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Illusions of Grandeurs: Washingtonian Architecture as Seen by White and Black People of the Early Nineteenth Century

Abstract

In the early nineteenth century, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson built a classically inspired capital designed to legitimize American republican ideals. White interpretations of the architecture gradually aligned more with the founders' intentions, especially following its reconstruction after the 1814 conflagration. Enslaved and free black observers recognized their exclusion from the message of freedom and equality. Rather than finding their identity through federal buildings, they established their communities within churches, houses, and businesses owned by black people. The varied reactions to Washington's and Jefferson's designs demonstrated how the aesthetic idealization of republicanism revealed incongruities in the new capital.

Keywords

architecture, Washington D.C., African Americans, Capitol, White House

Disciplines

American Art and Architecture | History | United States History

Comments

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Illusions of Grandeurs

Washingtonian Architecture as Seen by White
and Black People of the Early Nineteenth
Century

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HIST 343
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As America moved into the nineteenth century, the founding fathers attempted to solidify a national identity by establishing a permanent capital. With Washington D.C. as the chosen location, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson favored a classical design as a means of combining the legitimacy of a European past with the novelty of American simplicity. They believed the city's buildings, namely the Capitol and President's House, would become visualizations of American ideals and the nation's commitment to freedom. However, an assessment of white and black viewers' perceptions of the city, especially at the turn of the century and as the city was rebuilt after the War of 1812, reveals a disjunction between the planners' intentions and the city's realities. Most early white observers thought the buildings clashed with the wilderness of the surrounding area.¹

After the British burned the federal buildings in 1814, the reconstructed and improved buildings came to symbolize American resilience, making the city more impressive to foreigners. The costs, however, kept the city from exemplifying republican simplicity. Black Washingtonians, both enslaved and free, perceived the Capitol and President's House differently from white interpretations. While slave built these structures and lived in hidden pens, free blacks recognized that the promises of freedom, equality, and safety did not apply to non-white residents. Instead, they turned to their own structures to develop their communities. Thus, an analysis of early nineteenth century perceptions of the capital's buildings demonstrates how viewers, especially black residents, often did not perceive the architectural design as Washington and Jefferson had intended. Instead, the idealized message of an equal and simple metropolis clashed with the realities of the young city.²

¹ Jean H Baker, "Capital Projects," in *Building America: The Life of Benjamin Henry Latrobe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 85, doi: 10.1093/oso/9780190696450.003.0004.

² Chris Myers Asch and George Derek Musgrove, *Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation's Capital* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469635873_asch.

Washington City's location was separated from the states so that Congress would not be influenced by regional bias.³ Consequently, the city was removed from the architectural antecedents of America's older cities giving its planners the freedom to assert any style they chose. They rooted their design in the American ideals they hoped to exemplify. First, the planners sought to legitimize the country visually so it could be taken seriously on the global stage. Many of the designers sought to do this by adopting European styles, particularly, French and Irish. Thomas Jefferson, for example, liked the low height of Parisian houses and wide streets.⁴ The planners first employed Peter Charles L'Enfant, a Frenchman.⁵ L'Enfant intended to mimic the grandeur of Louis XIV's architect, Le Notre, and his great accomplishment, Versailles, to elevate Washington D.C.⁶ George Washington recruited James Hoban to design and build the President's House which he also rebuilt after it was burned in 1814. Hoban studied architecture at the Royal Dublin Society and established his name when helping design the Charleston Court House in 1792. Washington liked Hoban's simpler Irish style in contrast to L'Enfant's French extravagance. Hoban took elements from the Leinster House in Dublin and James Gibbs's "Gentleman's Residence" which utilized popular classical designs.⁷ Ultimately, the designers wanted the buildings to be "striking and pleasing" with the hopes of outshining European cities.⁸

However, the planners also hoped to make the city uniquely American by providing visual coherence to unify the nation. Lacking historic state buildings, Washington and Jefferson turned to the ancient Greeks and Romans for inspiration. The classical style was

³ Constance McLaughlin Green, "The Founding of the National Capital" in *Washington: A History of the Capital, 1800-1950*, 3-22 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962), 9-11, doi:10.2307/j.ctt1mf6xv4.4.

⁴ "Thomas Jefferson Expresses His Ideas about the Capital City," Primary Sources: The Federal City, Our White House, accessed April 20, 2020, <http://www.ourwhitehouse.org/primaryfedcity.html>.

⁵ George Cochrane Hazelton, *The National Capitol: Its Architecture, Art, and History* (New York: J. F. Taylor & Company, 1902), 8, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=loc.ark:/13960/t12n5xs8g&view=1up&seq=7>.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

⁷ Niall Kelly, "The Man Who Built the White House—Twice," *American History* 35, no. 5 (December 1, 2000): 48-51, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/224074203/>.

⁸ "Commissioners to Washington, March 11, 1793," in Hazelton, *The National Capitol*, 265; Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City*, 25.

ideal for the capital because it accorded with Washington's and Jefferson's ideal republican capital that prioritized efficiency and simplicity. Jefferson envisioned a humble "federal town."⁹ George Washington embraced a similar vision but also recognized the need to impress. He explained to the Commissioners of Public Buildings that he held "grandeur, simplicity and convenience" as the core tenets his design to balance of European extravagance with American practicality.¹⁰ The adoption of classic Greek and Roman architecture emulated timeless "Republican simplicity" and served to educate Americans in this superior style of art.¹¹

Pierre L'Enfant was first hired to map the city and made concerted efforts to style Washington in a classical style. Washington and Jefferson held a competition to find an architect for Capitol Hill, named after Capitoline Hill in Rome. Dr. William Thornton, an Englishman, won with a distinctly classical design complete with Corinthian columns emulating Athenian style. When Thornton proved unable to build his designs for the Capitol due to his inexperience, Jefferson chose Benjamin Henry Latrobe, an Englishman, to replace Thornton in 1804. He went further with Roman and Greek designs although Jefferson tried to restrain his extravagance to fit the American model of simplicity. The two men outlined what they wanted the Capitol to mean to its citizens. The building needed to mimic Greek political meeting places and the Roman Pantheon to represent a place for the "new secular religion of liberty."¹² Making references to the Roman Empire and styling the capital after Rome helped elevate the prestige of the city. Additionally, Latrobe and Jefferson believed that the use of stone would "establish the permanence of the republic" while classical design would suggest

⁹ Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City*, 20.

¹⁰ He repeated this phrase with slight variation elsewhere saying, "grandeur, simplicity, and beauty." "George Washington to Commissioners, January 31 and March 3, 1793," in Hazelton, *The National Capitol*, 264.

¹¹ Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City*, 28.

¹² Baker, "Capital Projects," 85.

an ancient tradition.¹³ Hoban's design for the President's House also utilized classical designs with a two story colonnade and whitewashed sandstone.¹⁴

Despite the planners' intentions, the initial perceptions of the city were mixed at best. White residents and visitors noticed the disjunction between the architects' neoclassical ambitions and the reality of the city. As the eighteenth century transitioned into the nineteenth, Washington D.C. was half wild and half built.¹⁵ An English visitor, Francis Bailey, visited the city in 1796 describing half of it "*in wood*."¹⁶ The President's House and the Capitol were the exceptions indicating that Washington City was "the spot intended for the metropolis of the United States" but not yet deserving the title of metropolis.¹⁷ When Abigail Adams moved into the unfinished President's House with her husband in 1800, she struggled to call D.C. a city saying it was "only so in name."¹⁸ Not only did the neoclassical buildings stand out in from its landscape, they also clashed with the living conditions of the majority of white people living in the city. Nearly 75% of white men were laborers and many could not even afford brick houses, living in wooden frame instead often worth less than \$100.¹⁹ Consequently, the early city did not immediately fulfill the planners' desire to awe visitors and inhabitants.

In August of 1814, crisis hit the capital. Finding Washington City insufficiently protected, British forces invaded, plundered the public buildings, and set fire to the Capitol and President's House.²⁰ A thunderstorm kept the buildings from burning to the ground but

¹³ Baker, "Capital Projects," 103.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 73, 75-76, 81, 83-85, 103; Hazelton, *The National Capitol*, 8, 17; Kelly, "The Man Who Built the White House—Twice," 49.

¹⁵ Green, "The Founding of the National Capital," 4.

¹⁶ Francis Bailey's italics. "An English Visitor in 1796 Describes His Impressions of Washington City," Primary Sources: The Federal City, Our White House, accessed April 20, 2020, <http://www.ourwhitehouse.org/primaryfedcity.html>.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Quoted in Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City*, 25-26.

¹⁹ Green, "The Founding of the National Capital," 38.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 60-61.

the structures' charred shells haunted the city and the American conscience.²¹ The public's response demonstrated how important the buildings had become to some citizens. One Virginian wrote, "The appearance of our public buildings is enough to make one cut his throat, if that were a remedy."²² Worried over the safety of the location, Congress briefly considered a bill to remove the seat of government from D.C. to Philadelphia.²³ Ultimately, the political and symbolic importance of D.C. remained strong and the Senate passed a bill in 1815 to allocate funds to begin rebuilding.²⁴ With Latrobe and Hoban in charge, they chose to rebuild the Capitol and President's House in the same classical style.²⁵

The second building aroused positive excitement for the city. An article in *The National Intelligencer* passionately reported on the rebuilding effort. Hoping to recover pride for the American people, the author explained that the buildings were being skillfully and quickly recovered superior "to their former splendor, with increased strength, durability and convenience."²⁶ The author spoke of rebuilding the city as though it were a representation of the American spirit needing to be recovered after the War of 1812. The buildings stood to represent American endurance in the face of foreign enemies. It was important to explain that "the injury done to the public edifices has been found not to be so great as had at first been apprehended" meaning that America had not been so injured that its government had to cease functioning.²⁷ Rather, as the Capitol was being rebuilt stronger than before, so will the people, giving the buildings of the capital a greater meaning for Washingtonians as it was rebuilt.²⁸

²¹ Kelly, "The Man Who Built the White House—Twice," 53.

²² Quoted in Green, "The Founding of the National Capital," 65.

²³ "Hazelton, *The National Capitol*, 39-41; Kelly, "The Man Who Built the White House—Twice," 53.

²⁴ Green, "The Founding of the National Capital," 65.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 67; Kelly, "The Man Who Built the White House—Twice," 53.

²⁶ "The Public Buildings," *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington D.C.), May 24, 1815, *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

The opinion of foreigner visitors also changed. An Englishman, Henry Bradshaw Fearon, visited the city as the “President’s palace” and Capitol were being rebuilt in 1817.²⁹ He acknowledged that foreigners often “ridicule the federal city,” especially prior to the fire. He offered his own criticism, disparaging “Mr. Latrobe” for his lack of skill regarding the inelegant Capitol’s interior.³⁰ However, Fearon readily complimented the buildings when he thought they deserved it. Its exterior with its marble pillars, he judged, would “produce a really grand effect.”³¹ Ultimately, he believed that the fire had subverted the “childish folly” of the city planners who wanted marble steps for all the residential houses and a minimum of three stories for each structure.³² The fire had tempered their unreasonable ambitions and now the city was rising “with increased splendor...like the phoenix from the flames.”³³ Thus, the fire served to bring attention to the city and allow for it to be reconsidered, not as a city built in the woods, but a city baptized in fire fitting it more within the narrative desired by the city planners.³⁴

Some observers still could not appreciate the capital due to the economic burden it represented. Although the initial costs had been high, the need to rebuild after the fire stressed the city more. The fire had weakened the structures and even shattered stone requiring buildings like the Capitol to be dismantled completely and then rebuilt entirely.³⁵ The damaged stone needed to be replaced by expensive Virginian and Italian marble.³⁶ Olaves Peter Gram, a teacher in Architectural Drawing, expressed great discontent with the cost of rebuilding the Capitol in a letter to a friend in 1817. He explained how the commissioners’ poor architectural skill and impractical directions were distracting and thus

²⁹ Henry Bradshaw Fearon, *Sketches of America* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1818), 286, <https://archive.org/details/sketchesamerica00goog/page/n296/mode/2up/search/president>.

³⁰ Fearon, *Sketches of America*, 286-287.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 287.

³² *Ibid.*, 289.

³³ *Ibid.*, 286-289.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, v, 286-289.

³⁵ Hazelton, *The National Capitol*, 41.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 41-46.

wasteful in time. He criticized Latrobe for wasting money by hiring poorly skilled workers, importing fragile Italian sculptures that often broke in transit, and wastefully using materials like applying expensive stones “where no stones need to be.”³⁷ Consequently, Washington D.C.’s second build did not align with Jefferson’s hope for a modest city.

The populace’s relationship with the capital’s federal architecture often ignored the experiences of black people within the city, especially slaves. By 1800, 3,200 of the 14,093 people living in the capital were enslaved.³⁸ Their great numbers owed partly to the capital’s location in the south and proximity to numerous plantations. The city engaged in a highly lucrative slave trade. Franklin & Armfield, the largest slave-trading firm in the country, had their headquarters in D.C. and transported over a thousand slaves annually.³⁹

The construction of federal buildings solidified the capital’s dependency on enslaved labor and provided a markedly different perspective on the city’s federal buildings. To fund the construction project, the president and commissioners attempted to auction off lots within the city. When lots failed to sell, the city planners needed to find cheap alternatives for labor. They hoped that European immigrants would flock to the city and provide a sufficient working population. When that also failed to materialize, they decided to rent slaves from local masters for a limited time. These enslaved workers became instrumental to the construction of the Capitol and the President’s Mansion, making up about half of the 200 laborers. A cycle reinforcing the need for slavery resulted as the use of enslaved labor damaged free workers’ ability to bargain for higher wages, further limiting the availability of a potential labor supply. Thus, a great number of enslaved Washingtonians encountered the

³⁷ Olaves Peter Gram to a friend, November 29, 1817, Library of Congress, Washington D.C. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=loc.ark:/13960/t9183kn3g&view=1up&seq=7>.

³⁸ Green, "The Founding of the National Capital," 20.

³⁹ Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City*, 31, 47.

federal buildings, not as symbols of independence and equality, but as the creation of their forced labor.⁴⁰

Charles Ball represented some of the slaves hired out to Washington D.C., although he lived and worked in the naval yard not the construction sites. In comparison to his experiences on a tobacco plantation, he felt “very happy” in the city as he was occasionally paid and could spend his Sunday afternoons as he wished.⁴¹ He often spent that time walking across the city and expressed his excitement in seeing “the new and splendid buildings.”⁴² He did not contemplate their symbolism but focused more on the state of life of other blacks in the city. He would witness the “large numbers of people of my colour chained together in long trains, and driven off towards the south,” explaining that such displays of slavery were acceptable in front of the Capitol since the “Slave-trade was not regarded with so much indignation and disgust, as it is now [in 1837].”⁴³ Ball indicated that most white people did not consider the presence of slaves in the face of a symbol of freedom hypocritical while omitting his own feelings on the subject. Ultimately, Ball focused more on the plight of the slaves rather than the ironic symbolism of the buildings.

Although many whites accepted the public display of chained humans in the capital, others, mainly visitors, were appalled. Jesse Torrey visited Washington City while it was being rebuilt after its burning. Like Ball, he witnessed slaves being marched within sight of the ruined Capitol towards the Potomac River to be sold down south. He also saw the thousands of “African *brethren*” working to rebuild the Capitol and did not understand how the Capitol could be idolized as “the temple of freedom” as “*slaves* are employed in

⁴⁰ Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City*, 18, 30, 33.

⁴¹ Charles Ball, *A Narrative of the Adventures of Charles Ball, a Black Man, Who Lived Forty Years in Maryland, South Carolina and Georgia, as a Slave Under Various Masters, and was One Year in the Navy with Commodore Barney, During the Late War* (New York: Brick Church Chapel, 1837), 27, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/ballslavery/ball.html>.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 27, 60.

rebuilding this sanctuary of *liberty*.”⁴⁴ Torrey saw the federal buildings as symbols of freedom as the architects had intended. His awareness of the black plight, which was shared by other abolitionists, tainted his perception of the city, not as something humble pretending to be cosmopolitan but as an enslaved city pretending to be free.

The presence of slaves was not always public. Other slaves were kept isolated from visitors, in turn isolating themselves from the federal architecture that was intended to be the focal point of the city. Franklin & Armfield held enslaved people in pens within unassuming residential buildings or in courtyards behind high walls.⁴⁵ Some hotels outfitted slave holding pens within their basements for when plantation owners visited the city.⁴⁶ Eight of the first twelve presidents brought their slaves with them to the capital, some even converting the basement of the President’s House into slaves’ quarters.⁴⁷ Such treatment was the antithesis of its founders’ intent.

Although 85% of the black population in the city was enslaved in 1800, Washington DC also witnessed the growth of its free black community.⁴⁸ By 1810, free blacks rose to 30% of the black population and the number continued growing in the following decades.⁴⁹ Some ran successful businesses and owned property while any of them could watch congressional proceedings.⁵⁰ Alethia ‘Lethe’ Browning Tanner represented a group of slaves who earned their freedom and sought to establish themselves among the black elite in D.C. As a slave, she sold produce at Washington Market located outside the President’s House

⁴⁴ Jesse Torrey, *A portraiture of domestic slavery, in the United States: with reflections on the practicability of restoring the moral rights of the slave, without impairing the legal privileges of the possessor: and a project of colonial asylum for free persons of colour: including memoirs of facts on the interior traffic in slaves, and on kidnapping*, Philadelphia, 1817, <http://ezpro.cc.gettysburg.edu:2627/sas/start.do?prodId=SASm>, 33-34.

⁴⁵ Solomon Northup described the location of his holding had “only the appearance of a quiet private residence.” Solomon Northup, *12 Years a Slave*, New York: Graymalkin Media, 2014, 20; Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City*, 47.

⁴⁶ Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City*, 70 .

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

until she bought her freedom in 1810.⁵¹ Tanner asserted her freedom most clearly by purchasing a frame house two blocks from the President's House which she owned until her death.⁵² For former slaves, freedom was not represented in the federal buildings but in the ability to own property.

Despite some black people's ability to gain respect as business and property owners, their relationship with the freedom and grandeur touted by the design of the Federal buildings was complicated. Racial tensions within the city born from white people's fear of black success led to restrictions on the activities of black residents. The first black codes passed in 1808 and then revised in 1812. They imposed a curfew on black residence and required all blacks to carry proof of freedom. Lacking the rights of white male citizens, free blacks lacked legal protection and potentially faced unjust enslavement.⁵³

Solomon Northup experienced the fragility of black freedom in D.C. firsthand. Northup, a black musician from upstate New York, traveled with a circus whose final stop was Washington City. in 1841. After he visited the Capitol, walked its ground, and took note of the President's House, his employers drugged and sold him to William H. Williams's slave pen on Seventh Street and B Street NW, today known as Independence Avenue.⁵⁴ Northup made no note of the architecture of the city's public buildings, instead providing details of his twelve square foot pen, its heavy plank floor, and barred and shuttered window. He described the thirty-foot enclosed yard with twelve-foot brick walls, resembling "a farmer's barnyard... save it was so constructed that the outside world could never see the human cattle that were herded there."⁵⁵ The only significance he held to the public buildings was that of deep irony,

⁵¹ John G. Sharp, "Alethia 'Lethe' Browning Tanner," Biographies, Washington D.C. Genealogy Trails, accessed April 20, 2020, <http://genealogytrails.com/washdc/biographies/bio6.html>.

⁵² Last Will & Testament of Alethia Browning Tanner, May 15, 1847, box 33, District of Columbia Orphan's Court, Washington D.C., <http://genealogytrails.com/washdc/biographies/bio6.html>; Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City*, 44.

⁵³ Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City*, 45, 62, 69.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 70

⁵⁵ Northup, *12 Years a Slave*, 20.

“Strange as it may seem, within plain sight of this same house, was the Capitol... A slave pen within the very shadow of the Capitol!” Northup understood the Capitol as white people did, seeing it as a symbol of freedom for the republic. However, the architecture that really stood out to him was that of buildings incongruous to the city’s intended artistic narrative. Black people, especially free blacks, not only recognized the intended symbolism of the Capitol and President’s House, but interpreted the counterpoint of such symbolism in a city dependent on slavery.⁵⁶

Due to the dissonance between the meaning of the Federal buildings to the white and black populations, black Washingtonians often turned to other structures to unify their communities. Freedwoman, Alethia Browning Tanner, initially worshipped with the mixed congregation of Ebenezer Methodist church on Capitol Hill. When the church started segregating its black participants, Tanner and other parishioners founded their own church, Israel Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. She was not alone as other churches, like The Little Ark in Georgetown and Asbury African Methodist Episcopal church were also founded specifically for black use.⁵⁷ Tanner also helped establish a school for black children called “the Bell school” in 1807 becoming the first black inclusive school in D.C.⁵⁸

Planners of early DC sought to reinforce ideals of patriotism and republicanism in a single seat of government enmeshed in classical architecture. However, the realities of those living in the city demonstrated how architecture, rather than creating a symbol that masked the insecurities of the young nation, highlighted them. The whitewashed buildings did more to exaggerate the plainness of the rest of the city and highlight the expense the infant government could barely afford. The buildings’ destruction by the British in 1814 proved to

⁵⁶ Northup, *12 Years a Slave*, 15, 18-20.

⁵⁷ Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City*, 60.

⁵⁸ Sharp, “Alethia ‘Lethe’ Browning Tanner”; Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City*, 44.

be more helpful in instilling the meaning of the buildings in the minds of white Americans.

Rebuilding and strengthening the city also revived people's patriotism.

Black residents engaged with these buildings differently. Due to racial divisions born from the presence of slaves, black people found the rights and liberties represented in the Capitol incomplete in their own lives. Enslaved people saw the capital's buildings as work zones and remembered more clearly the insides of pens. Free blacks established their own community spaces in search of the freedom barred in white society. Although white and black Washingtonians recognized a dissonance between the ideal and reality presented through the capital's architecture, whites found that the city fulfilled the founding fathers' intentions over time while black Americans found the architectural message increasingly alienating.

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