When Washington and Jefferson first saw the sketch William Thornton submitted for the Capitol in 1793, they were wholeheartedly for its acceptance. It was a classic Roman pattern which pleased the Republic’s founders who saw, or fancied, so many parallels between ancient Rome and the new United States. This marked the beginning of a great symbol of democracy; Madison and Monroe in turn actively furthered the completion of the original building, and a long line of foreign and native-born architects, sculptors, and painters combined their talents in this national monument.

Thornton’s prize-winning elevation lacked working drawings and consequently, with the cornerstone laid, a French architect, Stephen Hallet, was commissioned to supply the plans and serve as assistant to James Hoban, an Irish architect already busy with the President’s House. Hallet, defeated in the Capitol competition, was impatient with an amateur’s rough project and proceeded without further debate to alter and improve it. When Washington inspected the changed foundations he expressed his disapproval “in a style of such warmth as his dignity seldom permitted.” Within a year Hallet was succeeded by George Hadfield, a British architect recently arrived from London with letters of recommendation from John Trumbull, the painter. His association with the Capitol was almost as brief as Hallet’s because of an eagerness, by now familiar, to improve the plans entrusted to him, and in 1798 the direction of the building again reverted to Hoban.

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THE CAPITOL

By JOSEPH DOWNS
Curator of the American Wing

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November 21 Abigail Adams, the first “First Lady” to occupy the President’s House, wrote: “We have indeed come to a new country... woods are all you see, from Baltimore until you reach the city which is only so in name. No arrangements have been made to supply newcomers with fuel... Congress poured in, but shiver, shiver. The public officers have been sent to Philadelphia for wood-cutters and waggons.” Then Oliver Wolcott, Secretary of the Treasury, expressed his fears: “I do not see how the members of Congress can possibly secure lodgings unless they will consent to live like scholars in a college or monks in a monastery crowded ten to twenty in one house and utterly secluded from society.”

In 1803 President Jefferson invited Benjamin Latrobe to become Surveyor of Public Buildings. His appointment was hopefully expected to silence the critics and bring Thornton’s design to a speedy completion. Latrobe was widely traveled and already trained as an engineer and architect upon his arrival from England seven years earlier. In 1799 his designs for the Bank of Pennsylvania established the Greek Revival style in Philadelphia, which swept the country half a century later and became the first American expression of architecture. Within the same year he contributed the first Gothic Revival design in the United States for Colonel Crammond’s house, Sedgeley. He also proved his engineering skill when he gave Philadelphia the first city water system, pumped from the Schuylkill River to street hydrants.

Latrobe’s critical scrutiny of the plans for the Capitol brought the inevitable suggestions for changes, which were stubbornly rejected for a time by Dr. Thornton, who never ceased to be a carping critic of Latrobe. In the nine years which followed, the south wing, containing the Hall of Representatives, was built and the interior of the earlier north wing was completed. Here were used Latrobe’s famous corn capitals and later the tobacco capitals, two of the most original and beautiful variations of a classical motif in our architecture. For the execution of the sculptural ornament Thomas Jefferson wrote to his friend Philip Mazzei in Italy, seeking workmen: “The Capitol was begun at a time when the country was entirely destitute of artists and even good workmen in the branches of architecture upon which the superiority of public over private buildings depend.” This appeal bore good fruit and over a period of years numerous sculptors and stone carvers came from Italy to enrich the Capitol. The first to arrive were Giovanni Andrei and Giuseppe Franzoni in 1806. Franzoni carved the great spread eagle and the figure of Liberty in the Hall of Representatives. His brother Carlo reached Washington ten years later, and to him is credited the spectacular Car of History clock; Francisco Iardella, who arrived with him, cut the tobacco capitals in the lobby of the Senate wing. Antonio Capel- lano, reputed to be a pupil of Canova, carved...
the bas-reliefs of Washington and of John Smith and Pocahontas in the Rotunda. Luigi Persico executed the figures of War and Peace, the figures of Columbus and an Indian, and the figures on the east pediment. Enrico Causici's bas-relief of Daniel Boone in combat with a savage struck terror to the hearts of a visiting band of Indians paying their first respects to civilization.

With the outbreak of the War of 1812 appropriations for the unfinished Capitol ceased, but following peace with England in 1815 Latrobe again resumed work. He found the Capitol nearly ruined, its limestone exterior blackened and crazed, and the interior largely destroyed by the vandalism of incendiaries. From the new plans drawn at this time, the existing north and south wings were restored, and the east and west facades of the central part of the Capitol, still unbuilt, were reversed.

Latrobe was busy with other commissions while employed as the Federal architect and found it more convenient to reside in Philadelphia or Delaware than in Washington. His frequent absences had long been the cause of delays and mistakes in construction and finally led to his resignation. Latrobe next turned his attention to the Cathedral in Baltimore, and then, removing with his family to New Orleans, he undertook the completion of the city water system, started by his son and left unfinished at his death. In 1820 while engaged on that project Latrobe senior contracted yellow fever and died.

President Monroe found a worthy successor to Latrobe in Charles Bulfinch, American-born gentleman-architect, whose well-earned fame in New England rested on numerous state capitol, churches, and important houses in the Roman style. A chance visit to Washington and a meeting with the President led to Bulfinch's appointment. He undertook the ungrateful task of executing the designs of other men and succeeded in stamping his own taste upon them by his persistent tact and sure judgment. Bulfinch supervised the erection of the central portion of the Capitol, linking the north and south wings together. He retained Latrobe's revised plan wherein the main approach no longer occupied the west façade, overlooking the White House and the Potomac. He further modified the west entrance by adding a basement to provide committee rooms.

Upon the insistence of the Cabinet and against Bulfinch's urgent advice, the height of the central dome was considerably increased; the exterior of this crowning feature was built of wood and sheathed with copper. Another problem the architect faced was the immense storage space required for firewood, some four hundred cords being used each year to feed the hungry maws of the Capitol's many fireplaces.

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Our water-color drawing of the Capitol (ill. p. 171) is signed by Charles Burton, who for more than a decade, beginning in 1820, was actively engaged in recording the American scene. His work was done chiefly in small scale and nearly all of it was of New York. A series of his miniature views for a memorial volume were presented to Lafayette in 1824, the year in which our drawing was done; from then until 1831 engravings from his work appeared regularly in the New York Mirror, and about the same time a notable set of twenty sepia views of New York and Philadelphia was published. Some of his subjects appeared on blue and white Staffordshire tableware. In 1832 Burton exhibited his drawing of Wall Street at the National Academy of Design.

We know Burton’s interest went beyond an academic study of architecture. He carefully observed the life around him and recorded it with human insight. The season depicted in our water color shows in the fresh green of early summer; along poplar-shaded paths ladies stroll sedately in slender Empire costumes, sometimes together or accompanied by their tall-hatted escorts. Down the avenue a stylish little canary-colored coach turns into the circular drive, with a lackey in bright blue livery balancing lightly on the rear straps. From the opposite direction comes a covered wagon, that useful American vehicle of all work, guided by the driver trudging beside it.

The Capitol, as basically planned, was declared finished in 1824, and the work of landscaping the grounds, which may be seen under way in Burton’s water color, occupied Charles Bulfinch until his tenure of office expired in 1829.

No changes in the building occurred until the need for expansion became urgent; between 1851 and 1865 under the aegis of Thomas Ustick Walters the Capitol assumed its present aspect with its far-spreading wings and mighty dome. There is an element of the extraordinary about this great classic building which first took form in a virtual wilderness and reached its ultimate development during the crucial years of the Civil War.

The drawings reproduced on pages 172 and 173 are from History of the United States Capitol (LVI Congress, 1st Session, Senate Document Number 60) (Washington, 1900), by Glenn Brown.