

THE ARCHITECTS

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HENRY
LATROBE

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Benjamin Henry Latrobe was a man of the world who chose to live in the United States. That choice, made in 1796 when he was thirty-two years old and on the brink of what could have become an illustrious architectural career in his native England, was a fortunate one for his chosen country. He arrived in America at a critical point in the formative years of the new republic and remained until his sudden death from yellow fever in 1820.

Latrobe was more than a superb architect. He was also an engineer, at a time when proficiency in both skills was all but unheard of in the United States. As late as 1812, he wrote to a Philadelphia publisher, "Here I am the only successful Architect & Engineer." He was a prolific artist as well, whose myriad drawings and paintings, while not major works of art in themselves, formed the basis of his stunning architectural designs. In addition, he was a town planner, an environmentalist, a naturalist and geologist, a musician, a poet, and a skilled writer. He could speak and read a half-dozen languages, including Greek and Latin. He once reminded his son, paraphrasing Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, that "a man's powers & existence is multiplied in proportion to the number of languages he speaks," advice to which his own outstanding career lent credence.

With such a wide variety of skills and interests, Latrobe naturally gravitated to the company of other brilliant men, many of them leaders of the political, economic, and social affairs of the nation. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson were just two of the nation's dignitaries who welcomed this tall, handsome, gifted newcomer into their midst. Like Jefferson, Latrobe was philosophical by nature and equally immersed in the study of architecture; although the two men did not always agree, they enjoyed a mutually respectful and rewarding relationship.

In spite of his many other pursuits, architecture remained Latrobe's passion, and his influence on the American architectural scene can still be observed today. The most significant of Latrobe's contributions is the United States Capitol, which remains essentially Latrobe's creation. Many of the other major structures he designed and built have long since disappeared. But Latrobe, more than any other contemporary architect, infused a new spirit into American architecture and into the work of the younger architects he helped to train - men like Robert Mills and William Strickland - who carried his influence into an-

other generation.

Latrobe was one of a number of professional European architects who were uprooted by the bedlam of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars and turned to America for refuge. But Latrobe's credentials far surpassed those of his potential contenders.

Born in Yorkshire, England, to devout, Protestant Moravians - Latrobe's father was responsible for all Moravian schools and establishments in Britain - Latrobe received an education few of his peers could rival. From a young age, both of his parents instilled in him a love of learning and stressed the importance of education and scholarship. His mother, born in Pennsylvania, also infused him with a fascination for the new American republic. In accordance with an established custom of Moravians, their son was shipped off to Germany to complete his education when he was twelve years old.

After eight years of intensive study, which concluded with a tour of the Continent that took him through France and Italy, he returned to England in 1784 in search of a future. His father's extensive circle of friends in the higher ranks of British society included composer and musician Dr. Charles Burney and his daughter Fanny, herself a distinguished author, and Dr. Samuel Johnson, perhaps the most illustrious man of letters in British history. Their brilliant company most certainly stimulated young Benjamin's cultural aspirations.

For a while, Latrobe was apprenticed to John Smeaton, the engineer who rebuilt the famous Eddystone lighthouse on the southwestern tail of England, the first truly professional engineer of his time, and at some point, participated in at least one canal project. Then in 1787 or 1788, he began working in the office of Samuel Pepys Cockerell, a highly successful London architect. After a few years under Cockerell's tutelage, in 1790, Latrobe was appointed surveyor of the public offices in London, a job he found tedious and uninspiring; in 1791, he established a practice of his own. In spite of the unrest caused by the onset of the French Revolution, Latrobe received commissions for a number of domestic buildings, including Hammerwood Park in East Sussex, which today is recorded as a Grade 1 structure on the Statutory List of Buildings of Special Architectural or His-

toric Interest.

In 1790, Latrobe married Lydia Sellon, a young woman from a well-to-do family, and in quick succession, they had a daughter, Lydia, and a son, Henry. Then, in 1793, Latrobe's wife died in childbirth along with their third child. Devastated, Latrobe suffered a mental breakdown; after two years of grief and loneliness, during which his two children were put in the custody of relatives, Latrobe made the decision to sail for America and whatever opportunities it might hold.

From the start, everything about this strange new world fascinated him. With boundless curiosity, he studied its history, its legends, the customs and habits of its people - and, of course, its architecture. In his bulging notebooks, he recorded geological formations, waterfalls, the courses of rivers, and the nature of the soil and terrain. Every type of wildlife, including snakes and insects, enthralled him and aroused his speculation. He admired the engineering skills of beavers as they built their dams, and he observed that these industrious creatures should be preserved rather than exterminated, as was happening.

His interest in nature was both academic and philosophical, as one of the entries in his notebook illustrates: "See how the poor little fly struggles in the net, and with what savage activity and joy the spider weaves the web about him. He is yet too free, too unfettered to be safely attacked; he can move his wings, he can move his legs, he buzzes violently with his wings. Already the action of his wings is clogged. He sinks into the net that is every moment strengthened. Hold, I will relieve thee, little sufferer! But is this humanity? Art thou not truly destined for the food of spiders by the hand that created you both? Shall I interfere and, by saving a life half destroyed, rob another of its support? I will venture it."

For a man of his background and caliber, this strange new world offered infinite possibilities. It was also a safe distance from the upheavals of the European wars, or so it seemed; before long, those conflicts would bring troubles to the American coast that would interfere with some of his own enterprises. In those early years of the republic, however, the population of the United States was burgeoning, and construction was booming in every state of the union.