The

JOURNAL OF LATROBE

Being the Notes and Sketches of an Architect, Naturalist and Traveler in the United States from 1796 to 1820

BY

BENJAMIN HENRY LATROBE
Architect of the Capitol at Washington

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

J. H. B. LATROBE

NEW YORK
D. APPLETON AND COMPANY
1905

here and there, broke the uniformity of the landscape and carried the eye far to the north into the remote perspective. Four garden benches were so disposed as to form a square on this little observatory, and upon a pedestal in the midst was a capital with its ears of corn, a silent but expressive compliment to the genius of its author, paid by one who knew him well and could appreciate his abilities.

As early as the year 1809 Mr. Jefferson, at the suggestion of Governor Claiborne, of Louisiana, applied to Mr. Latrobe to ascertain whether it was practicable to supply New Orleans with water by the same means that had been so successful in Philadelphia, and proposed that Mr. Latrobe should undertake it. This he consented to do, and we find among his correspondence numerous letters written to that place with a view of ascertaining the practicability of obtaining an exclusive grant of the privilege. In 1810 he became satisfied from his intercourse with Governor Claiborne, then on a visit to Washington, that such a grant could be obtained, and sent his eldest son by his first wife, Henry S. Latrobe, who, having graduated at St. Mary's College in Baltimore, had then been for some time in his office, to New Orleans with the necessary authority to negotiate for the grant in question. In 1811 the Legislature of Louisiana granted to him the exclusive privilege for twenty years from the first of May, 1813, the time intervening between this date and

the date of the grant being considered as sufficient for the erection of the necessary buildings and machinery. Mr. Latrobe having associated with himself several gentlemen as partners in the advantages promised by this undertaking, so flattering in the outset, but to which ultimately the lives of himself and his son were sacrificed, commenced the preparation in Washington of all those parts of the building which could be made cheaper there than at New Orleans, sending them round by sea to his son, who was upon the spot engaged in erecting the works.

The war with Great Britain, which came on in 1812, broke in upon all Mr. Latrobe's plans. The engines for the waterworks had not yet been built, nor could they be built at New Orleans; and if built, as was originally intended, in Washington, they could not be sent round by sea without the risk of a loss which no insurance could cover—the loss of time. Under these circumstances he made up his mind, as the greater portion of the work on the public buildings, and, of course, his emoluments thereon, were suspended by the war, to remove to Pittsburg, and there superintend the construction of the engines for the New Orleans works, sending them when completed down the Mississippi. While making arrangements to carry this plan into effect he incidentally heard that Robert Fulton, with whom he had long been intimate, contemplated removing his engine works to Pittsburg and

obtaining for his steamboats the same monopoly on the Western waters that was already enjoyed on the Hudson. He wrote to Fulton; the result was a combination of objects, and Mr. Latrobe, in the fall of 1813, as the agent of the Ohio Steamboat Company, moved his family to Pittsburg, and began there the construction of a steamboat, with a view of constructing subsequently the engines for which his son was waiting in New Orleans.

The first steamboat that had ever descended the Mississippi had been built in 1812 by Nicholas T. Roosevelt, Esq., who, in 1810, married the eldest daughter of Mr. Latrobe by his first marriage. The next boats were the *Vesuvius* and *Ætna*, built by a brother-in-law of Mr. Fulton's; so that the steamboat commenced by Mr. Latrobe was the fourth that was launched upon those waters, where they are now so greatly multiplied.

In this visit to Pittsburg Mr. Latrobe was unfortunate. Ignorant of the new creation which was then just starting into life to give impetus to all the transactions of commerce and all the relations of man in America, Mr. Latrobe in commencing the building of the steamboat *Buffalo* was but the agent carrying out the ideas of others and exercising no judgment of his own, because he had no experience, and without experience he was necessarily at fault. All his instructions, and those too of the most humble kind, were given

him by Mr. Fulton before he went to Pittsburg. Mr. Fulton in making up these instructions was governed by the value of labor and materials in New York, with the conveniences possessed there for the construction of vessels and materials. The result was what might easily have been anticipated. Mr. Latrobe found himself without support and his drafts protested when the advanced condition of the steamboat required the greatest exertions to complete it and make it profitable to those interested. Mr. Fulton, who found that his estimate had been spent and that it was still unfinished, made no allowance for error in those calculations and instructions which had been the only guides in the management of the business. He was disappointed, and his disappointment made him unjust. The distance of the parties rendered personal explanations out of the question; misrepresentation was busy in creating a wrong understanding, and the result was a breach, destructive alike to the interest of both of them. For the first time in his life the spirits and firmness of Mr. Latrobe sank under the complicated difficulties by which he was now surrounded. Not only was the steamboat design wholly defeated, but also all his hopes of being able to furnish the engines for his New Orleans works which he had looked forward to beginning on the completion of the boat. All the money that he could raise from his own resources was applied to the payment of the hands, in the daily expectation that

advices from New York would put all things once more upon their proper footing. The expectation was a vain one, however, and yielding to the pressure of circumstances, and worn out by constant mental suffering, Mr. Latrobe was wholly overcome and rendered incapable of exertion.

In thus speaking of Mr. Fulton and the consequences to Mr. Latrobe of his conduct in the matters here related, it is not intended by the writer of this article to use one harsh term or to create one unpleasant feeling to any of his friends or relatives. Before his death, which occurred while Mr. Latrobe was still in Pittsburg, he did ample justice to Mr. Latrobe, and admitted the error of the opinion under which he acted at the period in question, and expressed his deep regret at what had taken place. What is here stated claims its place in the narrative only as a necessary portion of the history of the individual.

Mr. Latrobe was in the painful condition above described when peace was proclaimed. It brought to him no satisfaction, for misfortune had made him indifferent to everything. Mrs. Latrobe, however, had seen that a law had passed authorizing the rebuilding of the public buildings, and, known to her husband, wrote to Mr. Gallatin, Mr. Dallas, and others of her husband's intimate friends, stating his situation and asking their influence in obtaining his reappointment to his former office as Surveyor of the Public Buildings.

She induced him, too, with much difficulty to write to Mr. Madison soliciting the place. Her gratification may well be imagined when the return mail brought to her the official information that the subject of her letter already had been under consideration, and there had never been a moment's hesitation as to his being the person to be appointed to rebuild the Capitol. She carried the joyful intelligence to her husband, and all the pain of months of anxiety and sorrow was compensated when she saw him revive from the despondency into which he had fallen at this prospect of extrication from the difficulties of his situation.

While at Pittsburg Mr. Latrobe designed several private buildings that were erected there or in the vicinity, as well as others. Among these last were the residences of Henry Clay at Lexington and Governor Taylor at Newport.

Upon receiving his appointment Mr. Latrobe immediately went to Washington to examine the situation of the public buildings. In the summer of 1815 he returned for his family, and soon afterwards found himself once more at the seat of Government. His reception here was of the kindest and most gratifying kind, and letters of congratulation came to him from all those with whom his profession had at any time connected him.

For nearly three years Mr. Latrobe now devoted himself assiduously to the restoration of the public

buildings at Washington, and made those alterations in the interior arrangements of the south wing and north wing which the destruction of the former divisions by the fire permitted. The Hall of Representatives was altered from an oval into a semicircle, and the design as it is now executed belongs to Mr. Latrobe. The columns of Potomac marble are due exclusively to him, as he was the first who suggested the applicability of the material to its present purposes. During a visit to Virginia he had observed the immense quantities that were scattered in all directions, and, having ascertained that it was susceptible of high polish, he proposed that it should be used in place of freestone for the columns of the Senate and House of Representatives. In the north wing the fragile character of the original structure before Mr. Latrobe was appointed Surveyor of the Public Buildings had given more materials for the flames, and the room for change and improvement was greater than in the south wing of the Capitol. The Supreme Court room, the Senate chamber vestibule in the place of the former staircase, are all of his design, and in the capitals of the columns of the latter the leaf and flower of the tobacco plant are used as the ears of corn in the capitals of the columns of the vestibule below.

While at Washington in 1817 Mr. Latrobe received the afflicting intelligence of the death of his eldest son. As we have already had occasion to remark,

he had gone to New Orleans to superintend the construction of the waterworks there, and finding ample employment otherwise in his profession as an architect had made it the place of his permanent abode. He had distinguished talents in his profession, and several of the best buildings of New Orleans are from the design of his pencil. The lighthouse that he designed on Frank's Island at the mouth of the Mississippi has been pronounced by a distinguished judge to be unsurpassed save by the Eddystone light and the celebrated light of the Caduan. During the attack of the British he distinguished himself by his cool, determined bearing.

On the return of Mr. Latrobe to Washington the system under which the work at the public buildings was conducted was very different from what it had been during the time of Mr. Jefferson. The direction was no longer in the hands of the President, but was confided to a Board of Commissioners appointed by law. After a little while this board was done away with, and an act of Congress passed resting the whole control in a single commissioner. The individual who was appointed to the office was, unfortunately for Mr. Latrobe, one who could not appreciate the necessity that then existed of the architect of a great and complicated structure having the sole direction of those interested with the execution of its various parts; and who, totally ignorant of everything connected with the profession, was nevertheless constantly interfering with

the progress of the work. It was not to be wondered at, therefore, that constant collisions took place between Mr. Latrobe and the commissioner, until the latter, by the course which he pursued, made it impossible for Mr. Latrobe to retain his situation without giving up what he conceived due to himself and his profession, and sacrificing for the sake of the office which he held his independence, both as an architect and a gentleman. The alternative was one about which he did not for a moment hesitate, and he resigned his situation as Surveyor of the Public Buildings, deeply as his pride and his reputation were interested in his completing them, rather than submit to the daily sacrifice of personal and professional feeling to which he would have been otherwise subjected.

The Capitol as now finished is essentially, with one or two exceptions, so far the design of Mr. Latrobe as it could be when the style of the architecture was settled for him beforehand by the erection of the north wing under the direction and after the plan of Dr. Thornton. The present central dome, however, is far larger than Mr. Latrobe ever intended that it should be. In his design, which is before the writer, this dome is low and flat, rising from an octagonal base, the sides of which are marked with deep-sunk panels. The dome is in every respect an appendage to the building. To use a plain simile, an inverted coffee cup, instead of a tea cup, has been placed upon the Capitol, and the

body of the building, with its noble porticos, instead of making its full and proper impression upon the spectator, is buried and pressed down by the mass above it. The domes of the wings are altogether dwarfed on either side of their formidable neighbor.

What is here said is by no means in disparagement of the amiable and talented gentleman who succeeded Mr. Latrobe as Surveyor of the Public Buildings. To him great credit is due for the manner in which his part of them has been completed, involving as it has done great originality of design and skilful contrivance. The whole of the center building was put up under his direction, and when the writer of this article speaks of the claim of Mr. Latrobe to the general features of the design, so far as this part of the Capitol is concerned, it is the exterior rather than the interior that is alluded to.

During his residence at this time in Washington, Mr. Latrobe designed St. John's Church, on the President's Square. The building as it at present stands has been disfigured in an attempt to enlarge it by the prolongation of one of the arms of the cross. The church as originally finished by Mr. Latrobe was a simple yet beautiful specimen of his skill. He also designed Christ's Church in Alexandria.

After resigning his situation at the Capitol, Mr. Latrobe removed in the early part of 1818 to Baltimore. There he was occupied in building the Exchange, on

Gay Street, and the Cathedral. The latter building had been commenced in the year 1805 under the auspices of the late respected Archbishop Carroll. Want of funds had protracted its erection, nor was it until 1818 that it was covered in. The Exchange was commenced in 1817 from a design made by Mr. Latrobe while he yet resided in Washington. The cathedral, in point of size and solidity of execution, is his greatest work. The Bank of Pennsylvania was long considered as the most beautiful; but while it does not yield to the cathedral in taste or execution, it is inferior in size and in complication. It required less genius to design it and less skill to suit all its parts, one with another, until a whole, perfect in proportion, was the result. At the present writing the interior of the cathedral is all that may be considered as finished, and the remarks here made refer to the interior alone. The exterior still wants one of its towers to lighten by contrast the dome, which now appears too massive, and, above all, it wants its north portico, with a double range of Ionic columns. When the towers and the portico shall be added to the cathedral, the exterior, not less than the interior, may be referred to as among the best instances of the talent and skill of the architect. The Exchange is in its exterior a plain building of excellent proportions. Its hall, however, is a beautiful specimen of architecture, not only in the proportion of all its parts, from the Ionic columns below to the light and airy

dome high overhead, but for the truth and ability with which the various and complicated parts of the whole are adjusted and put together.

After his removal to Baltimore, Mr. Latrobe, no longer in the public employment and bound down to remain near the public buildings, determined to visit New Orleans, with a view of completing the waterworks there which had been commenced by his son, and in which so much of the fortune of himself and his friends was already invested. Leaving his family, therefore, in Baltimore, he paid a visit to New Orleans in 1819–20, and commenced putting up the engines, which had been built in Baltimore since he had left Washington. After he had remained there a few months he found that his own constant personal supervision was unnecessary, and having made arrangements to remove his family, he returned for them to Baltimore, and in 1820 took up his residence with them in New Orleans, with the intention of remaining until the works were finished and their success certain. When it was understood that he intended removing from Baltimore, the trustees of the Cathedral and the directors of the Exchange addressed to him letters showing the estimation in which he was held by those to whom his talents had been last devoted.

For some time after Mr. Latrobe reached New Orleans the waterworks progressed most rapidly. His health was good, and he congratulated himself that at

last there was a prospect of his being released from the constant labors of his previous life and being able to live in comfort and with competence, if not affluence, for the remainder of his days. The engine was completed, and in two weeks the entire work would have been done and water flowing through the streets. But on the very day that he was engaged in superintending the laying down of the pipe connecting the engine with the Mississippi he was taken ill. The fatal disease of the climate had seized him, and in a few hours he was laid beside his son. His all had been embarked in the works he was then engaged in. His own life was now added, with his son's, to the sacrifice. With him died all hope of emolument from the scheme. The buildings and machinery passed into other hands, and his widow and children, in sorrow, and in vain, returned to the Atlantic seaboard.

JOHN HAZLEHURST BONEVAL LATROBE.

BALTIMORE, 1876.