, Étienne Sulpice (Stephen) Hallet, a trained French architect who fled to the U.S. in 1789, was charged with making alterations to Thornton's plan and supervising construction. Hallet was the runner-up in the Capitol design competition, but his plan was deemed too elaborate and expensive. As slight modifications were being made, Jefferson convinced Hallet to incorporate an interior dome over the House chamber like the one he had adored at the Paris grain market, the Halle au Bled, which featured beautiful glass skylights.⁴¹ With a plan made, the cornerstone for the Capitol was laid on September 18, 1793, in a grand ceremony by President Washington. The north, or Senate, wing was begun first because its

³⁸ Ibid, 19.

³⁹ Allen, 20.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 20.

⁴¹ Ibid., 23.

numerous rooms could house the House of Representatives, Senate, Supreme Court, and Supreme Court until the south wing was built.^{42 43}

As the new building, like the President's House, would be dressed in sandstone, craftsmen would be needed. Unfortunately, there were almost no local stonecutters, and the few that were around were not experienced enough to work on a project of this magnitude and importance. Once again, the Founders would have to look to Europe. British stonemasons George Blagden, Collen Williamson, Robert Brown, James and John Maitland, John Delahanty, and John Dobson were hired and began work on the Capitol.⁴⁴

Just a short time later, in 1794, after attempting to make unauthorized changes to Thornton's design, Hallet was dismissed. As his replacement, an English architect named George Hadfield was hired in 1795. Born in Italy and the brother of Thomas Jefferson's friend Maria Cosway, Hadfield had studied architecture at the Royal Academy in London and brought excellent credentials to the project. However, he too tried to alter the preferred design for the building and was forced to resign in 1798.

Permanent work on the Capitol building ground to a halt until well into President Thomas Jefferson's first term due to lack of funds. On March 3, 1803, Jefferson approved a \$50,000 appropriation for the "repairs and alterations in the Capitol...for the accommodation of Congress in their future sessions."⁴⁵ It was understood that the majority of these funds would be used for the construction of the south wing of the Capitol while the remainder would go towards repairs

⁴² Pamela Scott, "'Temple of Liberty': Building a Capitol for a New Nation," *Information Bulletin*, <http://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/9506/capitol.html> (accessed December 2, 2014).

⁴³ Allen, 44. When Congress first convened in 1800, portraits of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette hung prominently in the Capitol.

⁴⁴ Allen, 25, 28.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

to the existing north annex and the President's House.⁴⁶ To oversee this new development, Jefferson appointed Benjamin Henry Latrobe as the Surveyor of Public Buildings in Washington. Latrobe, born in Britain, trained under civil engineer John Smeaton and the neoclassical architect Samuel Pepys Cockerell and worked for a time as the Surveyor of the Public Offices in London. In 1796, he came to the United States, first settling in Virginia where he designed Richmond's State Penitentiary before migrating to Philadelphia. There, he designed the Gothic Revival Bank of Pennsylvania and successfully engineered the city's first water system.⁴⁷ Government leaders now hoped that Latrobe could finally bring Dr. William Thornton's Capitol to fruition.

By 1805, the exterior walls of the south wing had been completed to the point where Latrobe could focus on the interior, where the House of Representatives would meet. To recruit artists, Latrobe wrote to Philip Mazzei requesting "...assistance in procuring for us the aid of a good Sculptor in the erection of public buildings in this city, especially the Capitol."⁴⁸ Mazzei was an Italian friend of President Jefferson; the two had first met in 1773 and saw each other periodically again during Jefferson's tenure in Paris. Mazzei scoured Italy and recruited two accomplished sculptors, Giuseppe Franzoni and Giovanni Andrei. The two arrived in Washington in early 1806, with Franzoni to work on figural sculpture and Andrei to model the "roses and foliage" and the columns in the building.⁴⁹ Latrobe set Franzoni to work on a seated statue of Liberty positioned behind the Speaker's chair which, when completed, would stand

⁴⁶ U.S. Capitol Visitor Center, "Continuing Construction," *The Capitol 1789-1815*, <http://209.134.55.115/exhibitions/online/1789-to-1815/the-capitol/continuing-construction.html> (accessed December 3, 2014). By this time, the north wing was already suffering from rotting timbers and falling plaster.

⁴⁷ Joseph Downs, "The Capitol," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 1, no. 5 (January 1943): 172, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3257045> (accessed December 3, 2014).

⁴⁸ Allen, *History of the United States Capitol*, 62. See also Donald R. Kennon's *The United States Capitol: Designing and Decorating a National Icon* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

“...eight and a half feet tall, holding a liberty cap in one hand and a scroll in the other. An eagle stood guard to one side of the figure, its foot resting on a crown and other emblems of monarchy and bondage.”⁵⁰ Franzoni also sculpted a majestic, spread eagle for the frieze in the House chamber, as well as figures representing Arts, Commerce, Agriculture, Science, Military Force, and Civil Government.^{51 52} Andrei was tasked with carving the interior capitals, designed by Latrobe after the ancient Tower of the Winds in Athens.⁵³ Both of the Italian sculptors continued at the site until their work was completed in 1810. Latrobe would remain employed at the Capitol, renovating the interiors of both wings until 1813, when the War of 1812 resulted in the halting of all construction due to the diversion of funds.

With a system of government modeled after the ancient Grecian democracies and the republican values of Rome, America was also unable to discard its fascination with European architecture and craftsmanship during the Federal Period. This can be explained partly by the simple fact that the United States lacked any formally trained architects. As Thomas Jefferson himself explained to the Italian Philip Mazzei, “The Capitol was begun at a time when the country was entirely destitute of artists and even good workmen in the branches of architecture upon which the superiority of public over private buildings depend.”⁵⁴ Additionally, the Founders of the Republic wished to lay the groundwork for a legitimate capital city that would be respected by the powers of the earth. Prominent American leaders like Washington and Jefferson believed that to achieve this, the United States would have to emulate Europe to an extent. This was accomplished by first employing a Frenchman to draw out a plan for the federal

⁵⁰ Ibid., 72.

⁵¹ U.S. Capitol Visitor Center, “Continuing Construction,” *The Capitol 1789-1815*.

⁵² Allen, 72.

⁵³ Ibid, 73. In architecture, a capital is the top portion of a column.

⁵⁴ Downs, 172.

city and having a succession of other Europeans design the city's principal public buildings and execute their construction. Due to their efforts and vision, Washington became a marble and stone symbol of the new country's republican ideals, and a capital city admired around the world.

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