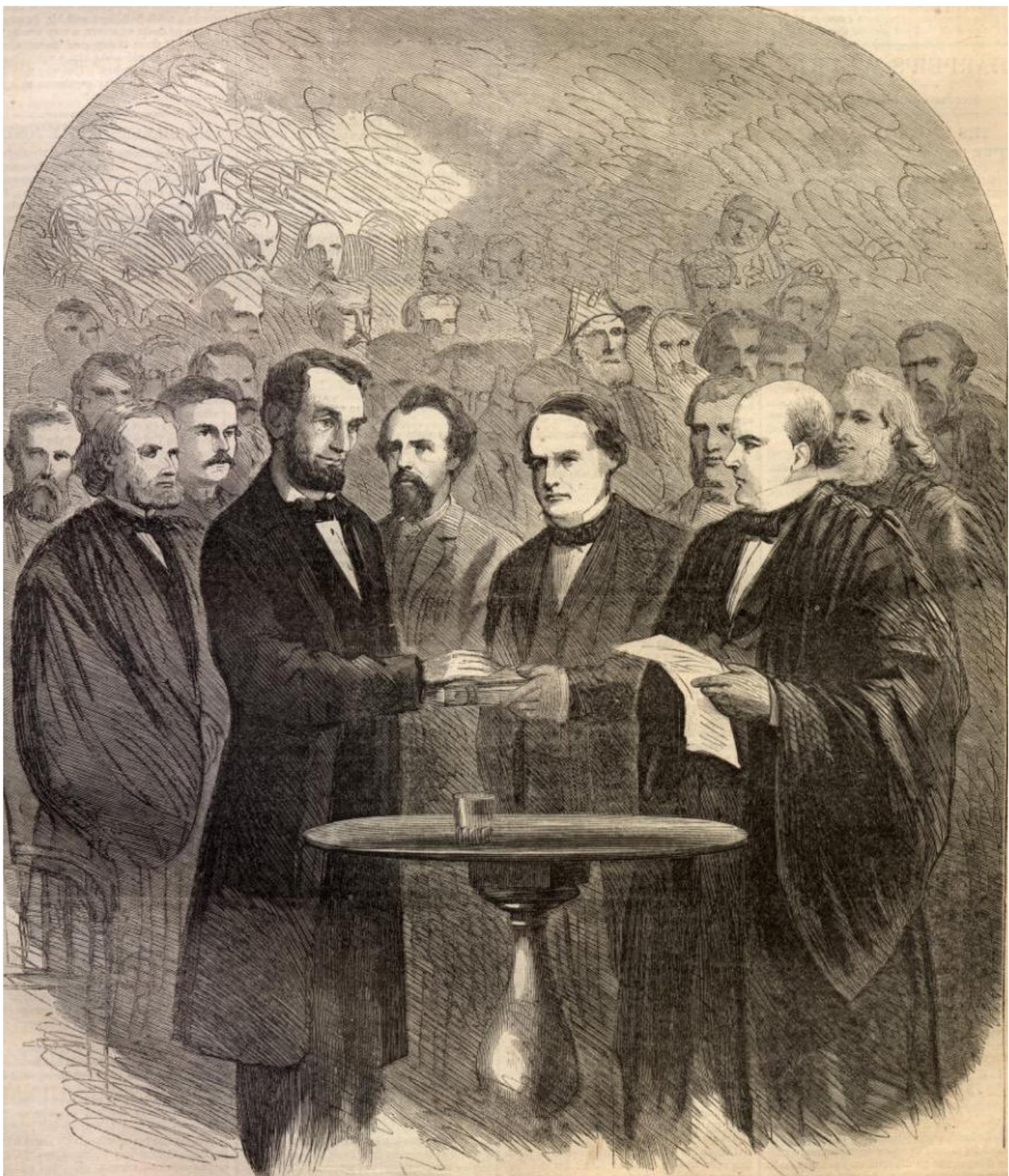


SPECIAL EDITION
THE CAPITOL DOME

EXAMINING THE WAR OF 1812





Harper's Weekly, March 18, 1865, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division

IN THE NEXT SPECIAL ISSUE OF THE CAPITOL DOME:

An illustrated article will feature one of the most memorable events in American history, the March 4, 1865 inauguration of President Abraham Lincoln at the United States Capitol. The ceremony was highlighted by Lincoln's second inaugural address, which no less an orator than Frederick Douglass called "a sacred effort."

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Cover: *This scene from the Hall of Capitols by Allyn Cox in the House wing of the Capitol shows the Capitol aflame on August 24, 1814.*

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Capital CONFLAGRATOR? Major General Robert Ross

By John McCavitt

I remember my first visit to the United States Capitol on October 16, 1995 for two reasons. Besides being the day of the Million Man March, it was the first time that I had seen the fresco on the ceiling of the Hall of Capitols depicting the British burning the Capitol in August 1814 (see cover). And, as our tour guide revealed to his eager gathering of tourists, they were commanded by Major General Robert Ross (fig. 1) from Rostrevor in Ireland. As a resident of General Ross's home town, I felt that discretion was the better part of valor by not interjecting to acknowledge that fact.

Back in 1995, like most residents of Rostrevor (or Rosstrevor, as it was once known owing to Ross's family being landlords of the village and its immediate hinterland), I knew only basic details about Ross's actions in Washington, D.C. And this despite the fact that a 100-foot obelisk erected in his memory is a dominant feature of the village skyline (fig. 2). Until recently the Ross monument and its grounds had become neglected, overgrown and daubed with graffiti (fig. 3). As a redcoat commander, he is not a popular figure today. Indeed, there appears to be much more sympathy in the area with his American adversaries. This is reflected in the fact that when the monument was renovated by the local council in 2008, a villager

climbed the scaffolding to raise a Betsy Ross flag (fig. 4).

As a professional historian I have harbored a lingering curiosity to find out more, without fear nor favor, about this local man who captured Washington. I began this research in earnest after I finished my second book on Irish history about "The Flight of the Earls," a momentous event in 1607 which signalled the end of Gaelic Ireland, clearing the way for British colonization of Ulster.¹ By an extraordinary coincidence, it would seem, my new subject of research related to "The Flight of the Madisons"—a term coined to describe President Madison and his wife fleeing Washington before Ross's forces arrived.²

With the bicentennial of events involving Ross in Washington rapidly approaching, a reappraisal is timely, not least because new research affords new insights and can dispel popular misconceptions. Despite being pilloried at the time in America for winning the "Bladensburg races" as U.S. forces fled from the British at the Battle of Bladensburg for example, evidence shows that President Madison ran very considerable risks as commander-in-chief on that fateful day when he came perilously close to being captured by Ross. What is more, while Ross was responsible for torching the Capitol and other public



Fig. 1. Family portrait of General Robert Ross, reproduced courtesy of Mr. Stephen Campbell, Rostrevor, County Down, Northern Ireland. Ross's portrait, in contrast to that of his naval counterpart, Admiral Cockburn, depicts him as he saw himself: an honorable soldier, not a conqueror or conflagrator.



Fig. 2. General Ross Monument, Rostrevor, County Down, Northern Ireland, after renovation in 2008.



Fig. 3. General Ross Monument before it was renovated in 2008.

buildings, including the White House, he did not burn the American capital. This is an important distinction. As a review of the circumstances which led to the burning of the Capitol demonstrates, had a different British commander been in charge we could well be commemorating not just the destruction of the entire U.S. capital (some 900 buildings in total) but perhaps a massacre of many of its people as well.³

The backdrop to Ross's brief occupation of Washington, D.C. on August 24–25, 1814, is provided by the War of 1812, America's first formally declared war. Longstanding American grievances included British restrictions on American trade, the infamous "Orders in Council," which prohibited neutral ships from trading with France. With the British desperate for manpower in the war against Napoleon, the Royal Navy's impressment of American seamen into British service also rankled. Meanwhile, "War Hawks" in Congress railed against British interference with Indian affairs on the frontier and eyed a land grab in British North America. Britain's difficulty with France was America's opportunity.

With the focus on the grand stage in Europe, the conflict with America was a sideshow for the British. That all changed

when Napoleon abdicated in April 1814 and substantial numbers of British soldiers became available for service elsewhere, including the Duke of Wellington's famous veterans. Viewing the American declaration of war as a stab in the back when Britain was engaged in a costly war with France, there was a score to settle.⁴ Rumors soon circulated in Britain that 25,000 men would be sent to North America.⁵ A major amphibious operation was planned that was to be led by Lord Hill, with Ross as one of his brigade commanders.

In the war to date, tit for tat burnings on the U.S.–Canadian border included American forces destroying the parliament buildings in Little York (modern-day Toronto) as well as the razing of civilian homes in Newark (modern-day Niagara-on-the-Lake). British revenge attacks included the destruction of the villages of Black Rock and Buffalo, New York.⁶ British forces under the command of Rear Admiral George Cockburn were also responsible for a series of conflagrations on the shores of the Chesapeake Bay.⁷

In terms of the immediate background to the burnings in Washington, the destruction of villages in the Long Point area of Upper Canada by American forces in mid-May 1814 proved to be critically important.⁸ The British Governor General of "The Canadas," Lieutenant-General Sir George Prevost, issued an appeal for assistance in taking retaliatory measures to Vice Admiral Alexander Cochrane, the senior British naval commander on the American station.⁹ Expecting the arrival of



Fig. 4. Betsy Ross flag atop scaffolding on General Ross monument, during renovation in 2008.



Fig. 5. “[A] representation of the capture of the city of Washington, by the British forces under the command of Major Genl. Ross and Rear Adm. Sir I. [sic] Cockburn, August 24, 1814, wherein are shown, the fort and the flotilla,” *The Stationer’s Almanac*, 1815. This fanciful English engraving conflates the Battle of Bladensburg, the burning of Washington, and the explosion at the Navy Yard into one grand panorama.

a large invasion force of up to 20,000 men, and with the arming of former slaves, Cochrane was convinced that “Mr. Maddison [sic] will be hurled from his throne.”¹⁰ Cochrane talked in terms of American “Sea Port Towns laid in ashes & the Country wasted will be some sort of a retaliation for their savage Conduct in Canada,” and that revenge attacks should be “made near to the seat of their Government from whence those Orders emanated.”¹¹ Despite talking tough, Cochrane had a greedy streak. He later qualified these remarks. Should a “contribution” be forthcoming from towns or cities at the mercy of British forces, their destruction could be prevented.¹² Strange as it may seem to the modern eye, ransom was conventional in warfare of the period.

When Major General Ross arrived in theater in command of some 3500 British troops, instead of the anticipated 25,000 under the command of Lord Hill, Cochrane was stunned. The reluctance of senior British army commanders to serve in the American war resulted in a radical reappraisal of military strategy as thousands of troops intended for amphibious operations were redirected to Canada. It also soon became clear that Ross and Cochrane did not see eye to eye in terms of taking retaliatory measures. Captain Duncan MacDougall, who

would later become Ross’s aide-de-camp, recalled that the general told the Vice Admiral in no uncertain terms that “we had been accustomed to carry on war in the Peninsula and France in a very different spirit, and that he could not sanction the destruction of private or public property, with the exception of military structures and warlike stores.”¹³

Wholly unexpectedly in the circumstances, Washington, D.C. became a target of opportunity for Ross’s “little army” as virtually non-existent American resistance on the ground facilitated a British probing mission led by Ross advancing deeper and deeper into American territory.¹⁴ The specter of Lord Hill’s massive invasion force had palsied American morale. With much encouragement from Rear Admiral Cockburn, who believed that the American capital was there for the taking, Ross risked his career by exceeding his orders, which had instructed him not to operate at a distance from the coast.¹⁵ Ignoring Vice Admiral Cochrane’s last minute recommendation to abort the attack, he continued his advance.¹⁶

Devoid of cavalry support and with little artillery other than the noisy, frightening, but inaccurate Congreve rockets, Ross made a “dash” for Washington, engaging and defeating American forces, mostly comprising militia, which had managed

to congregate just outside the capital at Bladensburg, Maryland on August 24, 1814.¹⁷ President Madison and several cabinet secretaries had been on the battlefield, with the president only making a hasty retreat when the American second line anchored by sailors and marines under Commodore Joshua Barney was forced to give way after inflicting heavy casualties on the British.¹⁸ Ross had at least one horse killed under him in the battle, and his uniform was pockmarked in four places by spent American fire, which did not wound him but undoubtedly badly bruised him.¹⁹ The American capital now appeared to be at his mercy (figs. 5 and 6).

The moment of truth or reckoning had now arrived. Would the Americans offer further resistance in defending their capital? And if they managed to seize the city what did the British intend to do there? To burn or not to burn; that was the question. Before moving into the District, Major General Ross made arrangements to ensure that private property and citi-

zens were to be respected. Major Norman Pringle of the 1/21st regiment was summoned to the British commander soon after the army arrived at the outskirts of the District. He was ordered to take command of one hundred rank-and-file soldiers to act as the advance guard entering the city. Pringle was further instructed to place sentries at various points, send out regular patrols, and prevent soldiers and seamen from entering the city or local homes.²⁰

Not wishing to send his troops into the city by storm and risk atrocities, Ross was still keen to take precautions in case American forces decided to mount a last ditch effort to defend Washington. In the darkening night, Ross and Cockburn, with men on either side of them, rode from the outskirts of the city to Capitol Hill at approximately 8:00 PM.²¹ A parley to discuss terms of surrender had been sounded by drum and by trumpet. According to the British they carried a flag of truce.²² No response was received to the sounding of a parley. As Ross's



Fig. 6. An enterprising London engraver captured the entire British conquest of Washington in this busy image showing the Battle of Bladensburg, the sinking of the American flotta, and the burning of the public buildings.



Fig. 7. Rear Admiral Sir George Cockburn, portrait by John James Hall, ca. 1817, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London. Cockburn's portrait shows his proudest moment; the City of Washington lies burning at his feet.

small party approached the Capitol and passed the Sewall Belmont house, a volley of shots rang out. Two British soldiers were killed and several were wounded.²³ Ross himself narrowly missed death or serious injury. His horse, however, was killed and the mount of the trumpeter also was shot.²⁴

Several British officers reported that the firing came not from the Sewall Belmont house but from other nearby houses, as well as from a party of up to three hundred Americans based at the Capitol.²⁵ Ross ordered up a brigade of troops and instructed them to fire a volley of shots at the Capitol with a view to deterring further resistance, reinforcing the impression that the British believed they had come under fire from the hallowed corridors of the American legislature.²⁶ This was suppressing fire, not an insult to American democracy.

Most of the evidence that the Capitol or its grounds had been used for military purposes comes from the British, although it is not entirely one-sided. One Washington resident, Mrs. Mary Stockton Hunter, later recalled telling British officers that gunpowder had been stored there.²⁷ It is more than possible that American forces stockpiled powder in the building when they were told to rendezvous there after the retreat from Bladensburg. It is not without significance in respect to what transpired that Secretary of War John Armstrong had recommended turning the Capitol into a fortress immediately after the Battle of Bladensburg and that he suggested utilizing adjacent houses too.²⁸ In the end, it may be no surprise that enraged American troops, who were appalled at the decision not to defend the city, ended up doing precisely what Armstrong suggested.

In the years since the British occupation of Washington, debate has raged about the identity and number of assailants who opened fire on Major General Ross and his advance guard. Most American accounts attributed the attack on Ross to an Irish barber named Dixon, also known as Dickson.²⁹ “Chief barber” to Congress for more than twenty years, for some he was a Figaro-type, a talkative, good-humoured man.³⁰ While there is evidence to suggest that Dickson was involved in the attack on Ross, he was far from the only one who opened fire on the British.³¹ It was a volley of shots that rang out, not just a single report. Again, while they may not have acted alone, the hardest evidence about who attacked Ross indicates the involvement of some of Barney’s sailors who had remained in the Capitol area.³² The Capitol and the houses from which shots were fired at the British were not immediately burnt after the shooting incident. Still Ross tarried in the hope of negotiating a deal.³³

The attack on Ross and his advance guard indicated to the British that the Americans were not going to negotiate. And so the burning began. Father John McElroy from a vantage point at Georgetown took a precise note in his diary when he saw the Capitol on fire, “9:06.”³⁴

Meanwhile, there had been outrage in British ranks at the attack on Ross, a hero to his troops. James Ewell, an American physician whose home the general later used for his headquarters, was told by British officers that had Ross been killed, “it would have been impossible to have restrained the soldiery, who idolized him, from committing the most horrid outrages, both on our city and its inhabitants.”³⁵ Lord Bathurst, the British secretary for war, considered this an attempted assassination of the British commander and that “by the laws of war, after such an act as this, the lives and property of all the people of Washington were forfeited.” Ross was soon heard to call out to his men, however, to “spare the lives and properties of the inhabitants” of the city.³⁶

In the decision-making which followed the attack on Ross and his advance guard, the general’s aide-de-camp, Captain MacDougall, was clear that the shooting incident “subjected Washington . . . to all the rigours of war.” Despite that, it was only after being “warmly pressed,” implicitly by Rear Admiral Cockburn, that Ross agreed to burn the public buildings of Washington “for the purpose of preventing a repetition of the uncivilized proceedings of the troops of the United States.”³⁷ It is also clear that Cockburn pressured the army commander to burn the entire city, private dwellings and all.³⁸ The nub of the issue for Ross was not only the “uncivilized” actions of American forces in Canada but the breach of military etiquette as he attempted to negotiate an orderly surrender of the city. An officer and a gentleman, one who played things by the book and valued chivalry, Ross would have considered the attack on himself and his men under a flag of truce as an affront to the codes of honorable warfare. It was in these circumstances that he reluctantly followed his orders, at least in so far as burning the public buildings in Washington was concerned. He disobeyed his orders by absolutely refusing to burn private property, with the exception of the premises that were used to attack him and his men.

In conversation at Washington with Dr. Ewell, Ross reportedly justified the burning of the public buildings as retaliation for what had happened in Little York, Canada.³⁹ An American contemporary, Charles Jared Ingersoll, also recorded that “Ross continually deplored the tragedy which he said he had to perform, occasioned, he added, by the Americans burning the British capital in Canada.”⁴⁰ Contrasting Ross with Rear Admiral Cockburn, however, Ingersoll remarked that “from the whole conduct of the Irish general, he seemed to be a kind-hearted gentleman, reluctantly fulfilling painful orders, which the Scots admiral executed with unfeeling delight.”⁴¹ Before the Capitol was burnt, Cockburn is said to have proposed a motion from the Speaker’s chair: “Shall this harbor of Yankee Democracy be burned? All for it say ‘Aye!’” It was unanimously carried.⁴² That he later had his portrait drawn with the public buildings of Washington ablaze at



Fig. 8. G.M. Brighty, "The death of General Ross, near Baltimore, as soon as he perceived that he was wounded he fell into the arms of a brother officer," engraving, 1816. This engraving depicts Ross on a white horse. One legend surrounding his death is that American sharpshooters were alerted that he would be riding a white horse.

his feet is a measure of the man (fig. 7).

The Capitol, as it turned out, was not so easily torched, with the British struggling to set it ablaze.⁴³ They used improvised combustible materials. In the south wing, after parts of the building were set alight the heat was so fierce that the British were forced to withdraw, leaving some rooms undamaged. The north wing was more extensively damaged because there was more wooden material, as well as the books and furniture of the Library of Congress.⁴⁴ On learning that the books of the Library of Congress had been destroyed, Ross expressed his regret to Dr. Ewell, remarking that he did not “make war . . . against letters.”⁴⁵

Elated by his unexpected success in capturing Washington, Ross was tempted to capitalize on his victory by marching overland to attack Baltimore from the landward, poorly defended, side. With the American government and military at sixes and sevens and morale at a low ebb after the debacle at Bladensburg, Baltimore’s fate hung by a thread. Rightly suspecting that Vice Admiral Cochrane’s support for such a venture may not have been forthcoming, the British general retreated to the Royal Navy fleet based in the Patuxent River instead.

Still believing that Baltimore could be taken and that a knockout blow could be delivered to his American adversaries, Ross attempted to persuade Cochrane to support an attack. Initially reluctant, the Vice Admiral eventually acceded to his request. By that stage, Francis Scott Key had arrived on board Cochrane’s flagship on a mission to try to secure the release of Dr. William Beanes, an American prisoner. And of course Key subsequently witnessed the dramatic, if ineffective, British naval attack on Fort McHenry in Baltimore with “the rocket’s red glare, the bombs bursting in air.” The lyrics of his Star Spangled Banner also reveal the stakes he believed the British were playing for: “A home and a country should leave us no more!” In the end, Key was a mightily relieved man that Baltimore survived the naval and landward attack of the British. That outcome was due in no small measure to the death of General Ross, who was killed at the head of his forces in a brief skirmish as the British army advanced toward Baltimore (fig. 8). He lived and died by the mantra of being “on the spot,” leading and inspiring his troops. Little wonder that this strikingly handsome, blue-eyed officer was idolized by his men for his exploits fighting the French.

Ross’s death was a cause of considerable national celebration, even jubilation, in the United States, prompted in no small measure by a sense of relief and deliverance. For his involvement in the burning of the Capitol and other public buildings in Washington, the British general drew some heavy criticism in America. He was branded at the time as a “conflagrator” and “incendiary, or legalized firebrand.”⁴⁶ Hezekiah Niles, a Baltimore based newspaper editor, was prepared to admit that

Ross was a courageous soldier, even a “dashing” commander as his conduct at Bladensburg had demonstrated. But “here his merits, if these things are merits, appear to have an end, for his after-conduct was barbarous.”⁴⁷ Similarly, while not questioning Ross’s bravery, another American newspaper commented that the destruction he was responsible for in Washington warranted him being described as a “savage.”⁴⁸ Reports even circulated after the war that Ross’s native Rostrevor was targeted for a revenge attack by an American privateer for what occurred at Washington, though hostilities ended before an attempt could be made.⁴⁹

That Ross was also widely admired in the United States at the time as a chivalrous soldier, even a merciful and magnanimous enemy, is not so well known. Indeed his reputation became a “hot” political issue in the presidential election of 1828. As a story published in a Washington, D.C. newspaper at the time remarked, it was to Ross’s “forbearance and generosity we owe it, that a single house was suffered to remain in the City of Washington.”⁵⁰ In the upshot, while Ross and many fellow countrymen in his ranks were responsible for destroying the public buildings of the American capital city, the Irish also were prominent in repairing and rebuilding them. Not only was James Hoban, an Irish architect, involved in renovating the White House, but almost half of the population of the District at the time were Irishmen, most of whom could only speak their native Gaelic language. Since many of them were laborers, chances are they were to the fore in repairing the public buildings burnt by British forces.⁵¹



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www.theflightoftheearls.net and
www.themanwhocapturedwashington.com.

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“Doubt, Confusion, and Dismay”

Efforts to Save the House and Senate Records in 1814

By Jane Armstrong Hudiburg



*Fig. 1. British troops advancing through the city encountered little opposition from the populace, who had experienced considerable doubt, confusion, and dismay in the previous days. This fanciful engraving from Richard Miller Devens, *Our First Century* (1876), depicts the Capitol ablaze but includes the central section of the building that had not yet been constructed.*

“**THE** third day, only; before the destruction of the Capitol by the British, all in the City was doubt, confusion, and dismay. The citizens were absent, under arms; business was suspended. Every means of transportation was either engaged or in use; and no certain intelligence of the Enemy was either communicated or known.”¹ Written two decades after the War of 1812, this account by the Senate clerk, Lewis Machen, captures the atmosphere in Washington just prior to the British invasion on August 24, 1814 (fig. 1). In the Capitol, the few remaining House and Senate assistant clerks, under no clear direction, worked fervently to remove their chambers’ respective records without possessing enough wagons to carry them all to safety.

The clerks’ considerable efforts had mixed results; on both sides of the Capitol, priceless records were destroyed and priceless records were preserved. However, the House account emphasizes what was lost and the Senate account emphasizes what was saved. The House assistants express their regret over the “troublesome scene,” while the Senate engrossing clerk heralds his “providential circumstances.”² And the wealthy clerk of the House and his colonel brother are publicly rebuked, while an African American messenger wins high praise on the Senate floor.³



Born to a prominent Montgomery County family in 1768, the future House clerk, Patrick Magruder (fig. 2), a Democratic-Republican, served in the Maryland legislature and one term in the House of Representatives.⁴ Despite claiming that his “blood” was “allied to the whole District,” he lost his 1806 campaign for reelection to the uncle of Francis Scott Key, prompting one Federalist newspaper to crow, “rudeness and insolence will always meet with their proper reward, contempt and defeat.”⁵ The sentiment proved to be an overstatement, however, as Magruder soon returned to Capitol Hill. With the support of his former House colleagues, in October 1807, he won the election for the chamber’s top administrative position, House clerk, as well as the subsequent appointment as librarian of Congress.⁶

As librarian, Magruder was responsible for the proper circulation, labeling, and shelving of material, more than 3,000 books and documents. These duties he delegated to assistants.⁷ Of greater concern, perhaps, was the Library of Congress’s role as a Capitol Hill social facility, located in a grand room of the Senate wing. Magruder and his wife, Martha (Goodwyn), the daughter of a House Republican, attended “high society” functions there and elsewhere in the city.⁸ Persistent poor health, however, dampened both his social life and his ability to perform the more involved role of House clerk. On at least two occasions, George Magruder, Patrick’s brother, a colonel in the District of Columbia’s militia, served as acting clerk, due to the clerk’s absence from “indisposition,” the last instance commencing on December 9, 1813.⁹

Stricken twice again after the New Year, Patrick left the city in late July for health-restoring mineral springs. Before doing so, he placed George, the principal clerk, in charge of the clerk’s office and assigned another clerk to open and air the library books.¹⁰ At this time, according to the House assistant clerks, Samuel Burch and John T. Frost, “all

was quiet,” and they had no fears regarding the safety of the Capitol. They heard nothing from the enemy, except for “marauding parties in the Chesapeake, and what was seen in the newspapers, of troops being ordered from Europe to America.” By the middle of August, though, news arrived that the “enemy was in the bay, in great force.”¹¹ The city’s residents fled to the countryside or answered the militia’s call to service.¹²

Anxious to protect the House papers, Burch, a member of the District’s 2nd Regiment, asked for a discharge. Lacking “superior authority,” though, his captain denied the request, forcing Burch to march from Washington on the 20th.¹³ Two other House clerks, Samuel Hamilton and Brook Berry, joined their artillery company, while Colonel Magruder took command of the 1st Regiment, leaving the clerk’s office to the newly-appointed Frost, an older man exempt from militia duty.¹⁴

By Sunday, the 21st, Burch’s concern reached the colonel, now leading several hundred men in the field. Magruder secured a furlough for the assistant clerk with instructions to return to the Capitol that evening to save as many of the clerk’s papers as he could “in case the enemy should get possession of the place.” The order had one caveat: Burch and Frost must not begin packing until they ascertained that the clerks in the War Office had begun to do the same.¹⁵

On this day, the third day before the invasion, the two House clerks knew well Lewis Machen’s emotions. Amidst the “doubt, confusion, and dismay,” Burch and Frost waited for a message from the War Office.¹⁶ In the meantime, they resumed their routine clerical duties, updating committee records. Finally, at noon on Monday, they learned that the War Office clerks had already packed up the day before. In a frantic burst of energy, they began gathering files. “As it was not certain that the enemy would get to the city,” though, they set the committee



Fig. 2. Patrick Magruder.

reports aside and refrained from breaking into George Magruder's locked desk, which held another set of documents.¹⁷

Burch tore off in search of a vehicle to transport the books and papers, but found that nearly every wagon or carriage in the city had been impressed by the army or otherwise occupied. Unable to hire a wagon, he claimed the right to impress, but had no authority to do so. Finally, a House messenger obtained a cart and four oxen six miles from the city, returning to the Capitol after dark on Monday. With their one cart, the clerks and messengers shuttled the most valuable books and papers to a "safe and secret place" nine miles in the country, repeating the process until they had to stop the morning of August 24.¹⁸ Meanwhile, Frost had the Library of Congress's books ready for removal, but no boxes to contain them.¹⁹ Forced to flee the Capitol for his own safety, he took the House committee reports to a nearby residence in one of the two houses on Capitol Hill that George Washington had constructed.²⁰ In his haste, however, he forgot "the Secret Journal of Congress," as well as the locked desk, containing a number of receipts and vouchers, the loss of which would lead to the Magruder brothers' downfall.²¹

"The Fate of War has befallen the City of Washington," the reporter for the *National Intelligencer* declared on August 30. "It was taken by the enemy on Wednesday the 24th instant, and evacuated by them in the course of Thursday night, after destroying the interior and combustible part of the Capitol, of the President's house, and of the public offices."²² Torched by the invading British, the Capitol's "combustible part" included invaluable House and Senate records and most of the Library of Congress's collection.²³

While Colonel Magruder's troops recovered from their shocking defeat at the Battle of Bladensburg earlier that day, the enemy built a bonfire in the ornate House Chamber (fig. 3), then turned to the committee rooms and the clerk's office in the basement.²⁴

There, the remaining papers and furniture, including Magruder's desk, burned so hot the soldiers had to leave the wing.²⁵ On the Senate side, the Library's books created a tremendous blaze; the flames engulfed the Senate chamber, fueled by the elegant drapery and carpets. The British

then burned the White House and the Treasury, as well as a number of private residences, including the George Washington house that now sheltered the doomed House committee reports.²⁶

In the aftermath (fig. 4), there was nothing for Burch and Frost to salvage. All they could do was provide Patrick Magruder with a list of the items destroyed: the reports of the Committees of Ways and Means, Claims and Pensions, and Revolutionary Claims, the Secret Journal of Congress (much of which was printed elsewhere), manuscript papers (mainly private petitions presented before 1799), a number of printed books, and all of George Magruder's expense records and vouchers, accounting for the House's contingent spending since January. With sadness, they concluded, "Every thing belonging to the office, together with the library of Congress, we venture to say, might have been removed in time, if carriages could have been procured."²⁷



Fig. 3. Rear Admiral George Cockburn allegedly stood on the chair of the Speaker of the House and mockingly asked his men to vote on "Shall this harbor of Yankee democracy be burned?" This engraving appeared in William Cullen Bryant, *A Popular History of the United States* (1881).

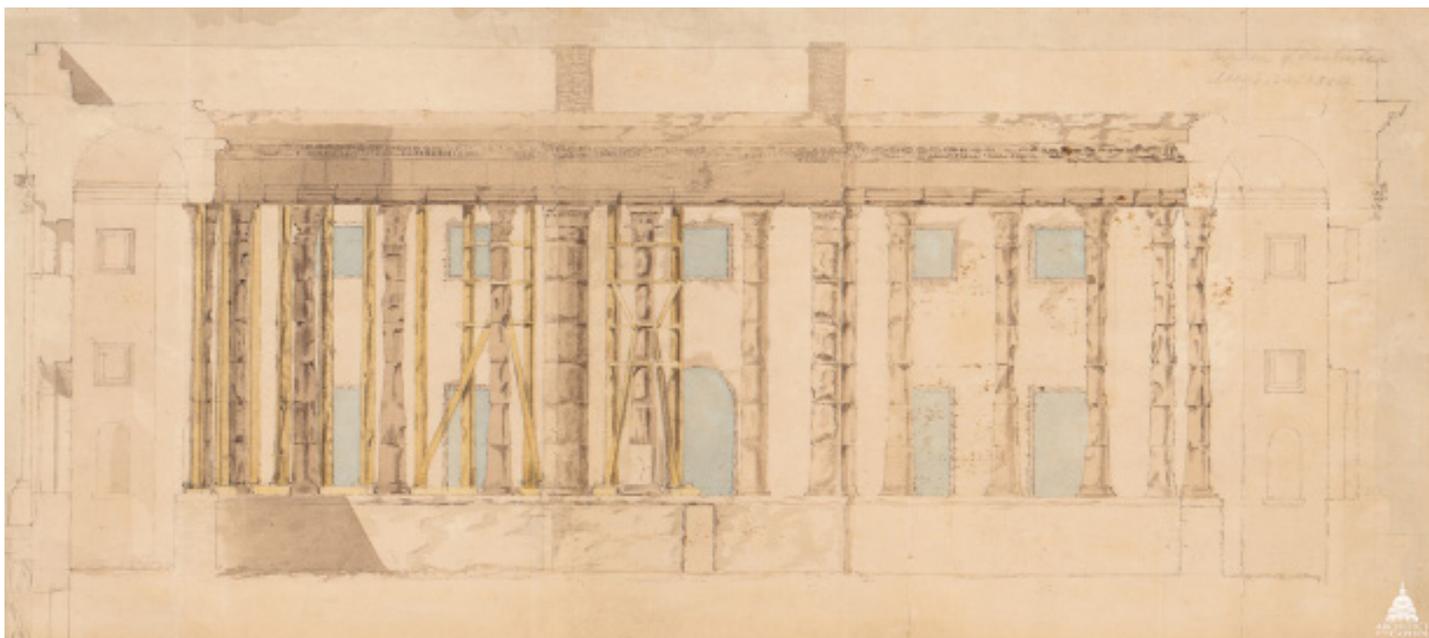


Fig. 4. This 1814 or 1815 sketch of the fire-damaged House Chamber is credited to Giovanni Andrei.

In September, Patrick Magruder himself called for a House committee to investigate the loss of records and to ascertain the House contingent expenses, so that the clerk might be credited the amount paid.²⁸ Later, Magruder probably regretted the request, as the committee reported in December that, since the clerks had waited until August 22 to pack up, “due precaution and diligence were not exercised to prevent the destruction and loss which has been sustained.” And concerning George Magruder’s claim of \$50,863 in House expenditures, the number was “very great and unprecedented,” especially since the colonel seemed unable or unwilling to specify the accounts involved. Instead, they determined the amount should be \$30,933.²⁹

Writing to Speaker of the House Langdon Cheves, Patrick Magruder refuted the charges. When he left the city to recover his health, which was “worn down by a constant and assiduous attention to his official duties,” the force of the enemy was not sufficient “to justify an expectation of an attack on the seat of Government.”³⁰ And, in fact, his clerks, Frost and Burch, “gentlemen of respectability and truth,” did exercise the “proper degree of diligence and precaution for the preservation of the papers appertaining to the office of the House and of the library of Congress.” While it was unfortunate that George had not kept a duplicate of the financial records, Patrick found accusations of “deficiency and default in his accounts” an added “cruelty to that pain which the undersigned has already suffered from the loss sustained in his office.”³¹

In January 1815, the investigatory committee amended their earlier concern. This time, they determined that the error was not so much in the delay in packing, but in the “neglect to

provide the means of transportation, which might have been done by the clerk who remained in the office, or any agent employed for the purpose.”³² They also found that George Magruder had mismanaged the accounts, allowing the creditors to overcharge the House without sufficient explanation.³³ Furthermore, they moved to consider a resolution to remove Magruder as House clerk.³⁴

Before the House voted on his removal, however, Magruder reluctantly submitted his resignation. In another letter to the Speaker, he did not mention the loss of papers or books, but maintained his innocence regarding the contingent funds, claiming that the expense payments had been “faithfully disbursed” by his brother, the principal clerk. He especially regretted the blow to his reputation by those whom he had once called his “political friends,” and wished his successor, “an easier and happier time in the discharge of his duties.” With that, he retired to his wife’s family estate in Virginia, holding firm the belief that, “truth is great, and will prevail.”³⁵

❧

In the course of the House committee’s investigation, the members requested information from several executive departments concerning the loss of their official records. The Treasury reported that, “All the essential books of the Treasury were removed to a place of safety.”³⁶ The War Department, the Department of State, and other offices reported similar acts of preservation. Interestingly, the House committee did not consult the clerk’s counterpart, the secretary of the Senate. Attracting no scrutiny, that office’s recovery efforts go unmentioned in the official records, save for a vague reference to a man named Tobias Simpson. On March 1, 1815,

the Senate resolved to pay him, “two hundred dollars, in consideration of his uniform good conduct, and particularly for his exertions to save the public property in the Capitol, both before and after the destruction thereof by the enemy.”³⁷

Between 1808 and 1825, the Senate Journal mentions Simpson several times. As a messenger, he earned two dollars a day.³⁸ He often was compensated for extra duties or was reimbursed for providing a horse, and on April 20, 1816, he earned another \$100.00 for “good conduct.”³⁹ The record is silent, though, on one astounding fact; at a time when slaves helped build the Capitol, a freeman worked steadily, received large bonuses, and won the Senate’s acclaim. In fact, no one would have known his ethnicity, if Lewis Machen had not mentioned it in his own account concerning the removal of Senate records.⁴⁰

Born in Maryland in 1790, Machen moved to Washington at the age of sixteen. In 1809, he joined the secretary of the Senate’s staff as an engrossing clerk, updating the bills as they changed during the amendment process. An eyewitness to the Senate’s famous “Golden Era” speeches, he would serve the secretary’s office in various capacities for fifty years, but never achieve its highest rank, secretary of the Senate.⁴¹ While bidding for that position in 1836, however, Machen provided the only known description of the Senate clerks’ activities prior to the 1814 fire. In a letter to Senator William C. Rives, Machen declared, “It is to me, providentially, that the Senate and the Country are indebted for the preservation of Records, the loss of which no money could have restored; and which, if lost, would have reflected a deeper and more indelible (sic) disgrace than the burning of a hundred Capitols, or the capture of every Seaboard City of our Land.”

According to the Machen letter, late in the summer of 1814, the Senate’s principal clerk was absent from the city. The first secretary of the Senate, Samuel Otis, had died in April, and the position remained vacant. As word grew that the enemy would likely approach, Machen was one of the few able-bodied men exempt from military duty. He had just bought a farm in Maryland, so he was no longer bound to the District militia, but had yet to be placed on the Maryland roll.⁴² This quirk in timing gave him an advantage over the House clerks, as he started considering evacuation plans just as his colleagues on the other side of the Capitol were called into service.

Riding into work “a few days before the invasion,” Machen happened across a “waggoner” he knew. Though not the owner of the wagon he drove, the man agreed to hire it out “in case of emergency.” Machen informed another engrossing clerk, John D. McDonald, of the available transportation, but both he and McDonald were unsure. As assistant clerks, they hesitated at the “responsibility of such a step.” Machen’s resolve, however, hardened as his apprehension increased. Around noon on the 21st, he informed McDonald he was willing to take on the responsibility himself. McDonald concurred with the decision,

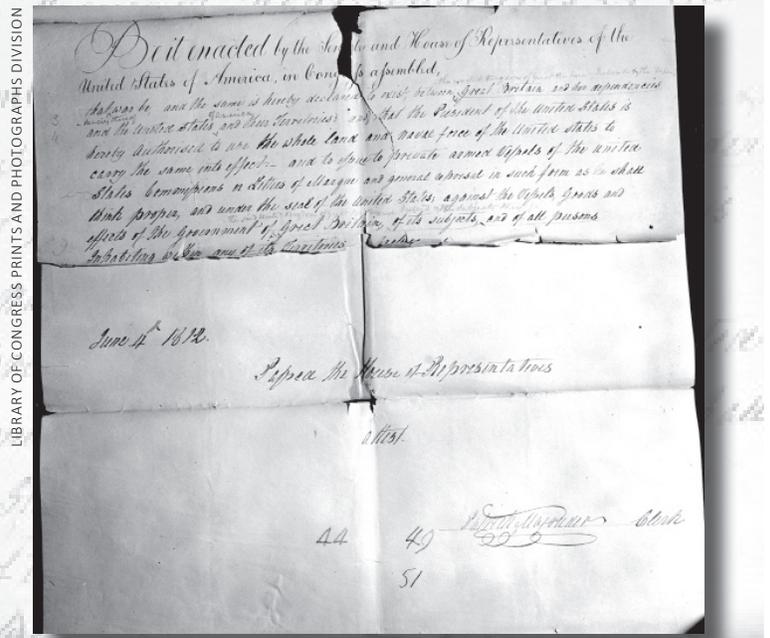


Fig. 5. The original House bill declaring war on Great Britain in 1812 was one of the House documents that survived. Dated June 4, 1812, the bill was signed by House Clerk Patrick Magruder.

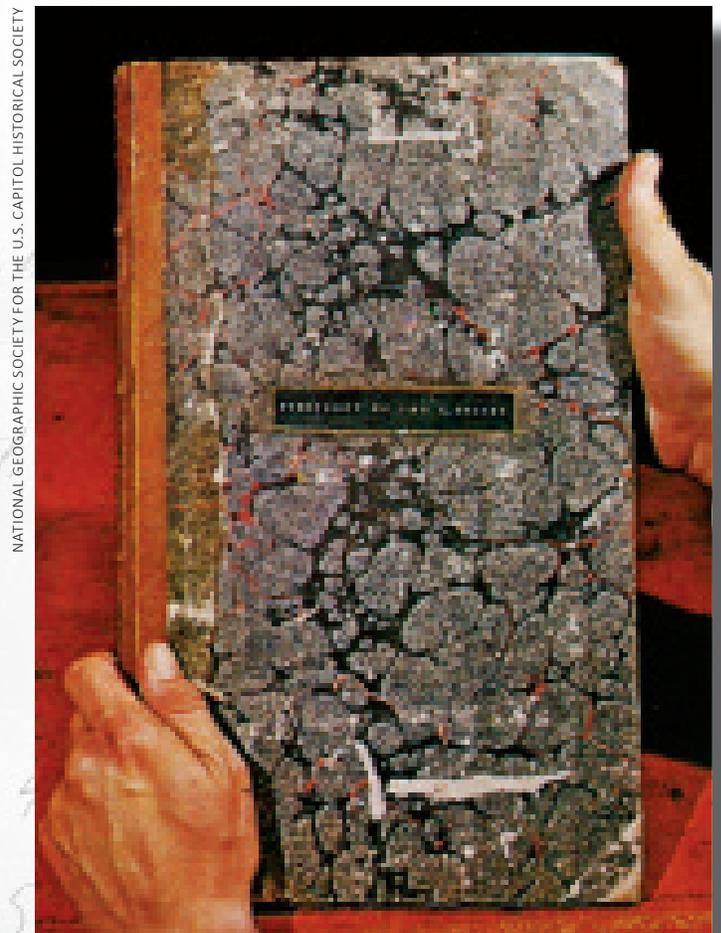


Fig. 6. British troops did not burn all of the documents; they took some as souvenirs. This volume of Treasury reports was taken by Cockburn and given to his brother. It was returned to the Library of Congress in 1940.

but left the Capitol to arrange for his own family.

Machen tracked down the wagon driver, who now refused to lend the vehicle, given that the owner, a “Mr. Scholfeld,” was absent and unable to offer consent. Machen countered that he had the power of impressment. The declaration worked. Not only did the waggoner yield the wagon and horses, but he travelled with Machen back to the Capitol to help remove the records. Machen, the unnamed waggoner, and the office messenger, whom Machen identified as “a black man named Tobias,” packed all the books and papers Machen found most valuable. As the sun set, and the wagon could hold no more, they headed to Machen’s country residence in Prince George’s County. Along the way, they faced two difficulties. While still within the city borders, a wagon wheel broke. “Without leave from the owner,” they “borrowed” a wheel from a blacksmith’s shop. Then, two miles from Machen’s home, the wagon overturned, delaying the group several hours before they reached their destination.

The next morning, McDonald joined Machen and convinced him to move the records to a more secure location in Brookeville, Montgomery County, about 35 miles from the Capitol.⁴³ There, the records remained until the Senate met at its temporary headquarters, Blodget’s Hotel, on Eighth and E Streets, in Northwest Washington.⁴⁴ According to Machen, those papers included the names and positions of every member of the American military forces, as well as the first twenty-five years of the Senate’s confidential executive proceedings.

At the end of his account, Machen wondered how one would feel to lose the Senate’s executive history, had it been “blotted forever from the knowledge and memory of man”? The same question could be asked regarding the history of the House, if Burch had been unable to obtain furlough. Indeed, given circumstances less “providential,” every congressional record, House or Senate, could have perished in the Capitol blaze. On the other hand, the records may not have survived their new locations, like the committee reports at the George Washington house. In removing confidential papers from the “place of their legitimate deposit,” the clerks courted disaster, with “eternal opprobrium” resting on their names.⁴⁵

This, then, was the dilemma that Colonel Magruder faced on the battlefield. Was it better to risk losing the records to an uncertain invasion or send them out in a rickety cart with the threat of a roadside ambush? In an atmosphere of “doubt, confusion, and dismay,” the Capitol’s clerks and messengers, ultimately, chose the risks of the road, and as a consequence, saved much of the early history of Congress.

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Notes

1. Lewis Machen to William Rives, Sept. 12, 1836, Rives Papers, Library of Congress.
2. Samuel Burch and J.T. Frost to Patrick Magruder, Sept. 15, 1814, *American State Papers* (hereafter *Am. St. P.*), 13th Cong., 3rd sess., *Misc.*, 2:245; Machen to Rives, *ibid.*
3. “Adjustment of the Contingent Account of the Clerk of the House of Representatives,” Jan. 16, 1815, *Am. St. P.*, 13th Cong., 3rd sess., *Misc.*, 2:263-65; Tobias Simpson Resolution, Mar. 1, 1815, *Senate Journal*, 13th Cong., 3rd sess., p. 677.
4. The Magruder family, which included Revolutionary War heroes and prominent merchants, has a long history in Montgomery County, Maryland. The children of Revolutionary War Major Samuel Wade Magruder, Patrick Magruder and his siblings were born on “Locust Grove,” an estate in north Bethesda. The house is one of the only eighteenth-century residences remaining in the county. “Locust Grove I. (Samuel Wade Magruder House),” Inventory Form for State Historic Sites Survey, Maryland Historical Trust. Magruder lost his election to the Federalist, Philip Barton Key. Martin K. Gordon, “Patrick Magruder: Citizen, Congressman, Librarian of Congress,” *Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress* 32 (July 1975):155-71.
5. British Ambassador August John Foster, a Federalist sympathizer, observed Magruder’s campaign against Key. When Magruder remarked that his “blood” was allied to the whole district, Key apparently retorted, “if the Question were about a Steed that argument might be good,” but it was about who would make the best member of Congress. Margaret K. Latimer, ed., “Sir Augustus J. Foster in Maryland,” *Maryland Historical Magazine* 47 (1952):286; *Frederick-Town Herald* (Frederick, Md.), Oct. 11, 1806.



6. Magruder replaced John Beckley, the first House clerk and librarian of Congress, who died just one month after Magruder's term ended in 1807. Magruder was actually the fourth clerk, since two other clerks served between Beckley's nonconsecutive terms. The two positions, clerk and librarian of Congress, were not separated until Thomas Dougherty replaced Magruder as clerk in 1815. Office of the Clerk, U.S. House of Representatives, History, Art, and Archives Website: history.house.gov/People/Office/Clerks/; Gordon, "Patrick Magruder," pp. 158-60.

7. The library's governing board selected and procured the books, while the librarian maintained the collection. Gordon, "Patrick Magruder," p. 160.

8. Martha Goodwyn was the daughter of Virginian Republican Representative Peterson Goodwyn, a colonel in the Revolutionary War. Ibid., pp. 161-64.

9. *House Journal*, 12th Cong., 2nd sess., Dec. 9, 1813, p. 169.

10. Patrick Magruder to the Speaker, Sept. 20, 1814, *Am. St. P.*, 13th Cong., 3rd sess., *Misc.*, 2:245.

11. Burch and Frost, *ibid.*

12. Anthony Pitch, *The Burning of Washington: The British Invasion of 1814* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1998), p. 45.

13. Captain Harvey Bestor's Certificate, Dec. 15, 1814, *Am. St. P.*, *Misc.*, 2:260.

14. Pitch, *Burning of Washington*, p. 44; Burch and Frost, *ibid.*, p. 245.

15. General Smith's Order, Aug. 21, 1814, *Am. St. P.*, 13th Cong., 3rd sess., *Misc.*, 2:260; Burch and Frost, *ibid.*, p. 245.

16. Machen to Rives, *ibid.*

17. Burch and Frost, *ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

19. "Mr. Frost's letter to P. Magruder," Dec. 17, 1814, *Am. St. P.*, 13th Cong., 3rd sess., *Misc.*, 2:260.

20. Henry Looker claims that Burch and Frost's reference to General Washington's house confirms other information indicating that the house had once been owned by George Washington. Henry Looker, "Washington's Houses on Capitol Hill," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* 7(1904):66-70.

21. Burch and Frost, *ibid.*

22. *National Intelligencer* (Washington, D.C.), Aug. 30, 1814.

23. In 1815, for \$23,940, Thomas Jefferson sold his considerable collection of books to the Library of Congress to replace the burned books. Purchase of the Library of Thomas Jefferson, *Am. St. P.*, 13th Cong., 3rd sess., *Misc.*, 2:246.

24. Consult Pitch for more information about Battle of Bladensburg; Pitch, *Burning of Washington*, pp. 208-20.

25. William C. Allen, *History of the United States Capitol:*

A Chronicle of Design, Construction, and Politics (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2001), p. 98.

26. Burch and Frost, *ibid.*; Pitch, *Burning of Washington*, p. 122.

27. Burch and Frost, *ibid.*

28. Patrick Magruder to the Speaker, *ibid.*, p. 245.

29. Books and Papers of the House of Representatives and Libraries of Congress Lost by the Conflagration in 1814, and the State of the Contingent Fund, Committee Report, Dec. 19, 1814, *Am. St. P.*, 13th Cong., 3rd sess., *Misc.*, 2:258.

30. Patrick Magruder to the Speaker (second letter), Dec. 19, 1814, *Am. St. P.*, 13th Cong., 3rd sess., *Misc.*, 2:258.

31. *Ibid.*; Mr. Frost's Letter, *ibid.*

32. Adjustment of the Contingent Account of the Clerk of the House of Representatives, Committee Report, Jan. 16, 1815, *Am. St. P.*, 13th Cong., 3rd sess., *Misc.*, 2:263.

33. *House Journal*, Jan. 19, 1815, 13th Congress, 3rd sess., p. 678.

34. *House Journal*, Jan. 21, 1815, p. 682.

35. Resignation of the Clerk of the House of Representatives, Jan. 28 1815, *Am. St. P.*, 13th Cong., 3rd sess., *Misc.*, 2:267.

36. Books, &c., Destroyed by the Conflagration in 1814, Treasury Report, *Am. St. P.*, 13th Cong., 3rd sess., *Misc.*, 2:249.

37. Tobias Simpson Resolution, Mar. 1, 1815, *Senate Journal*, 13th Cong., 3rd sess., p. 677.

38. According to a later secretary of the Senate, Asbury Dickens, the duties of messenger were: "He will have charge of the office; attend to the proper cleaning and warming of the respective apartments; deliver such messages as maybe required; attend to the distribution of stationery, agreeably to the directions of the Secretary, and of which he will make an entry in a book to be kept for the purpose; and procure from the place of deposit such printed Bills and documents as may be required." Asbury Dickens, Secretary of the Senate, Dec. 1, 1838, Lewis Machen and Family Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, container 22, Senate File, Secretary of Senate folder.

39. Tobias Simpson Resolution, Apr. 30, 1816, *Senate Journal*, p. 643.

40. Machen to Rives, *ibid.*

41. "Finding Aid," Lewis Machen and Family Papers, *ibid.*

42. *Ibid.*

43. *Ibid.*

44. Richard A. Baker, "September 19, 1814: The Senate Convenes in Emergency Quarters," in *200 Notable Days: Senate Stories, 1787 to 2002* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2006), p. 36.

45. Machen to Rives, *ibid.*

September 26, 1814: The House Debates Moving the Capitol after the Burning of Washington

By William C. diGiacomantonio



Fig. 1. A computer generated recreation of Blodget's Hotel by Stephen A. Hansen.

It is easy to imagine how members of the Thirteenth Congress might have felt as they drifted into their improvised meeting place in Blodget's Hotel (fig. 1) on the morning of September 19, 1814. "Hotel" was a vestigial name for what had become the Patent and Post Office building four years before. (The site is a hotel again—where the Monaco Hotel sits at 8th and F streets, NW). Legend says that Patent Commissioner William Thornton shamed British troops into sparing it during their rampage through the capital less than four weeks earlier. Before entering the building sitting high on its perch on the "F Street Ridge," congressmen could look over their right shoulder and see what remained of their Capitol (fig. 2), or over their left shoulder to see the charred shell of the President's House (fig. 3). For many, these glances would have been their first real impression of the war's effects. We can imagine them sulking,

feeling humbled—or vengeful. All saw ruins; some saw opportunity.

Congress had not met since the previous April, two months before British forces first infested the Chesapeake and fully four months before the rumors of their march on Washington finally materialized. House members spent their first week back debating the failure of the city's defenses. After a unanimous vote for a committee of inquiry into the cause, New York Representative Jonathan Fisk (fig. 4) rose to address an even more pressing matter: "to inquire into the expediency of removing the Seat of Government, during the present session of Congress, to a place of greater security and less inconvenience than the City of Washington."¹ He pointed out that the government's vulnerability had weakened public confidence, which was necessary to raise the funds necessary for carrying on the war. Once the war was over and the menace removed, there would be no more reason for staying away. Opponents immediately responded that a transitory seat of government threatened the very stability that Fisk sought: "once set on wheels, there was no saying where it would stop."² But such an argument amounted to an admission that Washington would not be able to compete once the superiority of alternative sites was revealed. Fisk asked, one suspects, with undisguised glee, if his opponents really wanted to admit as much? With a few exceptions, members made only glancing reference to the issue of constitutionality. In the most sustained defense of the capital's irremovability, Representative Joseph Pearson of North Carolina insisted that Washington's uninterrupted perpetuity as the "permanent seat of government" had been sanctioned by the Constitution, the *Federalist Papers*, and the original Residence Act of 1790.



Fig. 2. 1814 ink and watercolor drawing by George Munger documents the damage to the Capitol after it was burnt by the British.

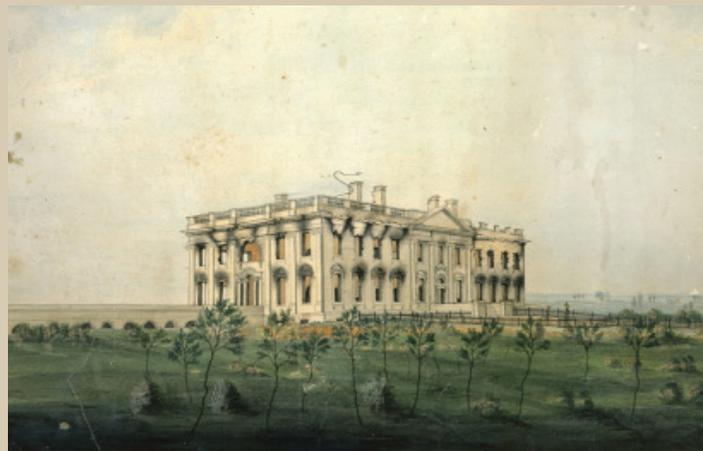


Fig. 3. George Munger's companion watercolor showed the damage done to the President's House by British troops.

Most of the debate revolved around future military preparedness, the possibility of being captured, and the cost of reinforcing the city rather than the more strategic coastal defenses. Some insisted that abandoning Washington “would gratify the pride and resentment of the English nation more than any other operation their army on the coast could perform.”³ And where would they run to? Congress knew no more where the British would strike in 1815 than they had known in 1814. Lastly, the city’s supporters mocked the argument that it was more disgraceful to run away when attacked than it was to run away even before they were attacked again. “This is indeed a new chapter in chivalry,” taunted Pearson—who knew something about chivalry.⁴ The genteel North Carolinian had seriously wounded a fellow congressman on the nearby Bladensburg dueling grounds just five years earlier.

The two speeches excerpted below from the *Annals of Congress* summarize the various arguments cited during the debate. The first is by duelist Joseph Pearson (1766-1834); the second, by Fisk’s fellow New York lawyer Thomas P. Grosvenor (1778-1817). Both speeches were delivered on the first day of the debate, September 26, 1814. For much of the ensuing month, Washington’s fate as the ongoing seat of government hung in the balance. Both the Federalist minority and the Jeffersonian Republican majority reacted to the proposed removal along sectional more than party lines. Both Pearson and Grosvenor, for example, were Federalists who had every reason to fight President Madison’s Republican Administration, which also openly opposed removal.

Fisk, Grosvenor, and the rest had based their proposition on the expediency of a temporary removal, but their opponents saw this as a ruse. And to prove their point, after the bill for removal had passed the Committee of the Whole and perennial contender Philadelphia had been inserted in the blank for the

place of removal, Virginia’s Joseph Lewis successfully moved a last minute amendment to appropriate \$100,000 annually for five years, to prepare Washington for the government’s return. Suddenly burdened with this financial commitment to return, the bill failed on its final reading in the full House on October 15. Pearson appears to have been correct when he insisted that “the specious garb which envelopes this proposition hides from the superficial eye much of its real deformity,” which was to abandon Washington and never go back.⁵

HOUSE DEBATES (September 26, 1814)

Mr. PEARSON [. . .] *The gentleman [Jonathan Fisk] had said the purposed removal is only temporary; but his arguments look to a permanent removal. Where, if not here, is the gentleman to get those records, those steering oars to guide him in this difficult road? The public library is destroyed, but there are as good in this District as in any place to which it is now purposed to remove. The gentleman may, if he thinks proper, within the compass of ten miles, obtain all the books he ever read. The gentleman had intimated that Congress might, in a*



Fig. 4. Joseph Fisk, from Edward Manning Ruttenber, *History of the Town of Newburgh*, p. 307.

a commercial city, obtain facilities in our financial transactions, and with more readiness procure money to carry on this war. All these arguments go to favor a permanent removal. If he was certain of any one thing, Mr. P. said, it was, that the Constitution precluded Congress from such removal. The law establishing a permanent seat of Government was bottomed on the Constitution; and in consequence of its passage, the whole soil of the District had been transferred in fee simple to the President of the United States, upon express condition that that act of Congress was carrying the Constitution into effect. What would gentlemen do with those thousands of people who have expended their substance in building and improving the place, and, relying on the public faith pledged by solemn acts, had given their property into the hands of the Government? The man who, in cold blood, could place the citizens of this place in the condition in which they would be in the event of removal, for consideration of a private nature, deserved eternal punishment. In another point of view, Mr. P. said, it seemed

to him that gentlemen who were regardful of the honor of the country, would not be ready to heap disgrace upon disgrace, and add to the disaster of the enemy's success against this place; that they would be prevented by their national, or even party pride, from permitting the enemy to obtain a greater triumph than they have already obtained. The President had informed Congress in his Message, that the public buildings had been destroyed, but that only a momentary inconvenience had thereby resulted to the Government. If, after this, Congress should, under the impulse of terror, or any other motive, remove from here, they will only give cause of triumph to the enemy. So far from entering into the feelings of the nation, for such conduct the people would scout us from our seats. What, sir! Shall the Representatives of a country like this, with thousands and tens of thousands of citizens ready to offer up their blood in its defense—shall we go off in a panic from a place not even menaced by the enemy? To do so would be ten times more degrading than the late incursion of the enemy. Mr. P. made a number



Fig. 5. "The Fall of Washington—or Maddy in Full Flight." An 1814 British political cartoon satirized the dilemma that Congress faced in September 1814: whether to move the seat of government to prevent the repetition of the ignominious flight of its leaders in the face of an invading enemy.

of other pertinent remarks, and concluded by saying, that, in the language of his colleague, to set the Government on wheels, would give play to the worst passions of the worst men, and everything would become game for ambition and intrigue.⁶

Mr. GROSVENOR, [. . .] Gentlemen had said, if the Government once began to roll, it would never return. Is this the true and proper Seat of the Government? If it be, how can gentlemen say it will not return immediately after the causes for its present removal cease? It will. The Seat of Government will in such case gravitate as certainly to this position as the needle to the pole. All the arguments, therefore, against the removal, on the ground that it would be permanent, ought to be thrown out of consideration, as they had nothing to do with the question. Let the resolution take its course and go to a committee. Suppose at the time Congress met, the enemy could have held the place, or was in force on the water, to occupy the place the next day. Would Congress, in such a case attempt to sit here? The question was not, however, whether any exigency would justify the removal from this place, because that principle has been decided long ago by the passage of an act to which he had before alluded;⁷ the question was, whether this was such an exigency as to require the removal? He saw no reason, therefore, why the adaptation of the question should excite such a feeling as appeared to prevail, unless the gentleman were desirous to place their argument on the ground they had unguardedly disclosed, that this was the very worst place in the nation for Congress to sit in. The idea from the gentleman from South Carolina [Samuel Farrow] was singular, who conceived that a removal would be striking our colors. Wait, says the gentleman, till the enemy come and chases you off! That, said Mr. G., is the dishonor which I dread from remaining, the very disgrace I wish to avoid. You now sit coolly and deliberately; you may remove without disgrace or dishonor. But if this be a point which you cannot defend against an enemy, why talk like children about remaining here and having your head cut off rather than remove? [. . .] To remove from the city temporarily was one of those occurrences in life to which we must submit, and is no more disgrace than the ordering the necessary retreat of an army. If it shall appear folly to remain here, this is the moment to remove. If we are to remain here till the enemy comes, to sit and be dragged from our seats, the President stolen—and there is nothing now to guard against it; if we are to run all the risks for false honor, let us have no argument; let us say at once we will be self-devoted. This war, gentlemen well knew, might continue for years. If a peace did not take place now, he feared it would be long before it did. What, then, was the condition of the Government in the District? Let gentlemen ask themselves fairly. Were they willing to appropriate the money of the people of the United States to build a capitol, to plant it in this District, where it might be destroyed in twenty days?

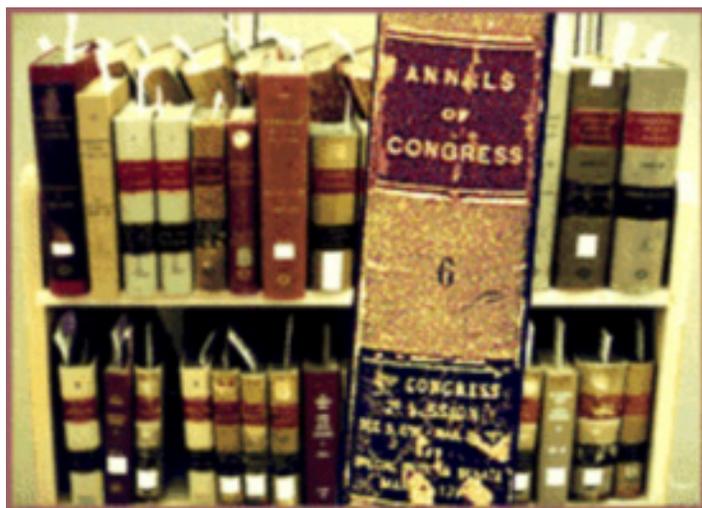
No, gentlemen said, they would defend it, at an expense of ten or twelve millions; for that much it would cost, so indefensible is this point. Did not the interest of the country, Mr. G. asked, require them to remove to a place of security, where it would not be necessary to expend ten or fifteen millions, or any other sum, in the simple defense of the Congress?⁸



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Notes

1. *Annals of Congress*, 13th Cong., 3rd sess., p. 312.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 313.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 354.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 372.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 357.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 315-16.
7. The federal government's temporary removal from Philadelphia in 1794 to escape the yellow fever epidemic.
8. *Annals of Congress*, 13th Cong., 3rd sess., pp. 317-18.



The Annals of Congress provide the best record of congressional debate for the period 1789-1824, the First Congress through the first session of the 18th Congress. The Annals were compiled between 1834 and 1856 using the best records available, primarily newspaper accounts.



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“View of the Capitol of the United States, after the Conflagration, in 1814,” from Jesse Torrey, A Portraiture of Domestic Slavery in the United States (Philadelphia, 1817), frontispiece.

Chained and manacled, a group of slaves passes the burnt out Capitol, pausing beneath the figure of Liberty in the heavens above. This ironic commentary on the existence of slavery in the land of the free served as a reminder, in Torrey’s words, of “an incontrovertible theorem, that the sentinels of Divine justice, are seldom trespassed upon, without regular and appropriate retribution, in some shape, and at some time or other.”

The Most Beautiful Room in the World?

Latrobe, Jefferson, and the First Capitol

By Richard Chenoweth, AIA

The United States Capitol in 1801 was the largest and most ambitious building program on the continent—and it was much more than that. The Capitol would symbolize the young nation’s high ideals as a free democratic republic and it would be an architectural model for the growing country. It also was America’s first grand effort to build a modern building of such huge scale.

President Thomas Jefferson and Surveyor of Public Buildings B. Henry Latrobe (see p. 38 for portrait) worked together with a rare synergy to build the Capitol between 1803 and 1809, and by the time James Madison came to office, the Capitol was functioning as America’s first world stage. But it didn’t last long. In August 1814, British troops attacked Washington and burned the Capitol—as well as the other public buildings in Washington City. Latrobe’s main interiors were destroyed, including the famous Hall of the House

of Representatives. The Statue of Liberty that presided over the Hall was disintegrated. Because of the haste for reconstruction beginning in 1815, and the unself-consciousness of the age, the design history of the Capitol between 1803 and 1809 to the War of 1812 is scant. No topographical images exist of Latrobe’s rich neoclassical interiors.

When I first came to this story, I was frustrated by the lack of visual evidence. Jefferson had suggested it might be the “handsomest” room in the world—but was it? Latrobe himself touched on the crux of the problem when he wrote: “To give an adequate description of a building unaccompanied by drawings, is always a vain attempt.”

In an effort to revisit the lost masterpieces of the Jefferson-Madison-era Capitol, I’ve recreated much of the design using digital technology. To me, this is a type of treasure hunt. Behind the actual design and construction of the Jefferson-



Fig. 1. Watercolor view of the North Wing of the Capitol by Thomas Birch (ca. 1800).

Madison Capitol lies a powerful story of human drama, conflict, determination, and genius. I will try to give a quick overview of the backstory here as a way of introducing my research and explaining the drawings I've created.

The First Decade of the U.S. Capitol

The cornerstone of the U.S. Capitol was laid by George Washington in September 1793. Washington and Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson envisioned a Capitol that would represent the political, philosophical, and architectural aspirations of the world's first modern democratic republic. In Jefferson's romantic ideal, the building also would reflect the ancient monuments of Greece and Rome¹ and be a world-class contemporary of its European counterparts.

The plan was to have Congress occupy the Capitol in 1800. As soon as the ambitious building program was underway however, the plan began to unravel. The man who had won the competition for the Capitol's design, Dr. William Thornton, did not execute the project due to his lack of real architectural knowledge and experience. The three architects who executed the work during the 1790s were Frenchman Étienne Sulpice Hallet (later known as Stephen Hallet when he settled in the United States), Englishman George Hadfield, and Irishman James Hoban. The building's progress during the years of the Washington and Adams administrations was marked by changes of plan, ill will among principals and city commissioners, difficult logistics in the newly laid out city, and generally shoddy workmanship.

By 1800 only the North Wing (fig. 1), the Senate side of the building, was complete. In 1801, the House of Representatives

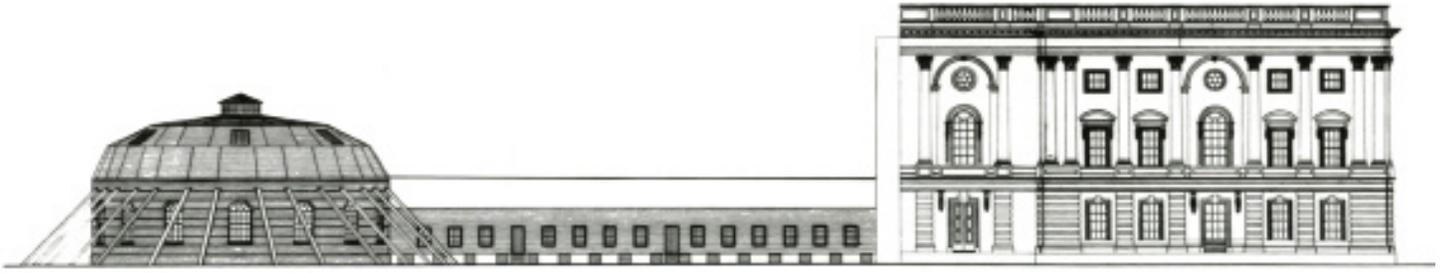


Fig. 2. Reconstruction drawing of the Capitol as it appeared in 1803, showing the oven connected to the North Wing by a covered walkway, created for the Architect of the Capitol.

met in the room intended for the Library of Congress, and Jefferson took the oath of office in the Senate Chamber, the only available principal rooms. In May 1801, Hoban was asked to build the House chamber following the original plan, and work on the South Wing's foundations began. The elliptical footprint of the main chamber rose precariously, but as no exterior walls yet existed, it grew into a large, freestanding, elliptical brick room. This proto-chamber, nicknamed the *oven*, or the *bake oven*, was connected to the North Wing by a covered passage (fig. 2). In the spring of 1801, the start of his administration, the designing and fastidious Jefferson was

certainly frustrated by the chaotic construction site on Capitol Hill.

Jefferson knew of Latrobe and had been impressed with his designs for the Washington Navy Yard. In their brief acquaintance they held a great esteem for each other as educated professionals, artists, and philosophers. Jefferson solicited Latrobe's advice on many projects henceforth; Latrobe would call Jefferson the planter of arts in America.² Their friendship lasted until Latrobe's death in 1820. Certainly, Jefferson imagined that this erudite, robust, European-trained architect, engineer, and naturalist could raise the construction of the Capitol to its

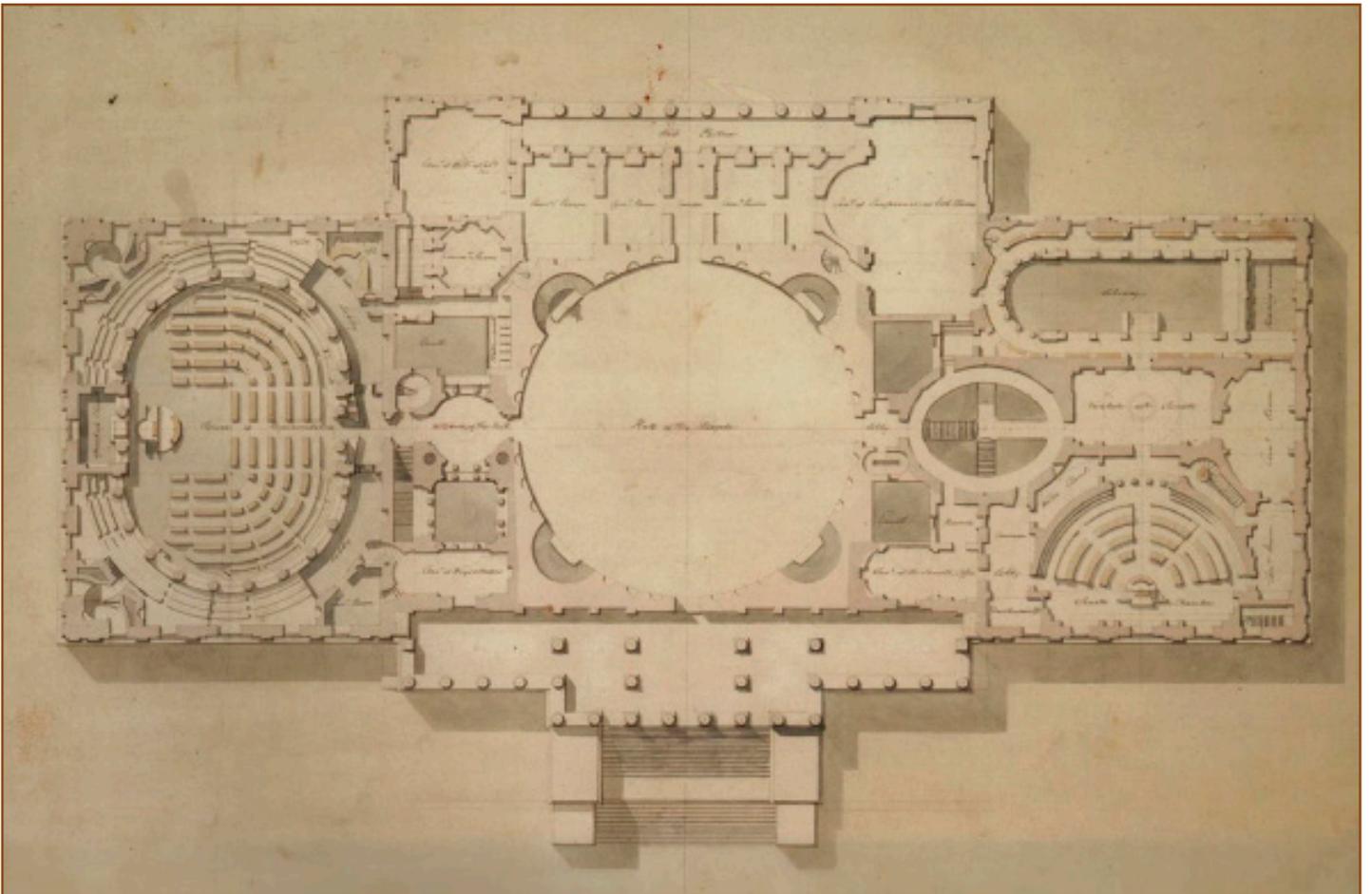


Fig. 3. Latrobe, United States Capitol, Washington, D.C., Plan of principal story and chambers (ca. 1808). Latrobe redesigned the Capitol's interiors within Thornton's original exteriors. Latrobe thought Thornton's exterior design was comically old-fashioned.

worthy level, and in 1803 he appointed Latrobe as surveyor of public buildings.

Nevertheless, the following ten years would prove a brutal ordeal for Latrobe in his service to Jefferson (and later President Madison), akin to Michelangelo's service to Julius II at the Sistine Chapel. The South Wing of the Capitol rose where the oven stood, and the North Wing, in large part, was rebuilt. As the United States' inchoate constitutional form of government emerged as a political idea, its physical and symbolic representation rose simultaneously from the promontory of the Hill, truly an unusual moment in the course of any political history.³

Latrobe's Neoclassicism

B. Henry Latrobe was born in 1764 in Fulneck, England, of English, French, and American ancestry. Latrobe was a product of his hometown's Moravian educational system and later, a Moravian school in Saxony. After his education, through which he gained fluency in many languages and toured the continent, he returned to England and began to practice architecture by about 1784. In 1791 he embarked on his own as a seasoned architect and engineer, with a developed aesthetic involving public works, engineering works, and large masonry structures.

American architecture in 1800 was largely based on traditional engineering, pattern book examples, and drawings that could be cobbled together by craftsmen and journeymen—usually without a unified vision. In fact, Thornton's winning design for the Capitol was largely based on ideas from William Chambers's *Treatise on Civil Architecture*, first published in 1759. Thornton's exteriors of the North and South Wings, his principal contribution to the finished Capitol, have the distinct flavor of the English Baroque style.

Coming to America in 1795, Latrobe embodied the modern, formally trained European architect, qualities most certainly admired by Jefferson. Latrobe's architecture was characterized by the strength and simplicity of volumes and forms, the expression of structure, and the use of "determinate" or unified light sources: "As all the Architecture (in the Hall) is solid and projected, its whole Effect will be lost by the destruction of *determinate shadows*, on which it depends."⁴

Latrobe reduced his surfaces and elements to simple, graceful forms, shunning superfluous ornament, even mocking churches of the "dark ages" ornamented with the "heads of monkies [sic] and cats and every possible distortion of the human body and countenance:"

Nothing is so easy as to *ornament* walls with foliage, with wreathes, festoons . . . especially if it be not required that these things should have the remotest relation to the pur-

pose of the building upon which they are carved, or that they should contribute to the real or apparent strength or convenience of the structure. . . . And on this account we find ornaments increase in proportion as art declines, or as ignorance abounds.⁵

He indicated explicitly to Jefferson that he chose an architectural solution based on its function rather than its form (presaging Louis Sullivan's form follows function dogma by ninety years). In a letter to Jefferson during a heated debate Latrobe wrote, "It is not the *ornament*, it is the *use* that I want."⁶

Glossary

DETERMINATE SHADOWS was the phrase Latrobe used to describe the passage of light over time throughout a room.

ENTABLATURE refers to the superstructure of moldings and bands which lie horizontally above columns, resting on their capitals.

HIPPODROME, meaning a space consisting of two half-circles linked by a central span, is derived from the Greek and Roman stadiums for horse and chariot racing.

LANTERN or LANTHERN in architectural terms refers to the rooftop structure, often a cupola, designed to admit daylight into the space below.

METOPE is a rectangular architectural element that fills the space between two triglyphs (vertically channeled tablets) in a Doric frieze, which is a decorative band of alternating triglyphs and metopes above the architrave (the lintel or beam resting on capitals of columns).

PIANO NOBILE is an Italian term literally meaning the "noble floor." It is the level of the major public spaces within a building, and in classical architecture the piano nobile is usually referenced or projected into design elements on the façade.

POCHÉ is a French term literally meaning "pocket," but in architecture it refers to either the structural material or the secondary spaces that shape figural rooms.



Fig. 4. Watercolor portrait of Maria Cosway, by Richard Cosway, 1785.

Although an architect of the Enlightenment, Latrobe had a deep respect for historical resources. *Antiquities of Athens*, published in London in 1762, was a detailed and extensive archaeological record of ancient Greek architecture by James Stuart and Nicholas Revett. A copy of *Antiquities* was in the collection of the Philadelphia Library Company at the time Latrobe lived in Philadelphia, and as a self-proclaimed “bigoted Greek,” he borrowed from it. The ancient Greek buildings detailed in this tome are refreshingly simple and strong, like Latrobe’s architecture, and Latrobe preferred this language for its adaptability to invention. Greek elements appear in Latrobe’s designs as graceful adaptations that met his particular aesthetic. For the twenty-four principal support columns in the Hall of the House of Representatives, Latrobe used his own version of the Choragic Monument of Lysicrates in Athens.

Latrobe, like Jefferson, was curiously afoot in both the Romantic world of nature and human imagination and the Classical world of reason. Latrobe’s letters suggest a man who could swing from melancholic and desperate in the travails of his life, to powerfully optimistic and self-assured in his successes; he could be savagely satirical and wickedly funny when describing the absurdities of life he encountered. But he was also intensely analytical. He could write extemporaneously on the sciences—structure, geology, hydrology, navigation—and also could ruminate tirelessly on music, art, people, and current events. He’s even credited with writing the first description of jazz music, which he had heard in New Orleans late in his life.

The Design of the South Wing

Latrobe’s first task as surveyor of public buildings was to build out the Capitol’s South Wing as prescribed by the plan. In the early spring of 1803, the South Wing’s foundation had risen to about ground level, and the large, elliptical, brick bake oven built by Hoban in 1801 rested on the footprint of what was scheduled to become a great elliptical chamber. This proto-chamber was woefully under-designed and within a year began to tilt and crack. Latrobe’s initial report of design and construction, issued within months of taking office, found the South Wing to be so insufficient that he recommended removing the foundations and the oven and starting over.

Starting over gave Latrobe the chance he needed to bring his superior ideas to bear. In designing the chamber, Latrobe proposed to Jefferson to raise the level of the Hall to the second story or the *piano nobile*. He created a detailed program, designed offices to accommodate the program, devised an entry sequence and ensured that structural and mechanical systems were in place. He also understood the inefficiency and difficulty of building an elliptical room, and therefore redesigned the chamber as two half circles connected with a central span, effectively making a hippodrome. Latrobe knew that in the carving of an elliptical entablature, every stone of each quarter ellipse would have a slightly different curvature based on the ellipse’s major and minor axes. As a hippodrome, all curved stones in the entablature would be of the same radius, thus streamlining the stone-carving process. Additionally, the