

"Art is a Hardy Plant": Benjamin Henry Latrobe and the Cultivation of a Transitional Aesthetics

by

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Abstract

This thesis suggests that architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe's engagement with American scientific discourses gave rise to a transitional aesthetics that radically refigured his European-derived notions of art and architecture. Looking at a range of works by Latrobe—a selection of theoretical writings, the *Essay on Landscape* (a watercolor instruction manual, 1798-1799), and the Philadelphia Waterworks (1798-1801)—I analyze his magpie borrowings of climate, geology, and natural history. These borrowings were sometimes awkward and were by no means uniformly successful; however, Latrobe's persistence in the face of failure underscores the importance he accorded to establishing, by any means possible, a mutual correspondence between nature, society, and art.

Sometimes called "the father of American architecture," the British-born Latrobe (1764-1820) has generally been recognized for his large, nineteenth-century projects. Focusing on his financial and technical struggles around works like the US Capitol and the Baltimore Exchange, the prevailing historical narrative has emphasized the disjunct between the immigrant Latrobe's professional ambitions and the capabilities of the young American nation. In this thesis, I argue that an emphasis on Latrobe's embattled practice tells us little about the conceptual field that drove his work. More importantly, it ignores the ways in which a larger discursive and physical context transformed the architect's own understanding of his work and its function in a new democratic society. Recognizing, and valuing, the presence of nature in Latrobe's writings offers us a new way of understanding the architect's practice as one attuned to the prevailing physical and social concerns of the period.

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Introduction

In September of 1799, the British-born architect, Benjamin Henry Latrobe (1764-1820), had been living in Virginia for two and a half years. Though he had spent much of this time making new friends and exploring the country, he had produced enough architectural designs to anticipate a folio of his *Designs of Buildings Erected or Proposed to Be Built in Virginia*. The folio was never published, and was in fact never fully compiled, but an elaborately illustrated title page, now housed in the Library of Congress, speaks to Latrobe's early ambitions for publication.

The title page has a bipartite organization; in the upper part of the page, the title is set out in carefully printed letters, followed by Latrobe's full name and the dates of his residence in Virginia (Figure 0.1).¹ Though the text is large, the generous spacing of its layout on the blank page reduces its visual impact, and the viewer's eye is almost inexorably drawn downward to a vivid and detailed trompe-l'œil vignette (Figure 0.2).² Using the motif of a torn fragment of paper carelessly pasted on the title page, Latrobe artfully uses its curling edges to reveal the names of his first two American residences: "Richmond, 1798" and "Philadelphia, September 1799." Though rendered with care, the "torn edge" of the fragment does not quite do its job with due violence; its occasionally awkward ac-

-
1. The title page indicates the period as spanning "from 1795-1799," but the last entry of Latrobe's trans-Atlantic diaries is dated March 9, 1796 and his first Virginia diary, which describes his early impressions of Norfolk, is dated later that month (March 21). Benjamin Henry Latrobe, and Edward Carlos Carter, *The Virginia Journals of Benjamin Henry Latrobe, 1795-1798* (New Haven: Published for the Maryland Historical Society by Yale University Press, 1977).
 2. Wendy Bellion provides a brief description of this vignette in her dissertation, "Likeness and Deception in Early American Art" (Northwestern University, 2001), 171. She further discusses the early American interest in trompe-l'œil and other visual play in *Citizen-Spectator*, where she published this frontispiece and another of Latrobe's trompe-l'œil drawings. Julia Sienkewicz discusses Latrobe's use of trompe-l'œil in the context of his other landscape drawings. Bellion, "The Politics of Discernment," in *Citizen Spectator: Art, Illusion, and Visual Perception in Early National America* (Williamsburg, VA: University of North Carolina Press, Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 2011), 63-112; Julia Sienkewicz, "Citizenship By Design" (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2009), 116-123 and 161-181.

commodation of pictorial elements like the winged allegory's dress hem and an otherwise unremarkable plant in the foreground suggests that the artist was more attached to his drawing than he would have us believe.



Figure 0.1: BHL, *Designs of Buildings Erected or Proposed to be Built in Virginia*, 1798. Watercolor, ink, and wash on paper. Library of Congress.



Figure 0.2: BHL, Detail of *Designs of Buildings Erected or Proposed to be Built in Virginia*, 1798.

With its large, mossy rocks, prominently hovering female, and eleven buildings (nine of which are airborne), the vignette is compellingly strange. Latrobe provided some explanatory comments on the verso of the page:

During my residence in Virginia from 1795 to 1799, the applications to me for designs were very numerous, & my fancy was kept employed in building castles in the air, the plans of which are contained in this Volume. The only two buildings which were expected from the drawings, were Captn. Pennocks house at Norfolk, and Colonel Harvie's at Richmond. (p. 5 & [blank]). The former stands on terra firma in the background to the left, the latter on the hill in the middle ground. The Wings of Col. Harvie's house were never built, & are thus following the other buildings into the sky. Higher up among the Clouds, are the buildings which may easily be known by looking over the following drawings. To the right hovers the figure of the Archi-

tect's imagination, such as she is. With the Bank of Pennsylvania in her hand, she is leaving the Rocks of Richmond & taking her flight to Philadelphia.³

Bank of Pennsylvania or not, the Rocks of Richmond are the the most prominent aspect of the vignette. The vivid, detailed rendering of the rocks in the foreground is much more visually enticing than the small and delicately sketched “castles in the air.” Altogether, the attention to landscape in the drawing hints that architectural designs were not the only subject which employed Latrobe's fancy during his first years in America, and the architect's journals, filled with detailed, even poetic, descriptions of Virginia's vegetation, waterways, and geological composition, confirm this intuition.

An examination of Latrobe's fascination with nature in all its forms during his early days in America might at first seem like a perverse effort: the examination of a minor aspect of a minor period of a famous but troubled architectural career. Latrobe is most well-known for the large projects he executed after leaving Virginia in 1798—the Bank of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia (1801), the Philadelphia Waterworks (1801), the Baltimore Cathedral (1821), and above all, his contributions to the US Capitol and the President's House (1817). The prevailing historical narrative has focused on Latrobe's status as a foreigner, an immigrant born, educated, and trained in Europe, whose professional ambitions exceeded the technical and financial capabilities of the young country.⁴ In this thesis, I suggest that an emphasis on Latrobe's materialized projects tells us little about the conceptual field that drove

3. Transcribed from verso of title page. Benjamin Henry Latrobe Archive, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington DC (call no: ADE - UNIT 2886, no. 2).

4. For an example of this perspective, please see Edward C. Carter II, "The Engineer as Agent of Technological Transfer: The American Career of Benjamin Henry Latrobe," in *Benjamin Henry Latrobe & Moncure Robinson: The Engineer as Agent of Technological Transfer*, ed. Barbara E. Benson ([Greenville, DE]: Eleutherian Mills Historical Library, 1975), 11-32.

his practice. Recognizing, and valuing, the presence of nature in Latrobe's writings offers us a new way of understanding the architect's practice as one attuned to the prevailing physical and social concerns of the period.

The archive of Latrobe's American life is extensive. It contains, at last count, 21 personal journals (Nov. 1795-Aug. 1820), 2 field books from Latrobe's survey of the Susquehenna River, 19 bound letterbooks comprising approximately 5,700 letters, 1360 unbound manuscripts (including 3 early literary efforts, but also additional correspondence, accounts, essays, research articles, official reports, legal documents, newspaper articles and poetry), 14 sketchbooks containing over 350 pencil, pen, and watercolor sketches, and 500 unbound architectural and engineering drawings.⁵ These were collected and collated during a project, headed by Edward C. Carter II in the 1970s, which definitively canonized Latrobe. The comprehensive microfiche collection of the original documents was supplemented by a six-volume publication, *The Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe* (1977-1995), which features several introductory essays on different aspects of Latrobe's work. Monographs on Latrobe's projects include Mark Reinberger's astute dissertation on the Baltimore Exchange (1988), Lee S. Formwalt's dissertation on the architect-engineer's "Development of Internal Improvements in the New Republic (1796-1820)" (1977), Abe Wollock's dissertation on the architect's "Activities in the American Theater" (1962), and Paul F. Norton's published dissertation on Latrobe's contribution to the US Capitol (1952). Recently, architecture historians have begun to look more broadly at aspects of Latrobe's work: his contributions to the professionalization of architecture in America (Mary Woods, 1999), his domestic architecture (Michael Fazio and Patrick Snadon, 2006), and his land-

5. Edward C. Carter II, Editor-in-Chief. *The Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe* [microform] (Clifton, NJ: Published for the Maryland Historical Society by James T. White & Co., 1976), 17-19.

scape sketches (Julia Sienkewicz, 2009).⁶ There are also at least three essays published on the architect's geological and natural history interests, the most compelling of which is Alexander Nemerov's essay on a large rattlesnake drawing recently attributed to Latrobe.⁷

These studies reconstruct the histories of some of Latrobe's most important works; some also reflect on Latrobe's complicated and often difficult position as a European-educated professional in a country which was not quite ready, socially or economically, to receive his expertise. Woods, for example, argues that the young country simply lacked the financial capital to realize Latrobe's projects,⁸ and Fazio and Snadon outline the American gentry's resistance to Latrobe's innovative residential designs. However, with the exception of Nemerov's article, these studies often fail to consider the broader cultural contexts in which Latrobe worked. In focusing on art and architecture, even broadly conceived, they tend to reproduce a narrative of failed adaptation.

-
6. There is some overlap in the material covered by this thesis and Sienkewicz's chapter, most notably our mutual coverage of Latrobe's *Essay on Landscape*. While Sienkewicz and I agree that the *Essay* documents Latrobe's re-thinking of the English Picturesque tradition, I differ from her in taking seriously Latrobe's identification of the work as an essay, rather than a treatise, and consequently I emphasize its polyvalent interests and observations. Sienkewicz's characterization of the *Essay* as a treatise is part of her larger argument that Latrobe ultimately develops a vision of a "binding rational fabric" of art, philosophy, and science that will support the young nation. In contrast, I argue that Latrobe's public and private writings repeatedly reveal a discomfort with rationality and its promises, and a more pluralistic vision of nature that complicates its relation to human social order. Julia Sienkewicz, "Citizenship By Design.", 111-183, esp. 144.
 7. Nemerov's article, "The Rattlesnake: Benjamin Henry Latrobe and the Place of Art in America," draws on broader cultural practices of natural history and drawing to argue that beauty, in Latrobe's and other's minds was already, in early nineteenth-century America, a diminished and co-opted value. I find Nemerov's argument persuasive and insightful, but I would like to point out that his examples are primarily visual works; even Latrobe's architectural works are analyzed through their pictorial representations (whether by Latrobe or others). Nemerov accordingly presents Latrobe's understanding of beauty as a primarily visual one. In consideration of Latrobe's other identities—especially engineer, natural historian, and geologist—I submit that it is possible that Latrobe also had a durational understanding of beauty—that is, as something apprehended or transmitted through space, movement, and time. a beauty premised on behavior or process. Alexander Nemerov, "The Rattlesnake: Benjamin Henry Latrobe and the Place of Art in America," in *Knowing Nature: Art and Science in Philadelphia, 1740-1840*, ed. Amy R. W. Meyers, and Lisa L. Ford (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 226-253.
 8. Mary N. Woods, *From Craft to Profession: The Practice of Architecture in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 25.

In fact it is startling, considering the abundance of writing we have by Latrobe, that so little attention has been paid to Latrobe's own thoughts about his work, his grasp of the society to which he was introduced in his early thirties, and the way in which he sought to re-shape his ideas about art, architecture, science, and society in response to its demands and desires. In other words, we have tended to look at how Latrobe fits into our history of architecture, but very much less so at how Latrobe attempted to fit himself into history—and how that attempt was executed through a borrowing of discourses and practices that range beyond those encompassed by even an expanded definition of architecture.

From his first days in Virginia, Latrobe's journals reveal his intense interest in every aspect of his new country. He wrote about local court sessions, sleepless nights at rowdy inns, the strange (but apparently fascinating) behavior of wasps and ants, and new varieties of natural beauty encountered in his travels through Virginia. He described firsthand experiences, recounted stories told to him by others, and recorded dialogues in which he presented pressing issues—like the degree of importance that ought to be accorded to "the will of the people."⁹

9. Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 445.

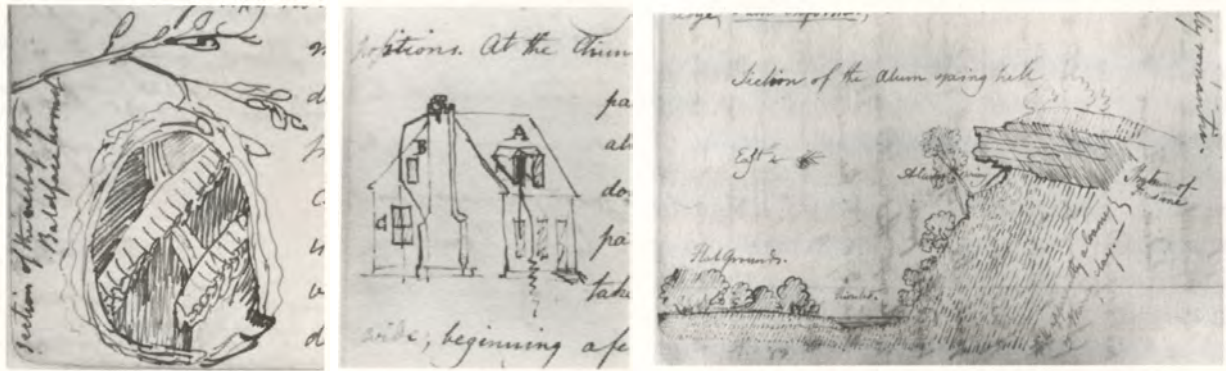


Figure 0.3: BHL, selected sketches from Virginia Journals (1796-1798)—a hornet's nest, house as lightning rod, alum spring. Ink on paper. Maryland Historical Society.

These writings tell us a great deal about the different ways in which Latrobe sought to integrate himself, and his work, into the post-Revolutionary concerns of American society. They remind us that an architect's success with a client is not simply a matter of pragmatic or functional fit, but one of conceptual fit—even if that conceptual fit is imperfectly post-rationalized. Far from being one of the *philosophes* or Enlightenment scholars primarily concerned with the perfect resolution of theoretical problems, Latrobe's improvised uses of climate, geology, and natural history were meant to serve a given need. Consequently a complete intellectual history is not the aim of this thesis. A practitioner who wanted first and foremost to build (and to be adequately compensated for his buildings), Latrobe did not aim to develop a cohesive architectural theory. Rather, he *essayed*, or made attempts at theorizing, by borrowing magpie-like from various scientific, literary, and religious discourses. At one point, for example, he praised Philadelphia's Quaker origins, whose "purity of taste" gave birth to his beloved Bank of Pennsylvania (1801).¹⁰ Another time, attempting to explain the varied fossils of the Eastern continent, Latrobe recalled a theory that located the Moon's origins

10. Latrobe et al., *Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, 3:81.

in the land mass of the region now occupied by the Pacific ocean.¹¹ Sometimes Latrobe tested these propositions out privately, in journal entries and unpublished little stories. Sometimes he did so more formally, in letters to clients, papers to intellectual societies, reports to committees, and even once in a public oration.

This thesis focuses on three themes that appear and reappear in Latrobe's writings: climate, natural history, and geology. Assisted by his liberal education and careful powers of observation, Latrobe offered small but significant contributions to both the fields of geology and natural history.¹² In *Transactions*, the journal of the American Philosophical Society, he published four articles: "Memoir on the Sand-hills of Cape Henry in Virginia" (1799), "A Drawing and Description of the Clupea Tyrannus and Oniscus Prægustator" (1802), "On two species of Sphex Inhabiting Virginia and Pennsylvania..." (1809), and "An Account of the Freestone Quarries on the Potomac and Rappahannoc Rivers" (1809). He was not, however, content to accept these pursuits as independent of his professional calling. Recognizing the resonance of these particular pre-existing scientific discourses (climate, natural history, and geology) in the American context, Latrobe attempted to contextualize unfamiliar European architectural and fine art practices by drawing on vocabularies and concepts more familiar to his new countrymen. Latrobe's aim in borrowing from these scientific disciplines was not so much a means of validating his work, but rather a grafting of one discipline onto another

11. "6 February 1798," in Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 346.

12. The full titles and citations are as follows: Latrobe, "Memoir of the Sand Hills of Cape Henry in Virginia," *Transactions* 4 (1799): 439-43; "A Drawing and Description of the Clupea Tyrannus and Oniscus Prægustator," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 5 (1802): 77-81; "On Two Species of Sphex, Inhabiting Virginia and Pennsylvania, and Probably Extending Through the United States," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 6 (1809): 73-78; "An Account of the Freestone Quarries on the Potomac and Rappahannoc Rivers," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 6 (1809): 283-93.

in order to help make comprehensible the unfamiliar practices of art and architecture. Thus, the accuracy or integrity of Latrobe's scientific borrowings is less significant than the very fact of his borrowing them, and the underlying concerns which are rendered visible by reading across repeated acts of appropriation.

In this thesis I suggest that Latrobe's recourse to scientific vocabulary and concepts in his texts gave rise to what I call a transitional aesthetics. Transition is usually used to describe the movement of something from one state to another, but in this case I mean to put the emphasis on the intermediate state implied by the adjectival form of the word. Studying the American environs through the lens of climate, geology, and natural history discourses, Latrobe apprehended a Nature that existed prior to, and separate from, the nature that humans construct with their verbal descriptions and physical labor. At the same time, Latrobe's fascination with ambiguous "modes of life"—the Venus flytrap, for example, or the warm-blooded porpoise—inspired a vision of nature which was similarly suspended between an autonomous natural order and a human-determined one.¹³ He thus described the granite rocks of the James River, which were "the more beautifully chrystallized" because their straight edges so easily lent themselves to the mason's chisel. When manifest in Latrobe's architectural projects, this transitional aesthetics most often evinced a finely-balanced, even somewhat uncomfortable, co-existence of different kinds of order (country/city, French/English precedents, private/public space, etc.). Various applied to architectural proposals, disciplinary divisions between architecture and art, cultural development, and most broadly the very distinction between natural and

13. The grammatical transitional case, for example, is one which expresses motion toward another case. "transitional, adj. and n." OED Online. March 2012. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/204816?redirectedFrom=transitional> (accessed May 14, 2012).

human order, Latrobe's transitional aesthetics negotiated a tension between an appreciation, on one hand, of the distinctness of different orders, and, on the other, an appreciation of the sliding of orders into one another.

On his arrival in the New World, Latrobe entered a cultural context defined by an obsession with the environment, which was alternately understood as physical threat, passive material for exploitation, provider of wealth, and source of a uniquely American character. Given the extent to which the agriculturalists were dependent on the vicissitudes of sun, wind, and rain, it is not surprising that the environment also came to serve as a critical allegory of politics, economy, and even culture. As much a discursive entity as it was a physical one, the environment's heightened status made it a natural filter through which other kinds of knowledge could be rendered legible.

Literary scholar Myrna Jehlen has convincingly suggested that the political precariousness of an entirely man-made world led early Americans to emphasize the entelechaic order of nature and their role as facilitators: agricultural cultivation helped nature and humans fulfill, mutually, their inherent potential. She consequently locates the uniqueness of American subjectivity in its identification with its material setting.¹⁴ Perceiving themselves as lacking a shared history or even culture, many early Americans sought refuge in the notion of a common ground. Such ground was both literal, as when Jefferson initiated the gridding of the continent with his map of the Northwest Territo-

14. Myra Jehlen, *American Incarnation: The Individual, the Nation, and the Continent* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).

ry (1784), and allegorical, as when early American politicians used natural metaphors to express the fragility of the country's present and future existence.

However, as the latter example suggests, Americans' subjective identification with their physical context was not always a happy or assured one. While my thesis is indebted to Jehlen's argument, I show that Latrobe's enunciations, which resonate with those of other early American elite, exhibit a consciousness of, and consequently an anxiety over, the nature and means of cultivation. The very word "cultivate" implies conscious effort marshaled toward a specific and recognized aim, and, on multiple levels, an anxiety about social and political union was continually linked with an anxiety about the environment and its habitability.

In this thesis, I argue that Latrobe's recourse to scientific vocabulary and concepts in some of his architectural proposals emerged from a broader interest in nature and the naturalization of change, an interest charged by the tension between natural and human order in early America. On his arrival in the New World in 1796, Latrobe entered a particular discursive context, one in which nature was alternately understood as physical threat, passive material for exploitation, provider of wealth, and source of a uniquely American character. Framing Latrobe's interests in a broader discursive context helps us to understand his hybrid, fragmentary arguments as manifestations of a kind of knowledge that is distinct from both that of the academic/theoretician and that of the builder. In other words, Latrobe's transplantation involved not just the transplantation of "technical," "stylistic," or even "professional" questions across the Atlantic but a transforming engagement with a new set of ideas, some of which—like climate, geology, and natural history—lay far afield of architectural practice. In America, moreover, these ideas were strongly linked to questions of political and social culti-

vation. It is within this larger field of concerns that we must locate Latrobe's conceptual practice, his architectural ideas and conceptions.

The step off the *Eliza* in March of 1796 may have been Latrobe's first physical contact with America, but in England he had been raised on stories told by his Pennsylvanian-born mother. Later in his life, Latrobe would claim that his removal to Germany in 1776, at the age of twelve, was due in part to the outbreak of the American Revolution.¹⁵ Whether this is true or not—the Moravian school system in which he was educated commonly promoted an international education among its pupils—in Niesky the young Latrobe was encouraged in his artistic efforts by Baron Karl von Schachmann, a family friend and noted connoisseur of medals, coins, and paintings.¹⁶ Having decided on an architectural career around 1783,¹⁷ Latrobe was primed to take careful note of the architectural and natural sights on his extended return trip to England through Silesia, France, and Italy in the summer of 1784.

After a few years spent working first for the engineer John Smeaton and then the architect Samuel Pepys Cockerell, the young Latrobe established his own architectural practice in 1790. He succeeded in garnering commissions for two completely new country residences and a public canal proposal, but England's declaration of war upon France in February 1793 brought the country's

15. BHL (Benjamin Henry Latrobe) to Samuel Blydensburg, 1 September 1810, in Benjamin Henry Latrobe, et al., *The Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe* (New Haven: Published for the Maryland Historical Society by Yale University Press, 1984), 2:896.

16. Talbot Hamlin, *Benjamin Henry Latrobe*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), 15.

17. *Ibid.*

building industry to a near standstill. This external depression, combined with a personal depression triggered by the sudden death of his beloved first wife in November of the same year, proved too much for the young architect.

On November 25, 1795, Latrobe boarded the *Eliza*, an American ship bound for Norfolk, Virginia. His departure date may have been linked to his bankruptcy, which was recorded in *European Magazine* as dating from December 5 of that year. Whatever his reason for leaving, Latrobe's anticipation of a winter arrival led him to choose a ship bound for the warmer climes of the southern United States. As Latrobe later explained to his maternal uncle, Henry Antes, he hoped to spend a few months traveling through the country's "more southerly states" before making contact with the Antes, and settling near them on some Pennsylvanian property left to him by his mother. In the same letter to Antes Latrobe explained that "a great variety of public business, which was offered me, rendered it impossible to accomplish my desire of settling near you."¹⁸ Latrobe here exaggerated somewhat the number and status of his obligations, though his time in Virginia did involve a range of projects: surveys for various canal companies, small residential designs for friends and acquaintances, a renovation of the Richmond Theater, and the first State Penitentiary.

After nearly three years in Virginia Latrobe moved to Philadelphia. His first completed project there was the city's Waterworks (1801), with the Bank of Pennsylvania being completed soon

18. BHL to Henry Antes, 8 April 8 1798, in Latrobe et al., *Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, 1:82.

after. The success of this latter project—"si beau, et si simple!"¹⁹—established Latrobe's architectural career. In Philadelphia, too, Latrobe began to work with Thomas Jefferson on Jefferson's vision for a national naval dry dock, and the President's pleasure was such that in 1803 Latrobe was appointed US Surveyor of the Public Buildings. With success also came political and financial conflicts, the latter of which were only exacerbated by Latrobe's entrepreneurial efforts.

Some of Latrobe's problems as US Surveyor arose from personal conflicts as well as his inability to form accurate budgets. However, Latrobe was also saddled with a client (Congress) that did not understand the need for the kinds of materials and construction practices Latrobe recommended—and its attitude was generally representative of the feeling toward architecture in early America. From Philadelphia, Latrobe and his family moved between Washington DC, Pittsburgh, and Baltimore, each time hoping to uncover more generous and more understanding clients.

After declaring bankruptcy for the second time in 1817, Latrobe and his family set sail for New Orleans. Here he hoped to begin again, and, in a city racked by the ravages of yellow fever, he threw his efforts into a waterworks project reminiscent of the one which had brought him his first major acclaim in Philadelphia two decades prior. Before ten months had passed, Latrobe himself

19. This comment was recorded by Latrobe in his journal on August 6, 1806:

The highest encomium, and the most flattering I ever received, relative to the Bank of Pennsylvania was the following. Walking up Second Strt. I observed two French officers standing opposite the building and looking at it without saying a word. I stepped into Black's shop and stood close to them. After some time one of them who I believe was Mr. Beaujour, exclaimed several times, "Si beau, et si simple!" He said no more, and stood for more than quarter of an hour longer before he walked away with his companion. Beaujour is a man of great talents, has been long in Greece and Egypt and is considered as a perfect judge of the fine Arts.

Benjamin Henry Latrobe, et al., *The Journals of Benjamin Henry Latrobe, 1799-1820: From Philadelphia to New Orleans* (New Haven: Published for the Maryland Historical Society by Yale University Press, 1980), 49-50.

contracted yellow fever, and following just a few days of illness, he died on September 3, 1820. Latrobe's family was left in dire financial straits, and the precise location of Latrobe's grave is unknown.

The structure of this thesis emulates Latrobe's approach. The chapters focus on a variety of works, taken from different points in Latrobe's career, and close readings of Latrobe's writings reveal the very different ways in which Latrobe applied scientific discourses to his proposals. Nevertheless, the notion of a transitional aesthetics, or a positive tension between the autonomy and mutual correspondence of two kinds of order (broadly defined), acts as a continuous thread that orients these observations, hypotheses, and architectural designs.

Chapter one, which surveys several works from Latrobe's first appointment as US Surveyor (1803-1812), looks broadly at environmental and social discourses in order to situate the architect's attempts to engage the prevailing concerns of the period. Recognizing early Americans' obsession with the environment, Latrobe latched onto climate in particular as a physical and "moral" force that could help justify his architectural innovations.²⁰ Because Latrobe's first, and strongest, climate-based proposals—an urban plan for Nescopeck, Pennsylvania and a Philadelphia townhouse—were unsuccessful, I contest the idea that Latrobe's later, often-cited allusions to environmental change were meant to appeal to his audience on a pragmatic level. Rather, I suggest that climate served as an allegory by which Latrobe articulated an increasingly grand vision of an ever-changing American aesthetic.

20. Throughout the thesis I borrow Hume's use of "moral" (vs. "physical") as a shorthand for climate's perceived psychological influence. David Hume, "Of National Characters," in *Selected Essays*, ed. Stephen Copley, and Andrew Edgar (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 113.

Chapters two and three consider two very different, but chronologically overlapping works from the beginning of Latrobe's American career: the two-volume *Essay on Landscape* (1798-99) and the Philadelphia Waterworks (1798-1801). In the second chapter I argue that Latrobe's professional and social engagements in Virginia transformed his appreciation of nature. No longer satisfied to look merely at landscapes, Latrobe urged the reader of his *Essay* to look *into* them, and, in doing so, to see and appreciate nature's autonomy, or resistance to human classification and comprehension. Latrobe's apprehension of this distinction stemmed from his perception of nature's "sliding" between humanly determined categories like "plant" and "animal." Paradoxically, though, this notion of sliding gave rise to a check on nature's autonomy when Latrobe began to apply it to other objects—like the previously mentioned granite rocks, whose "edges are so sharp and the Surfaces so true, that the Masons have little more trouble, than to break them into proper sizes, in order to construct very regular Walls."²¹ In other words, Latrobe's appreciation of nature's autonomy existed in tension with an aesthetics that also wanted to discover nature's foreshadowing of its own transformation.

The first and second chapters are each followed by an interlude which, using Latrobe's "Memoir on the Sand-hills of Cape Henry in Virginia" (1798), show how a position revealed in the preceding chapter—Latrobe's antipathy to hypotheses or rational arguments (chapter one) and his unflinching portrayal of the distinction between human and natural orders (chapter two)—took on a different but still recognizable guise in a formal scientific paper.

Like the *Essay on Landscape*, Latrobe's first presentation to a formal society of letters was a work that bridged between Latrobe's first and second American residences, and not just because of

21. Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 518.

the geographical locations involved. The paper, which examined the formation of the Sand-hills, reflected geological lessons recently learned by Latrobe from several European friends interested in scientific pursuits: Giambattista Scandella, Constantin-François de Chasseboeuf, comte de Volney, and William Maclure. The comte de Volney is the same Volney to which Latrobe positively referred Spotswood in the second volume of the *Essay on Landscape*, and it was with Maclure that Latrobe traveled from Richmond to Philadelphia at the end of 1798. As a guest in Maclure's home outside of Philadelphia, Latrobe was introduced by the geologist to others who could help scratch the "itch of Botany, of Chemistry, of Mathematics, of general Literature" that Latrobe exclaimed was "strong upon [him] yet,"²² and the success of that introduction is evident from the date of the Cape Henry Sand Hills paper, delivered to the nation's premier scholarly society only three weeks after Latrobe's arrival in Philadelphia.²³ Latrobe's initial proposal for the Philadelphia Waterworks followed about a week after, being dated the 29th of December, 1798.

In the third chapter, I suggest that transitional aesthetics informs the design of Latrobe's waterworks proposal for Philadelphia and, more generally, his understanding of urban character. Late eighteenth-century Philadelphia's ravaging by yellow fever would have come as a shock to those who had planned the city with the health of its citizens in mind. In his examination of the situation, Latrobe rejected a plan-based, primarily visual approach to urbanism and advocated a more holistic engagement that inserted the city into a larger, pre-existing environment (in the three-dimensional sense of that word) even as it recognized its separateness from that system. Similarly, Latrobe's

22. Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 341.

23. The American Philosophical Society was founded in 1743 by Benjamin Franklin et al. "Benjamin Henry Latrobe, Engineer" was officially elected a member in 1799.

promises to Philadelphia centered on the new kinds of behaviors, rather than the new structures, that his Waterworks would sponsor. Sensitively adapted to the capabilities of a city whose population and urban fabric had been devastated by repeated outbreaks of disease, this enacted, or behavioral, understanding of character posited an alternative to tangible, visual metrics of a city's character and level of development.

1. Anxious Climes

In 1789, Virginian Walter Jones wrote to James Madison, bemoaning the "ruinous adoption of European Fashions" and "pretensions to European ranks" among public men. While Jones's letter indicates that he thought there was a "proper" way for America's leaders to act, this was not his only, or even his primary, concern. As he explained to Madison, "There is a wide & secret inlet of mischief in our manners that if not controlled, will make legislative Forms of no avail."²⁴ Around the same time, Pennsylvanian Senator William Maclay alluded to the Congress's fragility when he wrote that "the Whole World is a shell and we tread on hollow ground every step."²⁵ Madison, too, though not quite so fearful as these two men, also turned to a natural metaphor to describe the enormity of the task faced by the young government when he said, "We are in a wilderness without a single footstep to guide us."²⁶

These comments referred to the environment, but they were not descriptions of the actual physical terrain inhabited by these men. Rather, these statements utilized natural metaphors to express an anxiety about their social milieu. Anxiety about the viability of the infant nation and the development of an American character became even more charged when it did engage the physical en-

24. "Walter Jones to James Madison, July 1789," in James Madison, et al., *Papers* ([Chicago]: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 12:403.

25. 17 January 1790, in William Maclay, et al., *The Diary of William Maclay and Other Notes on Senate Debates* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 179.

26. Madison to Jefferson, 30 June 1789, in James Madison, et al., *Papers*, 12:268.

vironment through the idea of climate, whose influence on both man's physique and character had been posited since classical times.²⁷

In the early part of the eighteenth century, climate was considered to be primarily determined by latitude, and the differences of American climates, both north and south, from their counterparts across the Atlantic, came as a profound shock to early settlers.²⁸ By the second half of the century, both Europeans and Americans were actively theorizing climate, its influence on the human, and the possibility of its change over time. Histories of "the dispute of the new world" generally focus on the exchanges between Thomas Jefferson and the French naturalist, Georges Leclerc, comte de Buffon.²⁹ Buffon's infamous degeneracy theory posited that America's cold and humid climate had sponsored inferior versions of Nature's products. The Comte's claims extended to animal and human alike, and addressed both quality and quantity. That is, Buffon claimed that American quadrupeds were fewer in number than European quadrupeds, and that such American quadrupeds as did exist were smaller and weaker than their European counterparts. Similarly, he argued that the male genitalia of Native Americans were small and withered; the degeneracy, not limited to physical bodies, had also rendered them lazy and stupid. If that was not enough, Buffon claimed that, over time, degeneracy would affect even European bodies transferred to the Americas—crops, livestock, and colonists.

27. A detailed account of the climate question as it pertained to the New World is provided by Antonello Gerbi, *The Dispute of the New World: the History of a Polemic, 1750-1900*, rev. and enl. ed. ([Pittsburgh]: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973).

28. Karen Ordahl Kupperman, "The Puzzle of the American Climate in the Early Colonial Period," *The American Historical Review* 87, no. 5 (1982), 1262.

29. The most recent, and most extended example of this is Lee Alan Dugatkin, *Mr. Jefferson and the Giant Moose: Natural History in Early America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

Jefferson, like James Madison and Benjamin Franklin, recognized the dangers of such a theory for a nation whose economic and cultural viability was not yet assured, but he was unable to extricate himself from the terms of its debate. Taking obsessive barometric measurements and urging American explorers to bring him evidence of large animals, Jefferson's efforts to produce more accurate data could only mitigate the severity of Buffon's claims. However, there were other Americans who side-stepped the degeneracy theory by emphasizing man's ability to alter climate, albeit slowly and gradually, through intensive clearing and cultivation of the land.³⁰

This chapter begins by outlining social and environmental anxieties in post-Revolutionary America in order to shine a new light on Latrobe's references to environmental influences. In letters to two separate clients in 1805, and one to Jefferson in 1807, Latrobe discussed, at length, the influence of climate on his designs. At least one Latrobe scholar has suggested that these references grew out of a more general position that "subordinated matters of style to an empirical reading of and a rational response to the specific needs at hand."³¹ While it is certainly true that Latrobe used climate to try to justify his innovative architectural designs, his interest in it is not so straightforward. Given the complex status of the environment in early America, it is not at all clear that Latrobe's clients would have appreciated his references to it—and the ultimate rejection of Latrobe's three climate-influenced proposals lends some weight to this supposition. A failure in terms of gaining architectural commissions, Latrobe's engagement of nature—particularly through this intangible, fluid concept—was nev-

30. Jefferson himself offers this suggestion, but it seems that the immediate dangers of the degeneracy theory overrode his confident assertion that, with cultivation, "a change in our climate however is taking place very sensibly." Thomas Jefferson, and David Waldstreicher, *Notes on the State of Virginia: With Related Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2002), 135.

31. Michael W. Fazio, et al., *The Domestic Architecture of Benjamin Henry Latrobe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 190.

ertheless crucial to his efforts to think through the problem of cultural transition and, ultimately, to present an optimistic vision of an American art that would be both unique to the environment of its origin and capable of sponsoring a refined sociality on par with those of older European cultures.

Modeling the Right Kind of Character

Having successfully fought for a government based on the will of the people, early leaders of the Republic found themselves alarmingly subject to the will of the people. In the post-Revolutionary period, the Federalist/anti-Federalist divide was exacerbated by uncertainty about the "character" of the masses. Without reconciling their political views, Federalists and anti-Federalists alike promoted the importance of manners in the proper formation of a republican society. In this context, a distinguished and distinct mode of gentlemanly behavior served, to both the American polity and to an external but interested European audience, as the outward sign of a new political culture. In the self-consciousness of its adoption, however, the "culture of honor" also illuminated a multi-layered understanding of leadership in the minds of the early American elite.³²

It may at first seem contradictory that those who supported "less" government were in favor of increasingly stringent social structures. However, even Jefferson, that most idealistic purveyor of the freeholder society, evinced in his writings an understanding that such a vision depended upon "a world in which all behavior was voluntary and therefore all coercion unnecessary, where independence and equality never collided, where the sources of all authority were invisible because they had

32. Joanne B. Freeman, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

already been internalized."³³ Given that the Revolution coincided with a social shift towards a more equal status between the "natural" aristocracy and an unruly "middling" class,³⁴ it is not surprising that in the post-Revolutionary period this vision was understood to be one in need of support.

As a result of these concerns, the American gentry aimed for a visible but inconspicuous cultivation of one's self and belongings. Anxious to avoid appearing supportive of luxury, men like Jefferson and Washington eschewed a certain kind of fancy dress, though they were by no means careless of their appearance. According to the *New York Journal*, Washington's homespun inauguration suit "was of so fine a fabric and so handsomely finished that it was universally mistaken for a foreign manufactured cloth."³⁵ Latrobe himself, visiting Mount Vernon in 1796, described the property in terms that speak to the first President's success in balancing care and restraint to achieve the "right" kind of appearance (Figure 1.1).

33. Joseph J. Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 69.

34. C. Dallett Hemphill, "Middle Class Rising in Revolutionary America: The Evidence From Manners," *Journal of Social History* 30, no. 2 (1996): 317-44.

35. Cited in Stephen Decatur, and Tobias Lear, *Private Affairs of George Washington* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin company, 1933), 9.



Figure 1.1: BHL, "President Washington and his family on the portico of Mount Vernon," 1796. Watercolor, ink, and wash on paper. Maryland Historical Society.

Approaching Mount Vernon from Colchester, the architect first encountered a Mill belonging to the President, whose "neatness," as he put it, "is an indication of the attention of the owner to his private concerns. The farm of the President extends from the Mill to his house. Good fences, clear grounds and extensive cultivation strike the eye as something uncommon in this part of the World." The house itself, when glimpsed through two groves, was not very striking, "though superior to every other house I have seen here." Of the interior, Latrobe only took notice of a "handsome statuary marble chimney piece in the dining room (of the taste of Sir Wm. Chambers)":

This is the only piece of expensive decoration I have seen about the house, and is indeed remarkable in that respect. Every thing else is extremely good and neat, but by no means above what would be expected in a plain English Country Gentleman's

house of £500 or £600 a Year. It is however a little above what I have hitherto seen in Virginia.³⁶

In contrast to Jefferson's sparkling wit, many early American leaders—including Washington—seem to have been deeply self-conscious about their speech and deportment. One French minister observed that the nation's leaders seemed stiff, as if engaged in a play that was “neither agreeable nor useful.”³⁷ Latrobe's account confirms this impression; though he was made to feel welcome at Mount Vernon, he noted that at no time did Washington “speak with very remarkable fluency:—perhaps the extreme correctness of his language prevented that effect.” Even so, after a brief discourse by Washington on the “increased dissipation and frequency of visitors” to the American resort village of Bath, the two men found common ground in their natural interests—the rivers of Virginia. Washington gave Latrobe “a very minute account of their directions, their natural advantages, and what he conceived might be done for their improvement by Art.”³⁸ The retired President further flattered Latrobe by his interest in Latrobe's work for the Dismal Swamp and the Canal Company. On the second day of the architect's visit the two men again returned to questions of land and development, with Washington describing the different benefits of various “Crops about Richmond.”³⁹

If Washington's interests indirectly alluded to the importance of both infrastructural and agricultural development in the minds of early American leaders, Latrobe's account of a dinner party

36. Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 163-64.

37. Eléanor-François-Elie, comte de Moustier, to Thomas Jefferson, 24 June 1789, in Thomas Jefferson, et al., *Papers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), 15:210-12.

38. *Ibid.*, 167

39. *Ibid.*, 170

conversation at President Jefferson's several years later expressed the greater range of topics on which a gentleman was expected to be able to discourse:

the best construction of arches, on the properties of different species of Limestone, on cements generally, on the difference between the French and English habits of living as far as they affect the arrangement of their houses, on several new experiments upon the properties of light, on Dr. Priestley, on the subject of emigration, on the culture of the time, on the dishonesty of Peter Legoux and his impudence, on the domestic manners of Paris, and the orthography of the English and French languages.⁴⁰

Latrobe's accounts of these conversations, and his pleasure in them, reminds us that the early American elite were not only politicians: they were farmers, philosophers, and naturalists. Politicking was just one of many interests, but none of these interests were mere pastimes; rather, all of the activities were seen as part and parcel of a gentleman's pursuit—a gentleman who, by virtue of his wide-ranging and disinterested knowledge, could lead a country by example.⁴¹

These polyvalent interests were not merely a metaphor for the gentleman's right to leadership but were seen as significant in their own right: one American historian, speaking of natural history practices, notes that “in the early republic, the formation of a collective knowledge of nature was the

40. BHL to Mary Elizabeth Latrobe, 30 November 1802, in Latrobe, et al., *Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, 1:234.

41. Ann Bermingham discusses the development of Addison's "man of polite imagination" in the context of a British Whig/Tory debate over what kind of person could be depended upon to make decisions for the common good in her book *Learning to Draw*. In his book on the history of political discourse in England, Scotland, and America in the period between the English Revolution of 1688 and the French Revolution of 1789, J.G.A Pocock provides a more extended discussion of the development of "manners" as a defining feature of modern liberalism. Ann Bermingham. *Learning to Draw: Studies in the Cultural History of a Polite and Useful Art*. (New Haven: Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 2000), 91-92; JGA Pocock, "Virtues, Rights, and Manners: A Model for Historians of Political thought," in *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 37-50.

formation of society itself.”⁴² Natural history is a particularly helpful example because it draws our attention to the way in which both knowledge and the informal institutionalization of knowledge worked hand-in-hand in early America. Moreover, while not unique among popular pursuits of the American elite, efforts to understand nature explicitly raised and complicated questions of environmental and societal transition.

Latrobe’s first years in America—and specifically, in Virginia—were filled with a range of activities which confirm the intertwining of society, politics, and business in early America. His early journal entries were structured around his various travels across the state and a given entry might describe, for example, the soil composition of the gently undulating country with “valleys . . . full of quartz,” the surprising purity and grammatical correctness of the English language as it is spoken “by all ranks” in America (as compared to its utterance in counties of England), and the unfortunate madness of a Mr. Haycock.⁴³ It is thus often not clear which trips are motivated primarily by business and which by pleasure. Latrobe’s interconnected interests carried over into the architect’s first professional projects in America. It is particularly evident in his involvement with Richmond’s Chestnut Street Theater, for which he authored *The Apology* (1798), his only known play.⁴⁴ While Latrobe, who did some renovation work for owner Thomas Wade West, seems to have been partially motivated by the promise of a theater commission, his choice of content—a political satire lam-

42. Christopher Looby, “The Constitution of Nature: Taxonomy as Politics in Jefferson, Peale, and Bartram,” *Early American Literature* (1987).

43. Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 89. April 6th, 1796

44. For more information on the tangle of activities associated with this play, see Abe Wollock, “Benjamin Henry Latrobe’s Activities in the American Theater (1797-1808)” (University of Illinois, 1962).

pooning Alexander Hamilton—and his emotional response to the play's failure suggests the extent to which the foreign-born architect threw himself in the politico-cultural life of his new country.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, Latrobe's true passion was not politics. Though in a letter to his friend Dr. Scandella (an Italian visitor to America), he proudly described his "Comedy which has been acted with a mixture of violent Applause and as violent opposition," he also, in the same letter, admitted that "I yawn at the perpetual political or legal discussion especially conducted in the cramp, local manner in which it is treated in Virginia."⁴⁶ This ending qualification alerts us to the fact that political discussions in America could be more expansive, and expansive in a way that might scratch the "itch of Botany, of Chemistry, of Mathematics, of general Literature" that Latrobe exclaimed was "strong upon [him] yet."⁴⁷

In the letter to Scandella, Latrobe lamented that he "never missed any friends in my life as much as I did you and Mr. McClure after you were gone."⁴⁸ This is a telling comment, for Scandella and McClure were noted amateurs of the young science of geology. Latrobe's extensive geological, agricultural, and natural history notes suggest that the architect would have been particularly sympathetic to the kinds of comments cited in the beginning of this chapter, in which natural metaphors were used to express political anxiety. To reiterate, these comments should not be taken as indicating their speakers' impressions of their physical environment, but their prevalence suggests the extent to

45. Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 334. Also see Latrobe's documentation of, and involvement in, the newspaper exchange that followed the play's appearance (343-356).

46. *Ibid.*, 340, 341.

47. *Ibid.*, 341.

48. *Ibid.*

which the environment functioned as an interpretive framework for other anxieties which filled the minds of early Americans.

Change, Climactic and Otherwise

The physico-theological debate, which concerns the nature of the relationship between humans and the earth, has a long and complex history which cannot be traced fully here.⁴⁹ However, in marking out some of its eighteenth-century particularities and identifying some of the individuals involved, we will be able to articulate a fuller understanding of the climate question as it developed in early America, and its relation to the political anxieties expressed by Jones, Maclay, and Madison. This contextualization will make comprehensible Latrobe's interest in, and references to, climate, but it will also illuminate Latrobe's departure from prevailing American positions on climate and its relation to the cultivation of manners.

Physico-theology refers to the idea that the earth, created by God for man, is most perfectly suited for his inhabitation. However, as one historian of geography points out, "There is a vast difference between regarding man as the highest being in the hierarchy of creation while assuming that each being lower on the scale exists for a purpose which may or may not have any relevance to man's existence, and regarding the creation as serving man, like a middle-aged housekeeper in Victorian novels who cares for her bachelor employer."⁵⁰ There were corresponding differences of opinion among the detractors of physico-theology, and there were also those who, like Kant, rejected the val-

49. For a fuller discussion, please see Clarence J. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore; Nature and Culture in Western Thought From Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).

50. *Ibid.*, 504.

idity of the question altogether by arguing that the metaphysical relationship between human and nature could not be established by human reason alone.⁵¹ Ultimately, the global voyages of the eighteenth century rendered the doctrine of final causes—that is, belief in purposeful development towards an ultimate aim—untenable, as the accumulating discovery of fossils revealed the possibility of animal extinction. The gradual and incomplete erosion of the doctrine of final causes did not end the physico-theological debate, but it did change the terms and emphases of its construction.

There were two aspects of this altered physico-theological debate that pertained particularly to American discussions of climate: the proper scope of human inquiry with regards to natural history studies and the theorization of climatic change. Unlike Kant, who dismissed the question of final causes as one outside the purview of human reason, Buffon actively disparaged it as detrimental to the work of those who sought to answer it:

Mais comme nous voulons toujours tout rapporter à un certain but, lorsque les parties n'ont pas des usages appareils, nous leur supposons des usages cachés, nous imaginons des rapports qui n'ont aucun fondement, qui n'existent point dans la nature des choses, et qui ne servent qu'à l'obscurcir: nous ne faisons pas attention que nous alterons la philosophie, que nous en dénaturons l'objet qui est de connoître le comment des choses, la maniere dont la Nature agit, et que nous substituons à cet objet réel une idee vaine, en cherchant a deviner le pourquol des faits, la fin qu'elle se propose en agissant.⁵²

51. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1996), 600-608.

52. Essentially, searching for the "why" of things necessarily means rejecting an investigation of the "how." Georges Louis-Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, *Histoire Naturelle* (Paris, 1799), 254-55; accessed February 28, 2012, http://books.google.com/books?id=lv14aPy2hSMC&source=gbs_navlinks_s.

For Buffon, the variety of nature resulted from observable conditions and changes observable in nature; there was no need to invoke divine will. This understanding of nature highlighted the ad hoc and contingent quality of human constructions of natural order.

Because it called into question the nature, and indeed very existence, of “creation,” the physico-theological debate had another dimension, equally fractured and nuanced, which centered on the question of change. If the earth was not perfect and static, it required one to consider the nature and direction of its changes. In this regard Buffon is an important pivot-figure because his position on natural history situated him in a second debate which concerned the origin of difference within the human species. Buffon’s emphasis on climate as a generator of difference which can nevertheless be modified by human effort was a stronger version of Montesquieu’s argument along the same lines, while Hume represents a group of thinkers who preferred to attribute such differences to the influence of government and society.⁵³

If climate could directly impact human nature, though, so might humans be able to directly influence the nature of the climate by clearing and cultivating the land. In America, the climate question was re-framed in terms of mutual influence or interrelationships. In emphasizing man’s ability to favorably alter climate over time, early Americans drew upon an idea, gaining strength in this period, that Europe itself had undergone significant, favorable climatic change since the time of the ancients as a result of agricultural cultivation. Consequently, despite the distorted degeneracy claims of

53. Hume’s belief raises an interesting question about the movements sponsored by imperial exploration and colonization: if government and society are responsible for a more or less unified national character, how does one promote a gradual but desirable differentiation between the colonizer and colonized? David Hume, “Of National Characters,” 117-118.

the Abbé Raynal and the Dutch philosopher Cornelius de Pauw,⁵⁴ (or perhaps spiced by their existence), the idea of America as laboratory was well received among Europeans like Buffon and Herder.

It was not for nothing that Jefferson concentrated his degeneracy-disproving efforts on the Comte. In contrast to his pious colleague Linnaeus, who saw nature's products as explicit manifestations of a divine will (and therefore perfectly and predeterminedly ordered in relation to man's understanding), Buffon had long advocated a theory of natural history which emphasized the distinct order of nature and its necessarily post hoc categorization by humans. Indeed, Buffon, open to the influence of empirical evidence, ultimately revised his theory of American degeneration. This was in part due to Jefferson's efforts, but Buffon also appears to have been impressed by American Hugh Williamson's account of cultivation's influence on climate, which was delivered to the American Philosophical Society in 1770 and translated into French in 1773.⁵⁵ Quoted imperfectly at the end of *Des Époques de la Nature*, Williamson's paper seems to have played a role in Buffon's ambitious theorization of the earth's changing climate—and man's significant role in the final, seventh epoch. By this, the present, epoch, Buffon believed that man had developed the technologies necessary to supplement nature—and to modify environments to better suit their needs. Despite the frequency with which Buffon is (correctly) accused as the originator of the degeneracy theory, the truth is that

54. Cornelius de Pauw, *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains, ou Mémoires intéressants pour servir à l'histoire de l'espèce humaine. Avec une Dissertation sur l'Amérique & les Américains, par Mr. de P.****. 2 vols. (Berlin: G.J. Decker, Imp. du Roi, 1768-69) and Guillaume Thomas François Raynal, *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements des Européens dans les deux Indes*. Corrected and enlarged edition. Introduction by M. A. Jay. Supplement by M. Peuchet. 12 vols. and atlas. (Paris: Amable, Coste, 1820-21)

55. Hugues Williamson, "Dans Lequel on Tâche De Rendre Raison Du Changement De Climat Qu'on a Observé Dans Les Colonies Situées Dans L'Intérieur Des Terres De L'Amérique Septentrionale," *Journal de Physique (Observations sur la Physique, sur l'Histoire Naturelle et sur les Arts)* 1 (1773): 430-46.; published in English in 1771: Hugh Williamson, "An Attempt to Account for the Change of Climate, Which Has Been Observed in the Middle Colonies in North-America," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*).

he is only that: guilty of providing the initial spark, and, unaware of the speed and power of the fire, indirectly guilty of revising his opinions too late.

Nevertheless, not all Americans were comfortable with the notion of a completely human-willed transformation of the land. One scholar convincingly suggests that the political precariousness of an entirely man-made world led early Americans to emphasize their role as facilitators: human cultivation merely helped nature fulfill its inherent potential.⁵⁶ This understanding also helped to reassure early Americans that, despite their European origins, American culture need not be merely a European derivative. A similar line of reasoning made “society” not an explicit term but the “implicit product of the virtuous relationship of each yeoman to his land.”⁵⁷ These beliefs hint at the intricate causal relationships that were drawn between political economy, cultivation, and social organization, and whose significance is reflected in Latrobe's journals and letters.

In addition to complicating the nature of influence between humans and climates, the establishment of the United States of America also made more explicit a question that had been under consideration for some time—the relative strength of the influence of government and climate on a society. In a text published in 1792, William Currie, a doctor documenting a *Historical Account of the Climates and Diseases of the United States of America* proclaimed that “although the United States of America cannot boast of the superiority of their climates over other countries in parallel latitudes,

56. Jehlen, *American Incarnation: The Individual, the Nation, and the Continent*.

57. *Ibid.*, 72.

they are exceeded by few in fertility of soil, and equalled by none in political advantage."⁵⁸ In the same vein, he asked: "what does it avail the inhabitants of Asia that many of their provinces are blest with the most delightful climate and fertile soil that imagination can conceive, since they themselves are in subjection to the arbitrary will of a capricious and despotic tyrant?"⁵⁹ Hume would have put it even more strongly. As he explained in his essay, "Of National Characters" (1742), it was more or less absurd to ascribe significant influence to climate; for him society was the true source of any national character that might exist, and such character was not dependent on territory: "the same set of manners will follow a nation, and adhere to them over the whole globe, as well as the same laws and language. The Spanish, English, French, and Dutch colonies are all distinguishable even between the tropics."⁶⁰ Ironically enough this is exactly what concerned some Americans. Despite their emulation of European manners and aspiration to a European notion of civility,⁶¹ Americans sought to develop some notion of an independent and unique republican culture.

It thus seems that the degeneracy question was less about whether the American climate was harsh and perceived as harsh (in both cases the answer was yes), but rather whose effect would trump whose: would Americans succeed in moderating the climate by their cultivation of the land before its negative influence eliminated or irrefutably weakened them? In his seminal essay on "Eighteenth-

58. William Currie, *An Historical Account of the Climates and Diseases of the United States of America : And of the Remedies and Methods of Treatment, Which Have be Found Most Useful and Efficacious, Particularly in Those Diseases Which Depend Upon Climate and Situation: Collected Principally From Personal Observation, and the Communications of Physicians of Talents and Experience, Residing in the Several States* (Philadelphia: T. Dobson, 1792), 405.

59. Currie, *An Historical Account of the Climates*, 407.

60. David Hume, "Of National Characters," 118.

61. Hemphill, "Middle Class Rising in Revolutionary America."

Century Theories on America as a Human Habitat," historian Gilbert Chinard suggests that Americans were formed not so much by the climate itself but by their determination not to be perceived as climate-influenced.⁶²

In this light, however, Latrobe's repeated and emphatic assertions about the "extensive and powerful"⁶³ influence of climate on both physique and manners begin to look quite misguided. Not only did Latrobe ascribe great influence to climate, he ascribed what, in late eighteenth-century America, would have been an unpopular influence: Latrobe unselfconsciously suggests that, given the more similar climates of America and France, the generally British-originating colonists would over time become more like the French. In late eighteenth-century America, this would not have been a popular idea; Latrobe himself noted on a number of occasions the prejudice he experienced as a result of his apparently French surname.⁶⁴ In the second half of this chapter, we will explore Latrobe's climactic references in greater detail. The architect turned to climate in an attempt to justify his transformation of conventional architectural and urban precedents; if this was a radical mis-judgment of his clients' interests, it was nevertheless provided a powerful metaphor that by which he articulated an evolving American aesthetics.

62. Gilbert Chinard, "Eighteenth Century Theories on America as a Human Habitat," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 91, no. 1 (1947), 54.

63. "Remarks On the Plan of Nescopeck, PA," in Latrobe, et al., *Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, 2:43.

64. BHL to Thomas Jefferson, 22 September 1798, in *ibid.*, 1:96., among others

Formalizing Climate's Effects

In the spring of 1805, Latrobe's career seemed assured. Appointed in 1803 as Surveyor of the Public Buildings of the United States, he was responsible for the construction of both the US Capitol and the President's House, each potentially a full-time occupation in its own right. Nevertheless, the government's salary was such that Latrobe chose to maintain his residence in Philadelphia (somewhat to the displeasure of Jefferson and Congress). From this base the architect was ever-actively seeking additional work. Responding to a developer's request for a town plan for Nescopeck, Pennsylvania, and a gentleman-friend's request for a town house in Philadelphia, Latrobe's activities were more diverse, both in terms of scale and client, at this time than any other. Perhaps it is only logical that the architect, attempting to simultaneously develop these very different projects, would seek a common, and commonly available, denominator. Climate, with its charged multiple meanings, proved to be a flexible, useful filter through which Latrobe could frame his various proposals. Applying climate to two very different designs—an urban plan for an ambitious private developer and a “rational” house for a member of the Philadelphia elite—Latrobe tailored climate's meaning to his audience and his aims, making the most of eighteenth-century climate's perceived effects on both health and manners. As the stakes rise, so do Latrobe's ambitions—in his letter to Jefferson on the US Capitol, and in his Oration to the Society of Artists of the United States in 1811—climate as a specific force is abstracted to its essential quality as a natural force of change, and in this form it is used to justify the adoption of ever-changing aesthetic practices.

(a) A Town Plan

In early March, 1805, Samuel Mifflin, Esquire, having travelled about 100 miles from his home of Nescopeck, Pennsylvania, called upon Latrobe to seek his professional expertise. Mifflin had been one of the first settlers of Nescopeck in 1792, and by 1805 had experienced enough success to claim responsibility for laying out the town. From the men's correspondence, it seems that Mifflin came to Philadelphia seeking comments on a plan drawn up by a Mr. Heath. Latrobe characteristically rejected what he would have seen as an amateur effort. Writing to Mifflin, he asked him to "make some sort of apology to Mr. Heath for the very great liberties I must necessarily take with [his plan]. What ever you do, I intreat [you] not to let or sell lots on the present plan. Arrangement, dimensions, aspect of the town must all be altered."⁶⁵ On the 30th of March, Latrobe sent Mifflin a second letter, which was accompanied by lengthy "Remarks on the Plan of the town of Nescopeck, Pennsylv."

Somewhat sententiously, Latrobe begins by explaining that his plan (sent separately and now lost) "looks so different from the plans of other towns that have been planned and erected in the United states [sic.], that it may be necessary to give you a general idea of the principles which in my opinion ought to govern the plan of every town."⁶⁶ Despite Latrobe's efforts to emphasize the pragmatic benefits of his radical plan, he was unable to overcome planning convention. Mifflin exhibited the plan to prospective purchasers in Philadelphia, but he ultimately rejected it.

65. BHL to Mifflin, 12 March 1805, in Benjamin Henry Latrobe, et al., *The Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe* (Clifton, N.J.: Published for the Maryland Historical Society by James T. White & Co., 1976), 38/A12.

66. Latrobe, et al., *Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, 2:42.

In his proposal, Latrobe emphasized the primacy of climate as both a physical and a moral force.⁶⁷ While buildings were to be judged by their adaptation to both the climate and manners of their country, climate must be the first consideration because “upon that depend in a great degree the manners and almost entirely the health of the people.”⁶⁸ Despite this grand opening statement, Latrobe concentrated almost exclusively on the effects of sun and wind on physical comfort and health. Most significantly, Latrobe advocated orienting the town plan to the cardinal directions and not to an arbitrary direction set by a diagonal river. According to Latrobe, diagonal rivers had caused many cities to be laid out such that the houses, facing the southwest and northeast, or the southeast and northwest, “court every possible inconvenience which can result from the effect of the Sun and wind in our climate.”⁶⁹ Emphasizing the discomfort experienced by those whose houses face the southwest or northeast, he asked his reader to imagine

what will be the difference of attention to business of a man, who in summer inhabits a cool dwelling, every apartment in which has its appropriate and permanent distinction, and of one who is driven from his front into his back, and from his East into his west rooms in the course of every day, without finding himself perfectly at ease in any of them.⁷⁰

This is Latrobe’s only concrete example of climate’s influence on humans, and it reveals the very pragmatic terms in which Latrobe felt that climate’s benefits and harms should be laid out for an American layperson. Climate here certainly has an effect on manners (imagine the poor man shuffling from

67. Several parts of the written description bear a marked similarity to Latrobe’s recommendations, submitted in August of the same year, for Newcastle, Delaware. See Lucille P. Toro, “The Latrobe Survey of New Castle, 1804-1805.” (University of Delaware, 1971).

68. Latrobe, et al., *Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, 2:42.

69. *Ibid.*, 2:43.

70. *Ibid.*, 2:44.

one room to another in a distracted state of discomfort), but more important is its effect on one's attention to business.

Having established the importance of maximizing the north and south fronts of houses, Latrobe assured Mifflin that "the only inconvenience that can arise" from orienting the streets to the cardinal directions "is that a few houses will not have rectangular corners." Surely, he suggests, "it is . . . better to sacrifice the form of half a dozen houses in a part of the town in which form is of little or no consequence, than to ruin the aspect of all the houses in the town."⁷¹ This statement alerts us to Latrobe's differentiated understanding of a town. Even though he advocated the use of a generic rule in determining the orientation of the town, this was not meant to encourage a "multiplication Table" strategy of indiscriminate grid-making:

One of the great means of making a small town a large one, is to make it an agreeable residence. This is to be accomplished by giving to the majority of the houses a good aspect, making the streets commodious, appropriating a portion of the ground best situated for the purpose, to public walks, and giving a large allotment of ground, as a temptation to the erection of public buildings. This is however not all. An endowment of Land, in a situation likely to become valuable, and to produce an annual income as the town increases should be given in perpetuity to the corporation, if there be one, or to the Trustees in the first instance. Such an estate is often the means of supporting an Academy, or some other public institution by which the town lives and thrives.⁷²

Latrobe thus advocated not just the development of a spatial hierarchy but also the development of commodities and benefits that would not, at least in the early days of the town, have an architectural presence at all. In the third chapter we will return to this notion of urbanism as something both tan-

71. Latrobe, et al., *Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, 2:44.

72. *Ibid.*, 2:45.

gible and intangible, for Latrobe's experience with yellow fever in Philadelphia—whose plan, by eighteenth-century measures, should have ensured the health and prosperity of its citizens—may have influenced his emphasis on public institutions, rather than a static urban plan, as that "by which the town lives and thrives."

Before one can discuss the best kind of urbanism, however, one must first establish urbanism's influence. In the Nescopeck proposal Latrobe performed a complex—and somewhat sly—rhetorical move which conferred significance upon town planning by association. As I have noted, Latrobe began by suggesting that the visual strangeness of his plan required an explanation of the principles which lie behind it. He then claimed that these principles are climactic in nature, and the explanations which followed demonstrated the extent to which other town plans neglect these climactic considerations. I want to suggest that Latrobe's conscientiousness is much less important than his linking of town plan and climate. Latrobe's real innovation here was to claim for town planning the same influence as climate, whether or not the town plan took climate into account. If in his opening statement Latrobe explained that climate must be the first consideration because of its influence on the manners and health of the people, he soon attributed the same power to the thoughtless town plan itself, whose influence "upon our manners and our health is much more extensive and powerful than we are aware."⁷³

(b) A Rational House

If Latrobe's explanation of the Nescopeck town plan did not actually articulate these extensive and power effects, this does not mean that Latrobe was merely gesturing unthinkingly toward grand

73. Latrobe, et al., *Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, 2:43.

claims. Four days prior, he had written another letter which placed a greater emphasis on climate's relationship to manners and even national character. At the beginning of the month, Latrobe had been commissioned to design a house for William Waln, a successful Philadelphia China merchant whose wife was a close girlhood friend of Mary Elizabeth, Latrobe's second wife. The proposed site was prominently located on Chestnut Street, between Seventh and Eighth streets, just a couple of blocks west of Independence Hall. Latrobe had understandably high hopes for the project; on March 26, 1805, less than two weeks after accepting the commission, he sent the Walns two different proposals. The couple proved difficult to please. Latrobe would send at least two more proposals before the Walns were ready to begin building, now on a corner site, in March of 1807. From this point construction seems to have gone smoothly; by August of the next year interior decorative painting was being applied and Latrobe was completing designs for the furnishings. Though it has since been demolished, the completed project's exterior was recorded by J. Kern in an 1847 watercolor view (Figure 1.2).



Figure 1.2: J. Kern, Waln House, 1847. Watercolor on paper. Library Company of Philadelphia.

Here we will be concerned with Latrobe's first proposal or, more accurately, its description, for, as with the Necopeck design, the plans have been lost.⁷⁴ He was particularly proud of design No. 1, which was "such a house as I should build for myself." Latrobe contrasted this "rational house" to the second proposal, which was "of a house more according to the conditions to which we have accustomed ourselves in this country but which is not in my opinion either the most elegant or convenient." As with the Nescopeck town plan, Latrobe's lengthy description was intended to justify a re-

74. Michael Fazio has produced a reconstruction from Latrobe's written description. Fazio, et al., *The Domestic Architecture of Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, 325-27.

jection of tradition and habit. In adopting the first proposal, the Walns would have gained five objectives Latrobe deemed essential to elegance and convenience:

1. To avoid back buildings, for which the ground is indeed to [sic] shallow if a pleasure ground and stables on the Alley, both necessary appendages to a good house, are required.
2. To give light air and easy access to the the kitchen Offices without removing them below the convenient inspection of the Lady of the house by the usual mode of placing them in the cellar story.
3. To reserve the whole south front (in which the entrance must necessarily be placed) on the principal floor, for the best apartments.
4. To gain a suit of good rooms including the Ladys apartment on one floor.
5. Not to increase the size of the house so much as to occupy the whole of the lot of 102 by 175 but to reserve a valuable building lot 24 feet in front.⁷⁵

In achieving these objectives, Latrobe believed that he had combined, as far as his talents were able, “the separate advantages of an English and a French town residence of a genteel family.”⁷⁶ To understand the reasoning behind such a combination, we will have to step back to Latrobe’s opening “general observations” and their references to climate’s influence.

Latrobe began his observations with a sentence that is almost identical to the second sentence of his remarks on Nescopeck’s town plan, but a close comparison of the two reveals different constructions of the relationship between the climate and manners of a country:

75. Latrobe, et al., *Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, 2:37-38.

76. *Ibid.*, 2:37.

[Waln] In every country the best plan of a private as well as of a public building is that which is as well adapted to the climate as to the manners of the people.⁷⁷

[Nescopeck] The plan of a town, like that of a house, must be perfect or imperfect as it is more or less adapted to the climate and manners of the country in which it is built.⁷⁸

In both cases, Latrobe suggested that the most private unit of architecture, the house, bears a similar relationship to larger entities like a public building or even a town. That is, even as the scale of the project changes, the principles of evaluation remain the same—and the principle highlighted here is the design’s “adaptation” to the criteria of climate and manners. Nevertheless, there is an important but subtle difference between the two statements. In the letter to Mifflin, Latrobe averred that a plan is perfect or imperfect as it is more or less adapted to the climate and manners of the country in which it is built. The conjunction presented climate and manners as a hybrid but single criterion. There was no suggestion that the needs of one might contradict the needs of the other. In contrast, Latrobe’s letter to Waln declared that the best plan is as well adapted to the climate *as to* the manners of the country; that is, there were *two* different criteria, and the best plan would be able to adapt to the needs of each one considered separately. This shift is evident in the overall structure of the two proposals. Latrobe began with climate’s physical effects in the Nescopeck proposal, and focused almost exclusively on it, his comments about an “agreeable residence” coming towards the end and without real reference to climate as an influence on manners. In the Waln proposal, Latrobe began by distinguishing between climate and manners as they existed in America at the end of the eigh-

77. Latrobe, et al., *Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, 2:35.

78. *Ibid.*, 2:43.

teenth century, and only towards the end of the letter did he refer, indirectly and intermittently, to climate's influence on physical comfort. Similarly, the objectives he outlined for Waln were mainly driven by considerations of "gentility" and its visible manifestations (note the repeated emphasis on "good," "best," and "valuable"); only the second and third objectives refer to physical climactic considerations, but even these are couched in terms which reflect their consideration of manners and convenience.

The problem with American houses, in Latrobe's opinion, was that their builders had not taken enough account of the fact that, though "in America our manners are English," "our climate is in almost every particular the contrary of the climate of the British Islands."⁷⁹ Proposing that America's climate was much closer to that of France than to that of Britain, Latrobe suggested that American manners would, over time, "slowly, but certainly" approach those of the French. This proposition of gradual, sure change—one that was popular in the context of an apparently intractable American environment—forced the architect to acknowledge that, in 1805, a house "completely arranged on French principles, would be as illy adapted to the habits of life of an American family, as a house completely on the London model is to its health and comfort."⁸⁰ Nevertheless, these two kinds of climactic influences troubled Latrobe's discussion of whether the British or the French provided the most appropriate residential precedent. He was unable to reconcile what we might term the synchronic and diachronic effects of climate: synchronic being the "practical" concerns of health and physical comfort; diachronic resulting in an understanding that what is suitable now will not always

79. Latrobe, et al., *Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, 2:35.

80. *Ibid.*

be suitable. Frustrated, Latrobe resorted to generalizations: "It is not necessary for the purpose of a house of the highest grade required in America to examine into the arrangements of French or of English palaces."⁸¹ All we require is, the greatest possible compactness, and convenience for the family, expressed in the very comprehensive word, comfort, and moderate means of entertaining company."⁸² Having thus placed utility before style, Latrobe continued with a discussion of the benefits of French arrangements.

Latrobe's attempt to distinguish the physical and moral influences of climate, and to use both to justify his innovative design of the "rational house," thus ended with a failure of the reasoned or rational argument. However, Latrobe's description of the Waln house demonstrates two important uses of climate as a rhetorical metaphor: first, climate could be used to talk about change, both physical and moral, over time, and second, the American physical and moral climates together could potentially justify the need for aesthetic innovation. Though this first proposal to the Walns fared no better than his town plan Nescopeck, Latrobe does not seem to have been overly dismayed. His later allusions to climate, though less explicit in their references, drew significantly on its defining characteristic as an agent of change.

81. This is in fact the first appearance of the word "palace," deployed—it seems—simply to help heighten the contrast between the decadent European plans and the comfortable, moderate American ideal.

82. Latrobe, et al., *Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, 2:35-36.

(c) A National Capitol

On February 18, 1804, Latrobe sent Jefferson some sketches exploring the possibility of lighting the House of Representatives “a la Halle de Bled [sic].”⁸³ It is not clear who originated the idea; both men were admirers of the 1783 dome designed by Legrand and Molinos for Paris' permanent wheat market.⁸⁴ Jefferson was particularly taken by the large, radiating skylights, which accentuated the structural lightness of the expansive wood-ribbed dome (Figure 1.3). In 1802 the two men had been planning to cover the naval dry dock with a similar design. Nevertheless, by August of 1805, Latrobe, though no less convinced of the beauty such a roof, was “as much convinced . . . of the pressing necessity of seriously deliberating whether they must not be given up, even now.”⁸⁵ The problem was twofold: first, that the sunlight coming in through the windows would be blinding “for the greatest part of the Session,” and second, that dripping, from condensation and/or leakage, was almost unavoidable.⁸⁶

83. Latrobe, et al., *Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, 1:428.

84. The Halle au Blé was “first and chief among the projects” meant to better the eighteenth-century city's organization and sanitation. Dora Wiebenson, “The Two Domes of the Halle Au Blé in Paris,” *The Art Bulletin* 55, no. 2 (1973): 262-79.

85. BHL to Jefferson, 31 August 1805, in Latrobe, et al., *Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, 2:134.

86. *Ibid.*

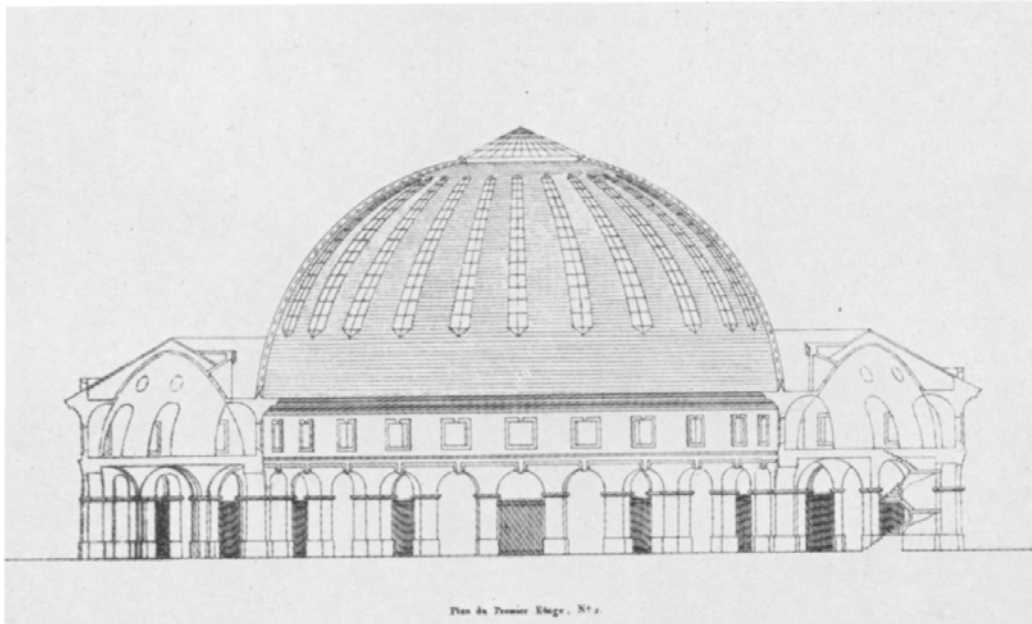


Figure 1.3: Section, Halle au Blé, 1783. (from Krafft-Ransonnette, *Plans . . . de Paris*)

If Latrobe gave up “the beauty of the light with extreme reluctance,”⁸⁷ Jefferson refused to give it up at all. At several points over the next year, Latrobe’s letters returned to the problem of the “Halle de Bled” lights and the pragmatic difficulty they represented. Jefferson, for his part, repeatedly “recommended a recurrence to the resources of your art.” On September 8, 1806, the frustrated President sent the ball into Latrobe’s court, leaving it to him “to attempt or to abandon the ribbed sky lights according to the judgment you should ultimately form of their *practicability*.”⁸⁸ Latrobe was thus placed in the uncomfortable position of having to admit that his “art” was not able to surmount a technical problem.

This brief account of the discussion, which does not include all of its turns, nevertheless points out the absolute fallacy of concluding, from Latrobe’s often-cited letter of May 21, 1807, that

87. Latrobe, et al., *Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, 2:134.

88. *Ibid.*, 2:282.

the architect's recourse to climate was an attempt to use "more locally forceful, empirical justifications" to target pragmatic Americans.⁸⁹ While Latrobe's attempt to promote his alternative design for the House of Representatives invoked climate as a justification for stylistic transformation, his argument was embedded in a larger one on the relationship between utility, style, and new "legitimate" forms of beauty. Latrobe began by emphasizing the cultural differences which demanded architecture's stylistic transformation; only after establishing this first requirement at length did he raise the issue of climate:

Wherever therefore the Grecian style can be copied without impropriety I love to be a *mere*, I would say a *slavish* copyist, but the forms, and the distribution of the Roman and Greek buildings which remain, are in general inapplicable to the objects and uses of our public buildings. Our religion requires churches wholly different from their temples; our government and our courts of justice buildings of entirely different principles from their basilicas; and our amusements could not possibly be performed in their amphitheaters. But that which principally demands a variation in our buildings from those of the ancients is the difference in climate. To adhere to the subject of cupola's, altho' the want of a belfry which is an Eastern accession to our religious buildings, rendered them a necessary appendage to the church, yet I cannot admit that because the Greeks and Romans did not place elevated cupolas upon their temples, they may not, where necessary, be rendered also beautiful.⁹⁰

Here, in contrast to his letter to Waln, Latrobe implied that America's climate was markedly different from that of France—thus making the model of the Halle au Blé roof inappropriate. At the same time, Latrobe's reluctance to admit professional defeat inspired him to preface this objection with a statement of cultural difference and its demands on architectural design.

89. Fazio, et al., *The Domestic Architecture of Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, 190.

90. BHL to Jefferson, 21 May 1807, in Latrobe, et al., *Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, 2:428-29.

These mentions of climate, brief and contradictory as they are, work against the idea that Latrobe hoped to use climate as a way of generating stylistic “laws” (despite his use of the term in the Nescopeck proposal). They suggest that Latrobe’s use of climate was primarily strategic, the deployment of a rich and multilayered concept which allowed the architect to say almost anything he wanted. Looking forward and backward at some of Latrobe’s other statements about science, nature, and art, however, reveal that the architect wanted to say something fairly specific. Less about a static set of environmental conditions, climate—especially as it was understood in early America—provided an ideal metaphor for Latrobe’s interest in questions of transition, and the articulation of an aesthetic which was based on, and sympathetic to, transition.

A Rhetoric of Aesthetic Transition

To understand one way in which a transitional environmental framework influenced Latrobe’s presentation of art and its significance, we must shift forward to his Anniversary Oration to the Society of Artists of the United States, which he delivered in Philadelphia on the 8th of May, 1811. Founded in 1810, the Society was created in conceptual opposition to the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, which was perceived by some as a “mere repository” of European art at this time.⁹¹ Composed of both professional artists and associate amateurs, the new Society, in addition to raising welfare funds for incapacitated artists, aimed “to teach the elementary principles of the arts, to encourage emulation by a comparison and communication of ideas; [and] to correct and improve public taste by stat-

91. “Latrobe and the Society of Artists of the United States, Editorial Note,” in Latrobe, et al., *Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, 3:65. (All Editorial Notes in the *Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe* are unsigned.)

ed exhibitions.”⁹² The Society thus formalized an impulse, manifested informally in the self-conscious behavior of the American elite—to encourage, by any means possible, the transition of Americans to a state of “moral and social harmony.”⁹³

Delivered in Philadelphia, at the height of Latrobe’s career, the Oration provided a perfect opportunity, and a perfect audience, for Latrobe to espouse his ideas about the importance of art for a democratic society. Latrobe began by acknowledging the somewhat shaky position art occupied in the minds of early Americans. He referred repeatedly to “national prejudices” according to which many see art as a force that “will enervate our minds and corrupt the simple and republican character of our pursuits and enjoyments”; it was seen by yet “more” as an effect, “the certain indication of the loss of political liberty, and of the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few.”⁹⁴ Latrobe also noted that art was viewed by many as “useless,” though he derided the fact that despite these concerns “still more” Americans substituted for this “innocent” delight “the gratifications of sense, and the ostentatious display of riches.”⁹⁵ Latrobe also pointed to more tangible obstacles: he mentioned the country’s laws of inheritance, whose effect “scatters at the commencement of every generation the funds out of which individual citizens might support the fine arts,” and the “immense territory” of the country itself,⁹⁶ which produced a different kind of scattering and weakening. Nev-

92. Latrobe, et al., *Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, 3:65

93. BHL, “Anniversary Oration to the Society of Artists,” in *ibid.*, 3:84.

94. *Ibid.*, 3:68.

95. *Ibid.*, 3:69.

96. *Ibid.*

ertheless, Latrobe considered these tangible obstacles much less important than the general prejudice against the arts.

Latrobe thus devoted a significant portion of his speech to outlining art's benefits to society. The arts, as he explained, "embellish domestic happiness, . . . charm leisure, . . . grace generosity, and honour patriotism."⁹⁷ Art's pleasures and gifts appear in every phase of life, from the infant's desire to draw and to imitate, to the polished man's enjoyment in contemplation and accumulation, and finally to the dying man's ambition to be honored by art with a monument.⁹⁸ This last example introduced art's relationship to society, and society's memorialization of its heroes. If it was not enough that they were "instructive, faithful, and amusing friends," Latrobe reminded his audience that the arts could "also be made profitable slaves" that could aid in the ornamentation of "the remotest corners of the world" and "the whole of the earth."⁹⁹ Indeed, they were disinterested—they might "be pressed into the service of arbitrary power, and—like mercenary troops, do their duty while well paid—"¹⁰⁰ If this seems like backhanded praise, Latrobe's further explanation reminds us of the importance of "disinterest" in this period of political turmoil: the arts were "mild, insinuating, [and] of no political party."¹⁰¹

In fact, Latrobe suggested that the arts could sponsor an independent, positive sociality separate from that provided by politics—though not, perhaps, unrelated to it. Art "cultivat[es] the pow-

97. Latrobe, et al., *Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, 3:83.

98. *Ibid.*, 3:77.

99. *Ibid.*, 3:83.

100. *Ibid.*, 3:75-76.

101. *Ibid.*, 3:77.

ers of the mind, and . . . the correction of the taste and the judgment”;¹⁰² moreover, genius is itself characterized by a “gregarious principle” such that “those who are the most susceptible of the beauties of truth and of nature, are also the most susceptible of affection.” Consequently, associations of artists would be characterized by “mutual esteem and confidence” which would gradually lead to the perfection of the arts. If his positive and forceful interest in the arts was not yet clear to his audience, Latrobe made it explicit: “As our political independence was achieved by adherence to this motto, let our independence in the arts grow out of the conviction that *united we stand, divided we fall*.¹⁰³ By this last argument Latrobe made it clear that the arts could encourage a strong and friendly unity among its adherents that would allow for a clean and necessary separation from the arts as they were practiced in Europe.

While these arguments, some of them quite canny, were confidently put forth, an awareness of their shortcomings is woven into Latrobe's speech. Even as he seemed to be pointing out their absurdity, Latrobe acknowledged the power of prejudices; they “grow out of the political constitution of society” and consequently any “attempt to remove them suddenly by argument will be vain.” In proposing that argument was ineffective in bringing about his desired conclusion, Latrobe placed himself in a bind. He admitted that strength of conviction had nothing to do with reason; the “opinion that the perfection of the fine arts is incompatible with freedom,—while it is the most powerful to retard their progress,—is at the same time the most unfounded in *theory*, and the most false in *fact*.¹⁰⁴ If reason and argument were ineffective tools against such prejudice, how then was one to

102. Latrobe, et al., *Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, 3:78.

103. *Ibid.*, 3:84

provide even “a slight introduction” of art to American society? Latrobe turned to the past, suggesting that “to produce . . . a conviction” in the positive power of art, “it would be more effectual, to set before you the proofs of history, than the less interesting deductions even of the soundest reasoning.”¹⁰⁵ Similarly, Latrobe argued that “the history of Grecian art refutes the vulgar opinion that the arts are incompatible with liberty, by an argument the most irresistible, that of fact upon record.”¹⁰⁶

However, the “proofs of history” proved no safer than argument itself. Latrobe’s desire to emphasize the inexorable development of the arts required him to de-emphasize its particularity to the United States even as he attempted to assure his audience that, as he put it, their “home is in the bosom of a republic” and was therefore particularly bound to foster the arts. Even within this argument, his reasoning suggests a confusion between the past and present cultures, as when he pro-

104. Latrobe, et al., *Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, 3:69.

105. *Ibid.*, 3:76. The architect’s denigration of the rational argument in favor of the “proofs of history,” or the “fact upon record” is not mere rhetorical flourish. In fact, several of his reports reveal that his distrust of theories runs deeper. In an 1803 letter to the American Philosophical Society, for example, he apologizes for his delayed paper on “American Innovations to Steam Engines,” explaining that he wanted to first test some of the engines, and that it was a good thing, too, “for it has been discovered that some of our innovations, the theory of which appeared to be very perfect, have proved extremely deficient in practical utility.” BHL to American Philosophical Society, 20 May 1803, in *ibid.*, 1:302.

Similarly, in a journal entry of 1798, Latrobe, intending to “merely” “note an observation,” finds his pen leading him on to speculative hypotheses on the possibility of the moon as an exploded fragment of the earth. Though the speculations appear to be proceeding smoothly, Latrobe suddenly stops himself in disgust: “I do not pretend that this Hypothesis is worth half a farthing. I am sick of pursuing it. I hate hypothesis making and mere hypothesis makers. It is a most hypocritical way of confessing ignorance.” Having thus checked himself, Latrobe goes on to describe, in minute detail, his direct observations of gradual valley formation. “6 February 1798,” in Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 347.

106. Latrobe, et al., *Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, 3:69.

claimed that “the days of Greece may be revived in the woods of America, and Philadelphia become the Athens of the Western world.”¹⁰⁷

Citations of this famous statement have not truly noted the significance of Latrobe’s recourse to a European (admittedly classical) model. Latrobe’s declaration demonstrates the difficulty early Americans faced in talking about the origins and nature of their national culture. If, on the one hand, they were anxious about its validity *vis à vis* existing European models (as Freeman, Schlesinger, and others suggest), they were also, as Jehlen discusses and as one might expect, anxious to demonstrate its uniqueness. This anxiety points to a more general issue which concerned not just climate, or development, or even society, but which encompassed all of these: the question of transition in a society that had no identifiable basis for common development.

The Oration thus exhibits a confusion between the “universal” and the “specific” that echoes Latrobe’s tortured discussion of residential precedents in his 1805 letter to Waln. Referencing ancient Greece, the architect embarked on a long comparison that likened “human natures and human powers” to their existence at the “earliest dawn of art in Greece,” but this universal quality over time and place was contradicted by its cultivation in the specific context of the United States: “then is *this* a soil as congenial to their nature, and as favorable to their growth and perfection, as that of Sparta, Thebes, Delphos, or Athens” [emphasis added].¹⁰⁸ However, with the introduction of soil, and growth, Latrobe discovered a possible way out of his rhetorical difficulties. “Art,” he proclaimed, “is a hardy plant. If nursed, tended, and pruned, it will lift its head to heaven, and cover with fragrance

107. Latrobe, et al., *Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, 3:76.

108. *Ibid.*

and beauty the soil that supports it; but, if neglected, stunted, trodden under foot, it will still live; for its root is planted in the very ground of our own existence.”¹⁰⁹ Art, then, even when certain and durable, would never reach a point of completion. Healthy, strong plants are ever-growing, continually changing in response in response to their environment.

Throughout the Oration, in fact, Latrobe had argued for slow, steady, and ultimately irrefutable change. He hoped that a conviction having been “wrought,” it would be “diffused throughout the nation.”¹¹⁰ With merely a “slight introduction to our acquaintance,” the arts will “strangle the serpents” of prejudice; the advancement of the arts “will not be rapid, but it will be certain and durable.” When it overcame prejudice to become a national taste, it “will be as permanent as the national language. It will not be a fashion . . . it will be a law to which the economy of our legislatures will bend.”¹¹¹ The mention of law here recalls Latrobe’s use of the word in relation to the Nescopeck town proposal. Even though climate there provided a “law” to the town plan, climate was itself believed to be evolving, and therefore its “laws,” like the laws of a national taste, might well change over time.

In this chapter, I suggest that Latrobe latched onto climate as a way of expanding architecture’s significance. With regards to his architectural projects, he attempted to draw a connection between architecture and climate’s influences, both physical and moral. This linking both justified his architec-

109. Latrobe, et al., *Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, 3:77.

110. *Ibid.*, 3:75.

111. *Ibid.*, 3:77.

tural innovations and implied that architecture, like climate, could play a key role in the development of a uniquely and truly American civilization. Without negating Latrobe's interest in, or abilities in, stylistic innovation, it is important to emphasize that his letters suggest a deeper understanding of a properly American architecture. In comparison with his English works, Latrobe's American projects—though simpler and perhaps more explicitly "Grecian"—do not seem that radical. Rather, their radicality lies in the architect's conception of the intertwined relationship between nature, aesthetics, and culture. In this regard, architecture's functional relationship with climate is important, but it does not sufficiently explain the architect's ambitions. Latrobe's rejection of the Halle au Blé roof epitomizes the usefulness of climate as an external referent—a kind of double-headed rhetorical hook which both orients his audience to his (relatively) unfamiliar architectural "idiom" and signals (or more accurately in the early American context, *creates*) architecture's double significance. In other words, climate both gestured towards architecture's conventional sheltering function and, given climate's double significance in the eighteenth century, implied another function for architecture—that of contributing to the civilizing process as it happens in time.

In his 1811 Oration, Latrobe abstracted from climate discourse to articulate a new theory of artistic development. Without mentioning climate directly, he drew upon two of its key characteristics—its fundamental relationship to the material American environment and the reputedly slow and gradual nature of its change. This analogy allowed Latrobe to imagine art as a "plant"—a practice that, growing specifically out of the American context, would provide a durable but ever-evolving national aesthetics. This radical vision suggested that American art was not necessarily different from

European art in its choice of subjects, or in its choice of forms, but rather in its understanding of art's metaphysical status.

This interpretation is supported by Latrobe's strategic presentation of American art's coming-into-being. Not content to talk about an art that evolves slowly, Latrobe suggested that even its very acceptance by its public must be slow and gradual. Latrobe denigrated the rational or theoretical argument, preferring instead the illustration, whether the illustration took the form of the "proofs of history," or the form of narratives bolstered by direct experience. Even these counterpoints to the rational argument, however, were meant merely to provide the slightest introduction of art to American society, the slightest leaning of the boat's keel.

Latrobe's position takes on additional weight when we recall the American response to theories of degeneracy in this period and their hopes for America as an embodied proof of human ability to render climate amenable. For many early Americans, real, physical changes generated slowly and gradually over time would provide their own refutation of European theories. This understanding of climate change (admittedly not a uniquely American one) developed from a historical perspective—a reading of classical authors and a consequent, though possibly mistaken, belief that their contemporary climate was indeed very different from that experienced by the ancients. Perhaps surprisingly, this emphasis on history provided "a direct challenge to generalizations derived from physical causes."¹¹² In other words, it was a moment in which history was understood (correctly or not) to contest, or at least problematize, both abstract theories and empiricism.

112. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore*, 621-22.

Towards the end of his letter to Waln, Latrobe suggested a further reason for the “very strong prejudice” in favor of English-planned houses, “which in some instances rises into bigotry, and goes over into a most violent condemnation of every French dwelling.”¹¹³ Latrobe praised the neatness of feeling which shied away from “the slovenly and often filthy frippery of the French.” This feeling was indeed something Latrobe ought to have valued, because the instinctive repulsion rendered his services useful and necessary: “A professional eye is required to look beyond the neatness of the first, and the uncleanliness of the latter into the merits of their arrangements.”¹¹⁴ After an interlude, we turn in the second chapter to this notion of “looking beyond” and its development in Latrobe's Virginia years.

113. Latrobe, et al., *Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, 2:37.

114. *Ibid.*

Interlude: Cape Henry and Hypotheses

Latrobe's "Memoir of the Sand-hills of Cape Henry," delivered to the American Philosophical Society in December of 1798, opens by noting the increasing preference for the Neptunian theory of geogeny over the "old volcanic system." "As far as conjecture and hypothesis can forward science," the newcomer to Philadelphia notes, the hydro-centric theory is "certainly more generally applicable."¹¹⁵ Digging into the ground uncovers fossil teeth and bones—nature's remains—which seem to confirm this hypothesis of water-driven soil deposition.¹¹⁶

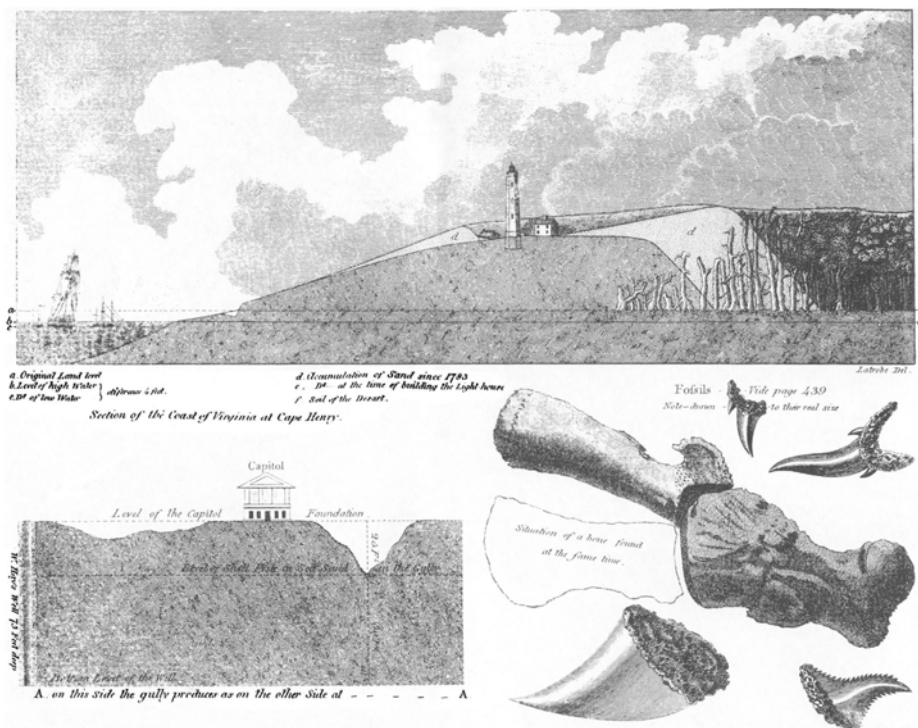


Figure I.1: BHL, Plate for "Memoir on the Sand-hills of Cape Henry . . .," 1799. Engraving. (from *Transactions* 4)

115. Latrobe, "Memoir of the Sand Hills of Cape Henry in Virginia."

116. The Neptunian thesis assumed the existence of a global ocean, whose precipitations and movements caused most observable rock formations. Abraham Gottlob Werner (1749-1817), was the "primary exponent" of the Neptunian thesis in this period, and Edward C. Carter suggests that Latrobe could have read his early publications while studying in Niesky and Barby. Latrobe, et al., *Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, 1:108, fn. 1.

“But,” the speaker draws up short, “along the coast of Virginia, a process is going forward, the result of which will be exactly similar, and in which water has no immediate share.” The descriptions now build up the landscape more slowly and intricately. Having traveled to the shore via his initial comments, he describes how the flood tide daily carries sand above the high water mark, where it is dried by sun and air before being blown even further inland by the wind. Here the sand forms hills on top of the “natural level of the land.” Their gradual but relentless incursion is indicated by the fact that the wind “is said to be felt, at this day, higher in land than formerly, and to be annually extending its influence” due to human cultivation: “when the woods shall be more cleared away, [the wind will] blow health and coolness over a portion of lower Virginia, which is now considered as extremely unhealthy.”¹¹⁷

The paper ends with an imaginative leap that gently mocks a future philosopher attempting to conjure geological processes after the fact:

Should this event take place, and some future philosopher attend the digging of a well *in the high sandy country, on the coast of Virginia*, his curiosity would be excited by fossile wood, 100 feet below the surface. He would there discover a bed of vegetable and animal exuvia, and going home, he might erect upon very plausible ground, a very good-looking hypothesis of a deluge, sweeping the whole upper country of its sand, and depositing it along the line of its conflict with the waves of the ocean.¹¹⁸

As this, the Memoir's closing passage, makes clear, the “laboratory” of the United States offered both a promise and a challenge to theories of climate change. Latrobe's reading of the Sand Hills disproves

117. Here, as with his other early mentions of climate, Latrobe only mentions its effects on physical health. As far as I have been able to determine, his first discussion of climate's influence on manners occurs in the first proposal for the Philadelphia Waterworks.

118. Latrobe, “Memoir of the Sand Hills of Cape Henry in Virginia,” 258.

(or at least undermines) a conventional reading of geological “evidence” without providing an alternative method. Latrobe does not suggest any way out for his imaginary philosopher. There is no substitute for having observed the slow accretion of sand over time—and indeed Latrobe himself is careful to avoid any appearance of generalizing; in a footnote he emphasizes, “I speak only of the coast of Virginia at Cape Henry: for although I have the best reason to believe that the same natural process has produced all the sand banks, islands, and sand hills from the Delaware to Florida: I have only *examined* that part of the coast, which is the subject of the present memoir” [emphasis in original].¹¹⁹ Latrobe is moreover very generous to his hypothetical philosopher, suggesting that the “very good-looking hypothesis” would be “erect[ed] upon very plausible ground.”

119. Latrobe, “Memoir of the Sand Hills of Cape Henry in Virginia,” 255, fn. 1.

2. Examining the Picturesque

A little over one year after his arrival at Norfolk, Virginia, Latrobe travelled to Lake Drummond on surveying business for the Dismal Swamp Company. Struck by the “vast, circular surface of Water which appear[ed] perfectly circular,” Latrobe in his journal contrasted that experience of “quiet, solemn pleasure,” in which “one simple idea, one immense object, uncompounded of heterogenous parts, fills the eye, at once and satisfies it,” with the “too big, too inexplicable, too unintelligible . . . not entirely pleasant” experience of viewing the lakes of Switzerland and of Westmoreland in England.¹²⁰ Latrobe's description of Lake Drummond contradicts an historical narrative that emphasizes an overwhelming early American experience of wilderness and strangeness. Latrobe differentiated between European and American landscapes, but he did not feel overwhelmed by the latter. In fact, Lake Drummond, as Latrobe described it, seems to correspond with eighteenth-century European ideas of beauty.¹²¹

Nevertheless, Latrobe's valuations of the Virginia landscape did not always emphasize beauty, or even an idealized notion of nature. Latrobe's fascination with purity—for example, of Lake Drummond's circular figure—carried over to objects not conventionally considered beautiful. Consider, for example, Latrobe's comments regarding a trip taken to some “Coal *pits* or rather *Quarries*”

120. “10 June 1797,” in Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 235.

121. This is a proposition that deserves more attention than is possible within the scope of this thesis. Latrobe's praise of Lake Drummond here seems to correspond most closely to Edmund Burke's idea of the beautiful (1757), which is “smooth, and polished” (Burke 113) though he accorded to beauty more majesty and grandeur than Burke and Kant, at least in Kant's first work on beauty (1764), did. If Latrobe was familiar with Kant's *Third Critique* (1790), it would raise interesting questions about Latrobe's understanding of the relationship between beauty and sociality.

Edmund Burke and Adam Phillips. *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960); Immanuel Kant and Paul Guyer, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

on the south side of the James River about three weeks after his arrival in Virginia. The architect, who had already taken several excursions in the area (both for business and for pleasure), was astounded by the depth and size of the deposit: “such a mine of Wealth, exists I believe nowhere else! . . . I hope to have another and better opportunity of examining this wonderful Mass of Coal, till then I postpone further description.”¹²² In and of itself perhaps unremarkable, this comment is set off by another, a few lines down in the same journal entry, which enthusiastically describes “the most *rich* swarth of white clover that surrounds the house” of Mr. Wardrup [emphasis added].¹²³ If wealth could be equally applied to coal and to clovers, this country indeed delivered joyful news.¹²⁴

In this chapter I suggest that Latrobe's multiple interpretations of nature are consistent with the presentations of a culture which relied on nature as an interpretive framework. Nature had a complicated position in the American worldview, being neither mere material for taming (development) nor purely idyllic image. Latrobe looked seriously and intensely at the landscape of his new country, not so much to preserve it as to imagine its relation to a new human order.¹²⁵ His interest in a natural order—clearly distinct from, and even at times inscrutable to—human order figured nature as something more than mere background. Looking into nature, Latrobe found that it resisted easy

122. "19 April 1796," in Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 97.

123. *Ibid.*, 97-98.

124. Nicolás Monardes, and John Frampton, *Joyfull Newes Out of the New-Found Worlde : Wherein Are Declared the Rare and Singuler Vertues of Diuers Herbs, Trees, Plantes, Oyles & Stones, With Their Applications, as Well to the Vse of Phisicke, as of Chirurgery. Also the Portrature of the Said Hearbs, Verie Aptly Described* (London: E. Alde, by the assigne of Bonham Norton, 1596).

125. I am indebted here to Thomas Hallock's articulation of the "imperial elegy" he reads in William Bartram's travel writings. Thomas Hallock, "On the Borders of a New World: Ecology, Frontier Plots, and Imperial Elegy in William Bartram's 'Travels,'" *South Atlantic Review* 66, no. 4 (2001): 109-133.

human categorization and ordering, but it was precisely this enigmatic and autonomous existence that rendered it a fitting substitute for history as the foundation of American civilization.

In 1798, the receipt of the commission for the Bank of Pennsylvania crystalized Latrobe's tentative intentions to leave Virginia. Virginia had in fact never been the young architect's ultimate objective; in leaving England, Latrobe had planned to make a new life on some Pennsylvanian property inherited from his mother. However, as he explained in his belated greetings to his Philadelphian uncle, Henry Antes, his anticipation of a winter arrival had led him to select a ship bound for Virginia so that he might travel through the "more southerly States" prior to settling in Pennsylvania. Latrobe exaggerated somewhat when he told Antes that "a great variety of public business, which was offered me, rendered it impossible to accomplish my desire of settling near you,"¹²⁶ but, as I suggest in this chapter, the lessons offered by Latrobe's "odds and ends of little services" for members of Virginian society and private infrastructure companies were more than serviceable substitutes which transformed the architect's understanding of America and American development.¹²⁷ In particular, Latrobe's interest in geology—fostered by his work for the Dismal Swamp Company, the James River Company, and the Appomattox Navigation Company, as well as his friendship with several amateur

126. BHL to Henry Antes, 8 April 1798, in Latrobe, et al., *Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, 1:82.

127. In a journal entry dated March 31, 1796, Latrobe describes the little services as follows:

designing a staircase for Mr. Acheson's new house, a House and Offices for Captn. Pennock, tuning a Pianoforte for Mr. Wheeler, scribbling doggerel for Mrs. Acheson, tragedy for her Mother, and Italian songs for Mrs Taylor. An excursion into the Dismal Swamp, opened a prospect for professional pursuits of more importance to me. I saw there too much to describe at random, and too little to describe at all without seeing more.

It is an impressive list, considering that the *Eliza* had probably docked at Norfolk only 11 days earlier. Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 79-80.

geologists—unsettled his picturesque conception of the landscape as a composition existing outside of time.

Despite his warm regard for his first American hosts, the “cramp, local manner” of the Virginians’ “perpetual political or legal discussion” wore on Latrobe,¹²⁸ and after a few years he began yearning for a residence that would be more amenable to his professional and amateur pursuits. Philadelphia, it seems, would provide such a home. Though Latrobe’s residence there would be relatively short (about five years), this period was crucial to the development of the young architect’s career. Not only was it the site of what is arguably his first stylistically significant architectural work—the Bank of Pennsylvania—it was also the site of his first urban infrastructural project, the Philadelphia Waterworks. Of these two works Latrobe was later to say that “for my professional reputation I should have done enough had I only built the Bank of Pennsylvania and supplied the city with Water.”¹²⁹ Philadelphia also provided the base for several residential commissions and significant public projects, both built and unbuilt.

Latrobe’s professional work in Philadelphia laid the groundwork for his later career by attracting the attention of President Thomas Jefferson. While Latrobe had written to Jefferson on March 28, 1798 to introduce himself to the then-vice president, the success of Latrobe’s varied Philadelphia projects led Jefferson to consider Latrobe as the proper executor of Jefferson’s vision for a national naval drydock. The success of this latter project was in turn crucial to Latrobe’s appoint-

128. Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 341.

129. BHL to Joseph Delaplaine, 23 January 1812, in Latrobe, et al., *Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, 3:236-37.

ment as Surveyor of the Public Buildings of the United States in Washington, DC in 1803. In this office, Latrobe would contribute substantially to both the US Capitol and the President's House.

Last but not least, residence in Philadelphia transformed Latrobe's social sphere: it was here that he was introduced to his second wife and a congenial scholarly community, most notably institutionalized in the form of the American Philosophical Society. In this period, the American Philosophical Society formed a cornerstone, if not *the* cornerstone, of American letters, and "Benjamin Henry Latrobe, Engineer" presented a paper to the Society soon after his arrival in Philadelphia at the beginning of December, 1798.

Latrobe's time in Philadelphia thus marks an important inflection in his career and personal life. As with many moves, however, Latrobe's physical transition did not neatly correspond to a division of his labors. In a letter written to Virginia Governor James Wood a couple of months after his arrival in Philadelphia, for example, Latrobe promised to return to Virginia to continue advising the construction of the state's penitentiary as soon as he was able, and offered in the meantime to continue sending written directions, as unsatisfactory as he knew such directions to be.¹³⁰ Similarly, Latrobe's first presentation to the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, discussed in the two interludes, concerned the formation and development of the Cape Henry Sand Hills in Virginia. In this chapter we are concerned with a more intimate hinge between Latrobe's life in Virginia and his life in Philadelphia: the *Essay on Landscape* (1798-99), a two-volume illustrated manuscript which

130. BHL to James Wood, 23 February 1799, in Latrobe, et al., *Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, 1:125. The demands of the Waterworks project soon made evident the impossibility of such an effort, and a successor was appointed in Latrobe's stead.

Latrobe addressed to a Miss Susan Catharine Spotswood. The provenance of the *Essay* is uncertain, but it has resided in the Virginia State Library (now the Library of Virginia) since 1952.¹³¹

The Essay on Landscape

Spotswood was a daughter of a well-established Virginia family; her great-grandfather Alexander Spotswood was the Lieutenant Governor of the state from 1710-1722.¹³² She figured but a few times, and very briefly, in Latrobe's correspondence; nevertheless, the time and care devoted to the production of the *Essay on Landscape*, as well as the personal remarks within it, suggest that a warm, and even flirtatious, relationship existed between the two. Whatever its nature, however, the relationship did not long survive the architect's removal from Virginia. Latrobe promised, in both the first and second volumes, to produce a third volume on perspective, but that manuscript, if it was completed, has not been recovered, and mentions of Spotswood in Latrobe's documents cease after the sending of the second volume. In May of 1800, Latrobe married Mary Elizabeth Hazlehurst, to whom he seems to have been utterly devoted, and Spotswood married Dr. John B. Bott in 1801.¹³³

Without discounting the influence of Spotswood on the *Essay on Landscape*, then, our particular interest in it has more to do with the manuscript's location in Latrobe's larger biography. The two volumes mark a moment of transition that is both conceptual and physical. The first volume, written while the young architect was still living in Virginia, strongly bears the marks of the Euro-

131. "The Essay on Landscape, Editor's Note," in Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 458.

132. "Editor's Note," Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 457.

133. Page Putnam Miller, *A Claim to New Roles*, vol. ATLA monograph series ; no. 22 ([Philadelphia] Metuchen, N.J.: American Theological Library Association Scarecrow Press, 1985), 16.

pean culture he had so recently left; the second, postmarked from Philadelphia, turns in both subject-matter and approach to the question of an American aesthetic vision. Taken together, these volumes introduce us to a younger and less “Americanized” Latrobe while also suggesting ways in which the lessons of this first Virginian period would be translated and transferred into Latrobe’s presentations of his later work.

The *Essay on Landscape* is rarely mentioned in the scholarship on Latrobe; when it is, it is almost always characterized, without qualification, as a picturesque work.¹³⁴ Even if one acknowledges the manuscript’s indebtedness to picturesque texts, one must also recognize that, in its application to the American landscape, Latrobe’s articulation of the Picturesque in the *Essay* transforms, sometimes radically, its English formulation. Emphasizing truth to nature, nature’s existence in time, and the mysteries which underlie the visible surface of nature, this is emphatically not the Picturesque of William Gilpin, Alexander Cozens, or even John Laporte (a personal favorite of Latrobe’s). Especially in the second volume, Latrobe’s interest in other kinds of visible order—those associated with natural history and geology, for example—disrupt and interrogate a purely aesthetic conception of landscape. If the previous chapter described an anxiety about societal change which was both bound up with and extended by discussions of an unseen but felt climate, this chapter focuses on questions around the visible order of Nature and its relationship to human order, or development, in the New World.

In avoiding a narrative of simple translation between Britain and America, it is also important to resist an easy recourse to received conceptions of an American Picturesque. Given the Pic-

134. An exception is a dissertation chapter by Sienkewicz, which was mentioned in the introduction to this thesis. See fn. 6.

turesque's relationship to "art" in both the sense of the "fine arts" and artificiality or the "technical arts," its transformation or inflection in the context of the American wilderness has encouraged the construction of an ingenuous or naive American Picturesque. Such narratives emphasize that Americans, in the face of a truly threatening landscape, rejected a "rough" landscape aesthetic in favor of a smooth or tamed appearance. In Latrobe's case, however, we find that, despite his developing understanding of American-ness, he continued to value a conventionally picturesque aesthetic. Nevertheless, the complexity of Virginian terrain demanded additional conceptual models, and in turning to geology and natural history Latrobe began to develop an appreciation of his environs as they existed in time.

This chapter has both a historiographic and a methodological aim: the former is to demonstrate that the charged issue of development and cultivation in America fostered a Picturesque which most decidedly did not reject the hand of art, artificiality, and artifice¹³⁵; the latter is to suggest that it is possible to take the Picturesque seriously without "reclaiming" it as a "serious-minded and holistic philosophy."¹³⁶ Indeed, *Essay on Landscape*, even as it questions the Picturesque vision of landscape, is Picturesque in its *method*. The explicit addresses to Spotswood as the intended reader, Latrobe's insis-

135. David Marshall, "The Problem of the Picturesque," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 35, no. 3 (2002): 413-37.

136. William Barksdale Maynard, "The Picturesque and American Architecture: A Reappraisal" (University of Delaware, 1997), 11.

tence on his work as an “essay” as opposed to a “treatise,”¹³⁷ the playful and sometimes contradictory statements of the text: all of these characteristics insist that we think about the casualness of the Picturesque as an important, if not defining characteristic of the aesthetic category.

The *Essay on Landscape* comprises two hardbound volumes, approximately six inches wide by eight inches tall, which were written and illustrated in Latrobe's own hand. Though the two volumes are composed of paper similar in weight and texture, they are not equal in length: the first consists of sixty hand-numbered pages (with one blank opening at the back) and the second of seventy-nine (and two blank openings). The volumes were probably bound before being filled by the author; a few botched drawings from each volume are neatly cut out, some of them patched, and in the second volume, Latrobe also left a few interspersed pages blank in anticipation of filling them later. It seems unlikely that Latrobe bound the volumes himself, though he may have specified the format—his personal sketchbooks, for example, were custom-sized to order and filled with laid paper whose well-defined warp and weft provided a subtle gridded guide for the architect's drawings.¹³⁸ Each volume of the *Essay* starts directly after an initial title page (Figure 2.1), with images appearing every two or three openings. The second volume has a few more images than the first (25 versus 22) and also a

137. Latrobe began Volume Two with the following comment:

Madam,

It is fortunate that in the title to the little Volume on Landscape which I have already had the pleasure to present to you, I have adopted the Word, Essay, rather than, Treatise. It is indeed only an Attempt; in the prosecution of which I have this great advantage that I can shelter my want of ability under the humility of my pretensions.

Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 497.

138. Fazio, et al., *The Domestic Architecture of Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, 67.

slightly more uneven distribution, with only one pen sketch appearing before page thirteen, but then with images—frequently two—appearing on every opening between pages thirty-two and forty-nine.

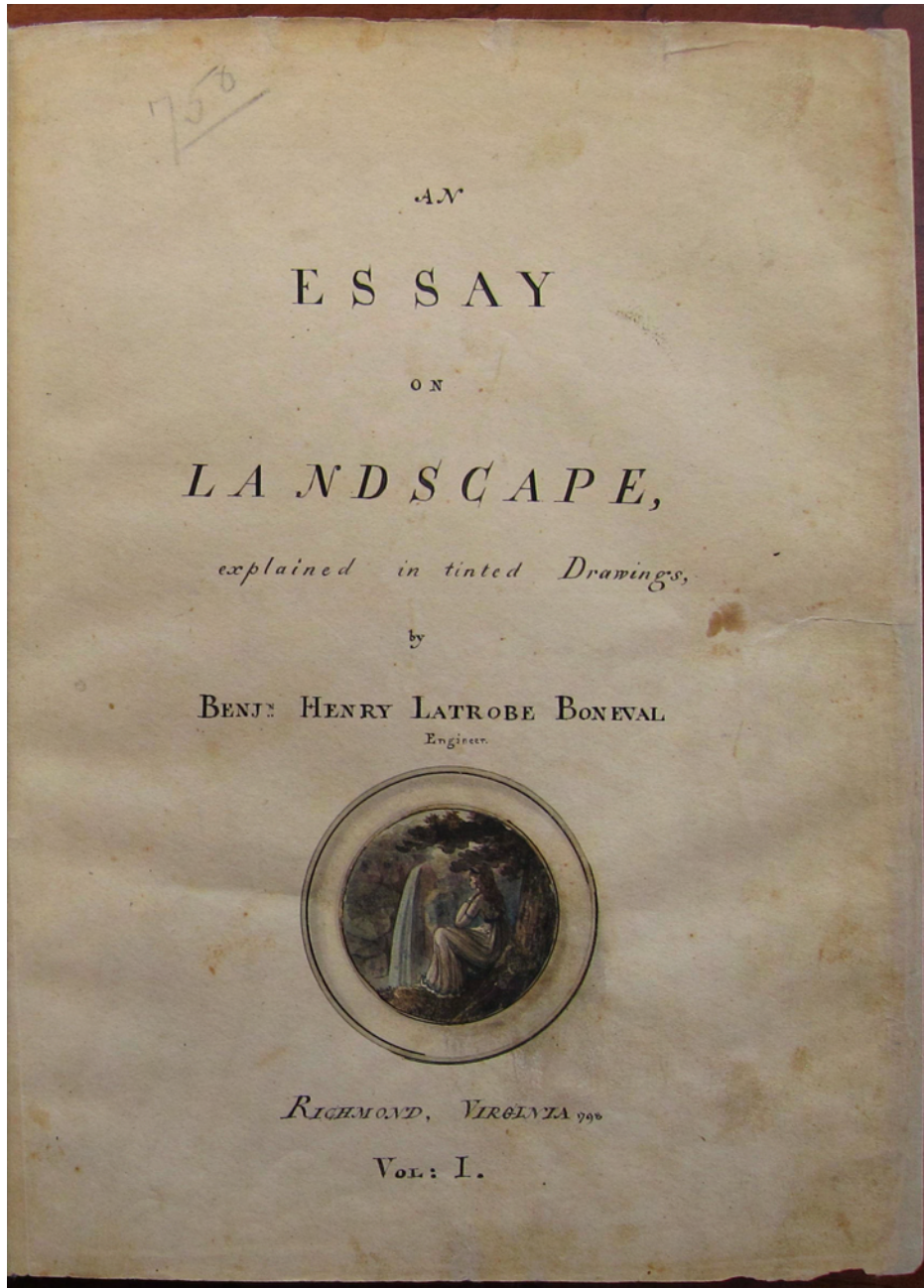


Figure 2.1: BHL, Title Page of *Essay on Landscape* (Vol. 1) 1798. Watercolor and ink on paper. Library of Virginia.

The two volumes also differ in their organization, the first one being somewhat more linear in sequence. After a short introduction in the first volume, Latrobe proceeded directly to drawing instruction. Brief as this text is, it is divided into three titled sub-sections (I. Composition, II. Light and Shadow, III. Tinting). Latrobe then devoted the bulk of the manuscript to "scenes" which ostensibly illustrated the application of the principles described in the preceding instructional section. The second volume also began with a personal introduction in which Latrobe described his own limited efforts at drawing and assured Spotswood of her much greater future success; this was followed by an extended "digression" on natural history, a brief lament on the difficulty of drawing trees, and finally, another long series of "scenes" which describe places and events drawn from Latrobe's travels in Virginia. We will return to the paradoxical nature of these scenes shortly, but a brief classification of Latrobe's sketches will round out our overview of the *Essay*.

Besides having distinct subjects and concerns, the sections I have identified above are further distinguished by the different types of sketches that Latrobe used to illustrate his text. The instructional text of each volume, for example, is accompanied by four explanatory sketches, sized two to a page. Each sketch is neatly framed by an inked rectangle (Figure 2.2). Latrobe emphasized that these sketches were imaginary and served only to illustrate the composition lessons as clearly as possible. They were sharply contrasted with the similarly framed "scenes" of real places (not Latrobe's consistent choice of word, but one that will serve here); the scenes are distinguished is not so much their size (though in general they fill a page) but their level of detail and, to reiterate, Latrobe's insistence on their representational truthfulness. In addition to these more elaborate illustrations, Latrobe sprinkled his text throughout with vignettes. These vary in their level of elaboration and in their sig-

nificance to the text—sometimes they illustrate it, sometimes they provide their own information or pathos (Figure 2.3), and sometimes they go completely unmentioned.

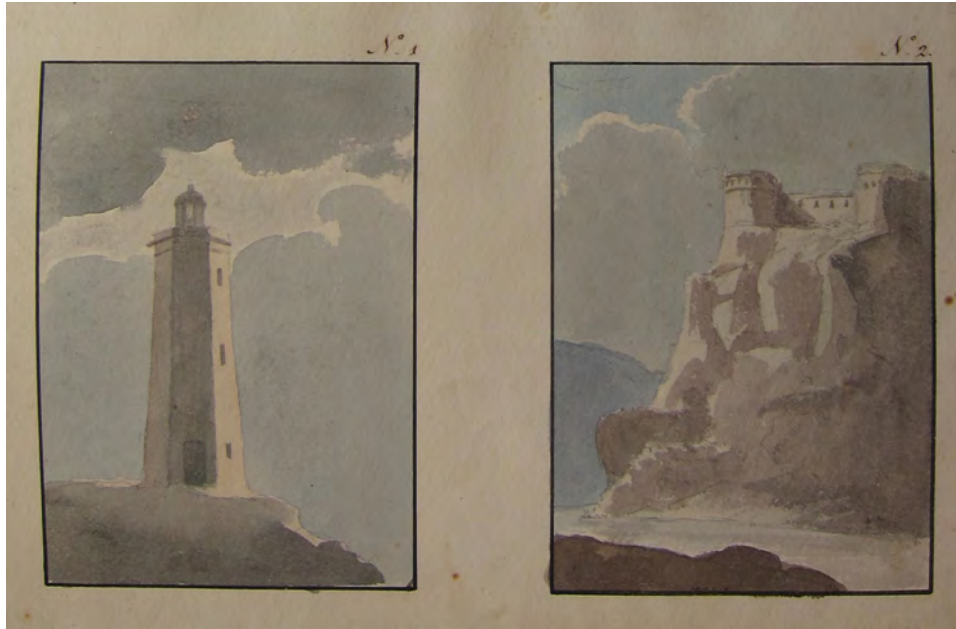


Figure 2.2: BHL, [explanatory sketches], *Essay* (Vol. 1), 1798. Watercolor, ink, and wash on paper. Library of Virginia.



Figure 2.3: BHL, [small vignette], *Essay* (Vol. 1), 1798. Watercolor, ink, and wash on paper. Library of Virginia.

Though generally small and seemingly incidental, the vignettes reveal a shift in Latrobe's interests between the two volumes. This shift is two-fold: it concerns both the source of Latrobe's images (England vs. America) and his choice of subject. The first volume has, in addition to the explanatory sketches mentioned above, five "scenes," five large vignettes, and seven small vignettes. One of the scenes depicts an American locale, as do two of the large vignettes and two of the small vignettes. In total, then, 12 out of 17 images are drawn from Latrobe's English experience (and thus more or less from memory). In the second volume, there are twice as many scenes, two large vignettes, and nine small vignettes. Virtually all of them (19 out of 21) are drawn from America; the one "English" scene serves as a contrast to the American understanding of landscape, and one small vignette humorously depicts exaggerated hoop skirts, conical hats, and elaborate wigs in an illustration of an earlier European taste for "nature in every shape but her own."¹³⁹

The two volumes moreover exhibit a shift in subject matter and Latrobe's treatment of it. Among the seven small vignettes of the first volume, four depict humans and human creations (a praying monk, two Silesian peasants, a bathing machine, and the death of a soldier) while three depict natural phenomena (a rock pile, a rainbow, and an anemone). In the second volume the proportions are reversed and more extreme—there are only *two* depictions of human-like figures (the corsetted females mentioned above and a sly gnome stealing through the night) and *seven* depictions of nature in various animal, vegetable, and mineral forms. Even this cursory overview suggests that

139. Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 500.

America, besides being granted visual priority in the second volume,¹⁴⁰ is also presented as an environment with its own aesthetic demands. Not only did the human become less interesting to Latrobe in the context of the second volume, the human figure was only represented as a kind of humorous aside.

The two volumes also differ in their treatment of the same subject—that is, the natural environment. The European landscapes are, in their offering of distant views, more expansive. The upper edge and sides of the frame are generally left open to the sky, with the figural elements tastefully crowded into composed groups. They almost invariably include some sign of human habitation, either in the foreground, prominently lit in the background, or, as in the case of the coast of England, in every part of the picture (Figure 2.4). In contrast, the American scenes are cropped more tightly, with large trees exceeding, or nearly exceeding, the frame (Figure 2.5). The backgrounds are filled with a rich texture of vegetation which creates a veritable wall, and the lack of constructed human presence in about half of the images makes it difficult to determine the exact scale of the elements depicted. This compression is especially striking because there are often strong elements in the foreground which press in on the sides of the scene (large rocks, particularly) or even loom in the center in an awkward, un-picturesque composition (Figure 2.6). Nevertheless the American images do not surrender to a feeling of wildness; the scenes are composed, with the forms, textures, and colors all carefully rendered.

140. We can only speculate on whether this corresponds to a shift in Latrobe's interests, or whether, the interest in American landscapes having already been established, he nevertheless felt the need to refer to his European experience in the first volume.



Figure 2.4: BHL, [The coast of England at Hastings], *Essay* (Vol. 1), 1798. Watercolor, ink, and wash on paper. Library of Virginia.



Figure 2.5: BHL, [Scene on the Appomattox River], *Essay* (Vol. 2), 1799. Watercolor, ink, and wash on paper. Library of Virginia.



Figure 2.6: BHL, [A mulberry-cherry tree at Heathville, Virginia], *Essay* (Vol. 2), 1799. Watercolor, ink, and wash on paper. Library of Virginia.

An American Picturesque

Latrobe's *Essay on Landscape* is a drawing instruction manual that contains very little drawing instruction. Having in Volume One quickly dispatched with the expected topics (composition, light and shadow, and tinting), Latrobe turned his attention to his sample sketches—but attended to them in an unexpected manner. Ascribing to each one at most a cursory instructional value, Latrobe spent most of his text on his real interest: the place depicted. Far from serving as a kind of exegesis of the scene's formal qualities, Latrobe's text sponsors other visions in the mind of the reader; indeed it sometimes seems that the watercolor or ink sketch is merely a notation that punctuates the fuller written description of a place and its history.

Latrobe also utilized different kinds of narratives to describe his scenes. There is the eyewitness account (usually Latrobe's, though sometimes belonging to a friend). There are also what we might call histories of common knowledge, which, like the "Siege of York [Virginia]," are "well known to everybody."¹⁴¹ Latrobe related these accounts in the third person, sometimes supplementing them with personal asides. Finally there is what Latrobe called the "traditionary" account or history, which he associated with peasants and children—these are "curious" and even sources of fun, but they are nevertheless considered worth mentioning, as leavening to the text if for no other reason.

The *Essay's* first two pages are missing, and the first words encountered by the contemporary reader allude to Latrobe's preference for artistic representations of "the Beauty of Nature" rather than

141. Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 487.

those of “the actions of Man.”¹⁴² Latrobe explained to Spotswood that, while market preference has favored the development of History paintings, there is “a Landscape painter, who, in his art, equals the first of” the great painters. The Landscape painter is, unsurprisingly, Claude Lorraine. Though Latrobe praised the sensuality of Lorrain's landscapes at length, he also valued Lorrain's portrayal of man's presence in the landscape:

Words cannot describe his pictures. They live. The spectator can travel in them. They contain the Geography of Kingdoms. His canvass seems inspired. You almost feel the Warmth of his Sun; or the coolness of his breeze, which appears to wave the vegetating foliage. In his sea pieces you fancy that, the surge murmurs; and his moonlights chill you with their damp foggy vapor. Nothing can be more beautiful and correct than his architecture, in which most landscape painters fail.¹⁴³

Latrobe's praise of Lorrain's architectural representations complicates somewhat his preceding prioritization of the “Beauty of Nature” over “the actions of Man,” but more importantly Latrobe's emphasis on Lorrain's beautiful *and* correct depictions of architecture offers an important clue to Latrobe's aesthetic values. He differed from a more conventional appreciation of Lorrain, which only valued the “lesser” genre of landscape painting by emphasizing the artist's taste and skill in transforming a given scene. This position is exemplified by Sir Joshua Reynolds, who praised Lorrain for recognizing “that taking nature as he found it seldom produced beauty.”¹⁴⁴ In contrast, Latrobe's valuation of the “correctness” of Lorrain's architecture is only a first hint of the extent to which he would apply the criterion of correctness to other aspects of the painted landscape.

142. Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 468.

143. *Ibid.*

144. “Discourse IV,” in Joshua Reynolds, and Robert R. Wark, *Discourses on Art* (New Haven: Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art (London) Ltd. by Yale University Press, 1997), 69-70.

Latrobe's definition of "correctness" requires some explanation. As he explained it, the "correct" painter rejected those prospects which could not be arranged into pleasing compositions; if a certain prospect had to be painted, the painter might attempt to improve it by adding "rocks, trees, figures, and clouds casting broad shadows"—but these had to be used judiciously. Latrobe cautioned Spotswood that "these licenses become with many painters such a habit, that it is impossible to recognize the *character* of the countries they represent in their pictures" [emphasis his].¹⁴⁵ Though he was speaking of the aesthetics of landscape representation, Latrobe's statement echoes one made in his journal regarding a physical landscape: "the woods are beautiful, but the modes of cultivation prevent the effect of contrast they might produce, were the ground cleared in small patches and the woods separated into bodies of less extent."¹⁴⁶ In both of these cases, Latrobe emphasized the importance of moderate effort. One could clear the ground, and one could introduce pleasing elements to one's picture, but true beauty arises from a tension between these human efforts and a sensitivity to nature's pre-existing beauty or character. In turn, nature by itself also misses the mark: "the woods are beautiful," but they would produce more of an effect if they were separated by the fields "into bodies of less extent."

The explanation which follows Latrobe's admonition to Spotswood in the *Essay* heightens the ambiguity of "correctness" and "character" in Latrobe's thought. Describing the sketches of a young painter with whom he travelled to the bay of Naples, Latrobe wrote that he "discover'd in every one of his Scratches strong Character of bold composition." And upon visiting his friend a week later to

145. Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 475.

146. *Ibid.*, 145.

view the finished Landscapes, Latrobe admitted that “as for composition, light, coloring, richness of detail, and correctness of drawing, I never saw surpassed in Water colors.” However, after the first wave of admiration had passed, Latrobe “discovered the grossest errors in the Geography of his pictures. Islands, mountains, and palaces were shifted about by his magic pencil at random, and the productions of his luxuriant fancy were sold at high prices for ‘Views in the bay of Naples taken on the Spot.’” Almost petulantly, Latrobe concluded, “This is not fair. It is to me, I think, a considerable advantage to be a very indifferent painter. I shall never be an eminent one, but I hope always to be correct, and I advise you to follow the same rule.”¹⁴⁷

Latrobe's description of his friend's work manifests a tension between two paradigms: the Picturesque, in which correctness of drawing referred to the artist's tasteful and judicious composition, and the empirical, in which correctness referred to the unadulterated documentation and transmission of a subject's likeness (or, as Latrobe terms it, its “character”). This latter understanding of “correctness” and its relation to the “character” of a painting's source is significant because it distinguishes Latrobe's understanding of the picturesque landscape from that of Englishmen like William Gilpin, for whom Nature was “always great in design, but unequal in composition.”¹⁴⁸ This was not necessarily a fault in nature, but rather a problem of scale. Nature, Gilpin explained, “works on a *vast scale*, and no doubt, harmoniously, if her schemes could be comprehended.” Gilpin encouraged his students to compose their landscapes according to an aesthetic more suitable to the taste of man.

147. Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 477.

148. William Gilpin, *Observations on the River Wye, and Several Parts of South Wales, &c. Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty; Made in the Summer of the Year 1770* (London: R. Blamire, 1782), 19.

In contrast, Latrobe, at least in the first volume of the *Essay on Landscape*, rejected taste as the supreme arbiter of a picture's quality.

Latrobe's slippage between general and particular understandings of "Landscape" is also revealing. The term both refers to what we might call a "concept" of Landscape, as when Latrobe says that a certain sketch "contains all the features of a Landscape"¹⁴⁹; and yet on the same page "a Landscape" is a particular entity whose "principal and essential features" may be captured in a sketch. Indeed, Latrobe's repeated and insistent recurrence to the narratives of particular landscapes suggests that, in striking contrast to picturesque artists like Lorrain and William Gilpin, the term was never meant as a purely aesthetic one. Even in the midst of his drawing instruction, Latrobe deemed it necessary to formulate his critique in both aesthetic and pragmatic terms. Towards the beginning of the second volume, Latrobe presented two sketches which "show the contrast of the benevolence of nature, and the ingenuity of Man": "under the spreading Oak on the left every hour of the day is shady and cool," he explained, while on the right a barren landscape created by the "rage of trimming" "may be easily recognized [as] the old arrangement of a Virginian plantation" (Figure 2.7).¹⁵⁰ While Latrobe attributed this difference to the uncultivated taste of the young country, further analysis of both his own writings and those of his contemporaries suggests that the difference in preferences ran deeper, pointing to fundamentally different views of the landscape.

149. Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 514.

150. *Ibid.*, 500.



Figure 2.7: BHL, ["The benevolence of nature" vs. "The ingenuity of man"], *Essay* (Vol. 2), 1799. Watercolor, ink, and wash on paper. Library of Virginia.

Through Latrobe's narratives we comprehend landscapes as they are worked by humans. The first developed scene¹⁵¹ of the *Essay on Landscape*, framed by a carefully drawn roundel, depicts Kirkstall Abbey, which only "began to rise into its subsequent Grandeur" after a holy Monk discovered and organized the efforts of a "parcel of hermits, who [had been] working out their salvation in solitary uselessness" (Figure 2.8).¹⁵² The next scene, which portrays a German castle in the distance (Figure 2.9), accompanies an account of the depraved feudal Baron's reduction by Emperor Otto III.

Through these narratives, Latrobe suggested that the scenes might be pleasing to look upon, but both the scene itself and its appreciation were only comprehensible in the context of human activity. Re-

151. The first four sketches "are not Views of any particular scenery in Nature." Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 473.

152. *Ibid.*, 480.

peatedly he set the beauty of the landscape against political and industrial endeavors. York town might have "an excellent harbor," for example, "but of what use is an harbor without a trade."¹⁵³

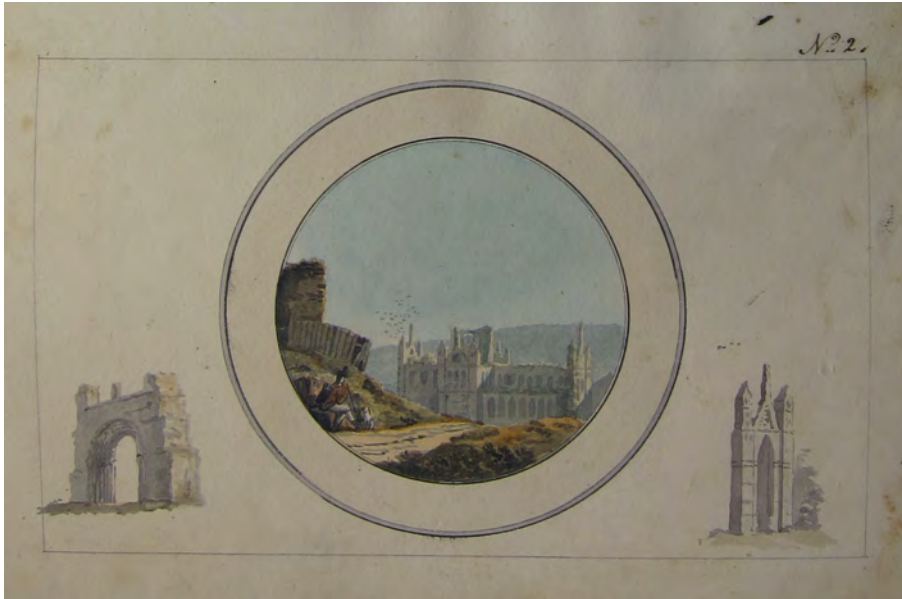


Figure 2.8: BHL, [Kirkstall Abbey, Yorkshire, England], *Essay* (Vol. 1), 1798. Watercolor, ink, and wash on paper. Library of Virginia.



Figure 2.9: BHL, [The Tollenstein in the mountains of Bohemia], *Essay* (Vol. 1), 1798. Watercolor, ink, and wash on paper. Library of Virginia.

153. Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 489.

The questions of climate and habitability discussed in the previous chapter significantly impacted the American vision of the ideal landscape. If, in his description of the picturesque aesthetic, Gilpin called for a “mallet” with which he could “deface” and “make . . . *rough*” [emphasis his] the smooth building,¹⁵⁴ some early American writers expressed a decided preference for refinement and a clean finish. This commitment was clearly articulated in the article by Hugh Williamson that made such an impression on Buffon. When Williamson made a case for clearing the ground, he repeatedly emphasized the desirability of a “clear smooth” land (whether field or continent); he compared “hard smooth surfaces” like a looking glass or any polished metal to “rough and unequal” surfaces like a wooden board. Similarly “rocks and smooth beds of land reflect more heat, than a soft broken surface of clay.”¹⁵⁵ Williamson’s comparisons thus set a more developed or finished material against a less-manipulated one—and more importantly, perhaps, a finished or smooth aesthetic against an unfinished or rough one.

Latrobe understood well the pragmatic advantages of a regular landscape, noting in a journal entry that Flat Creek deserved its name and that it appeared to him that “if it were a little straighter . . . it would be already be navigable for Batteaux.”¹⁵⁶ At the same time, the bemusement expressed by this statement suggested, in contrast to Williamson, an awareness that human order and natural order were fundamentally different. Williamson’s comparison, for example, between “rocks and smooth beds” and “a soft broken surface of clay” implies that the more-human-suited and less-

154. William Gilpin, *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty; on Picturesque Travel; and on Sketching Landscape: To Which is Added a Poem, on Landscape Painting* (London: R. Blamire, 1792), 7-8.

155. Williamson, “An Attempt to Account for the Change of Climate,” 275.

156. Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 140.

human-suited can both be found in nature, and thus that humans were merely furthering a pre-existing tendency. Later in the *Essay*, Latrobe mentioned being forced to document “a scene peculiar to our country,” because it would cease to exist when the riverbanks are in “compleat cultivation” (Figure 2.10). By this he clearly acknowledged that human development involved the exchange of one kind of order, and beauty, for another.

Moreover, Latrobe was not as dogmatic as Williamson in assessing the advisability of exchanging soft ground for clear, smooth land; in a passage of his Virginia journals, previously mentioned, he in fact disparaged a farmer’s too-even clearing of the land: “the woods are beautiful,” he noted, “but the mode of cultivation prevents the effect they might produce, were the ground cleared in smaller patches and the woods separated into bodies of less extent.”¹⁵⁷ Here he seemed to be questioning the clearing of the land that was praised by Williamson and, to a lesser extent, Jefferson. The same sentiment, presumably, governed his critique of the Virginian plantation whose trees have been stripped (Figure 2.7). In this vein, the *Essay on Landscape*—and especially the second volume—is filled with scenes which portray the beauty of the untamed American landscape.

Nevertheless, towards the end of the second volume of the *Essay on Landscape*, Latrobe begins to express a different view of the beautiful landscape which, without adopting anything so absolute as Williamson’s polished metal landscape, similarly appreciated beauty-in-developability. Describing the Granite Rocks of James River, Latrobe explained that they are

157. Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 145.

all chrystalyzed, that is, formed in distinct and regular shapes, which they preserve in a great degree even on the surface, where time and weather have worn off their edges and hollowed out their softer parts. On the Potowmac, the Granite is still more beautifully chrystalyzed. The edges are so sharp and the Surfaces so true, that the Masons have little more trouble, than to break them into proper sizes, in order to construct very regular Walls.¹⁵⁸

The vignette which accompanies this statement goes so far as to lightly mark in geometric designs on the surface of the stone, as if anticipating its ornamentation (Figure 2.11). Here, Latrobe clearly valued the *regular* beauty of Nature in its initial formation—and, significantly, its formal foreshadowing of its adoption or utilization for human purposes.



Figure 2.10: BHL, ["A scene peculiar to our country"], *Essay* (Vol. 2), 1799. Watercolor, ink, and wash on paper. Library of Virginia.

158. Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 518.

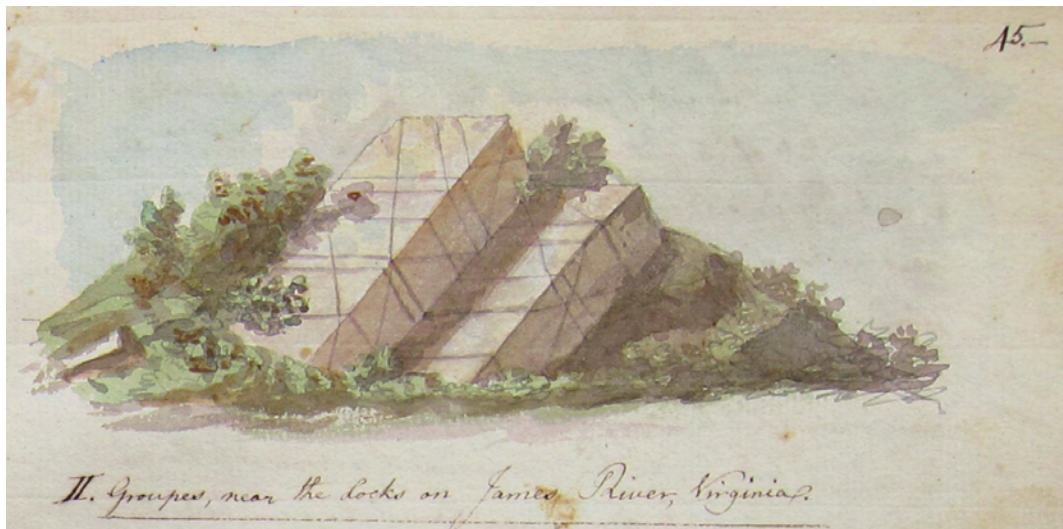


Figure 2.11: BHL, "Groupes, near the Locks on James River, Virginia," *Essay* (Vol. 2), 1799. Watercolor, ink, and wash on paper. Library of Virginia.

Latrobe's description of the granite differentiates his understanding of wear from a more conventional picturesque understanding of it. Yet, even in a more typically picturesque description by Latrobe, there are some telling differences. Returning to the introduction of the first volume of the *Essay*, we find Latrobe intertwining landscape, beauty, history, and cultivation in his gradual development of "the perfect composition":

When you stand upon the summit of a hill, and see an extensive country of woods and fields without interruption spread before you, you look at it with pleasure. On the Virginia rivers there are a thousand such positions. But this pleasure is perhaps very much derived from a sort of consciousness of superiority of position to all the monotony below you. But turn yourself so as to include in your view a wide expanse of Water, contrasting by its cool blue surface, the waving, and many colored carpet of the Earth, your pleasure is immediately doubled, or rather a new and much greater pleasure arises. An historical effect is produced. The trade and the cultivation of the country crowd into the mind, the imagination runs up the invisible creeks, and visits the half seen habitations. A thousand circumstances are fancied which are not beheld, and the indications of what probably exists, give the pleasure which its view would afford. Having satiated your eye with this prospect, retire within the Grove, so that the foreground shall consist of trees, and shadowy earth. / The landscape is immediately lightened up with a thousand new beauties, arising from the novelty of the

Contrast. This particular effect, of seeing a distant view glittering among near objects is familiar to every observer. The Landscape is now become a perfect composition.¹⁵⁹

From this passage it is evident that the water's significance, which was such a catalyst of pleasure, derived from its ability to invoke "trade and cultivation." Importantly, trade and cultivation, though important to Latrobe (as is even more evident in Volume Two) were also stand-ins for, quite simply, *possibility*: "a thousand circumstances are fancied which are not beheld, and the indications of what probably exists, give the pleasure which its view would afford." For Latrobe, the perfect composition was generative. This is evident in both his descriptions of the act of seeing and his narrative accompaniments to his watercolors. We will return to this "historical effect," with its delight in imaginative projection, later in this chapter. First, however, we must digress—as Latrobe did—to a very different kind of vision which paradoxically supports the promises of the first.

Looking into Nature

In her book, *Citizen-Spectator* (2011), Wendy Bellion discusses the ways in which visual acuity was highlighted and problematized in the early Republic.¹⁶⁰ In comparison to the highly self-conscious and reflexive visual games played by American painters, Latrobe's determination to provide "true" representations of places seems almost naive. Nevertheless, the play between the visual and textual sketch, the various kinds of histories Latrobe used to contextualize and deepen the impression received by the reader, and even his ambivalent evaluation of his own representational skills all served

159. Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 473-74.

160. "The Politics of Discernment," in Bellion, *Citizen-Spectator*, 63-112.

to interrogate the self-apparent truth of the image. In the second volume of the *Essay on Landscape*, Latrobe continued this interrogation, but now with more attention to that which precedes the representation: sight itself.

Towards the end of Volume One, Latrobe had forecast this interest by considering the inner vitality of some animate and inanimate subjects. First describing a sea anemone, "a singular sea-animal, or Plant—for it is both," he explained that, though unprepossessing in its exterior appearance, it possess an interior "which it can open and shut at pleasure," "exhibit[ing] the most beautiful Colors in an innumerable Tassel of fibres, which radiate from a Center."¹⁶¹ He provided Spotswood with a colored drawing of the creature fully opened (Figure 2.12). If the sea anemone usually displayed its vivid interior, Latrobe had just prior to this described an object less generous in exhibiting its contents. The "bathing Machine," the illustration of which appears a few pages earlier and is thus disconnected from its textual description (Figure 2.13), is a strange but apt companion to the sea anemone. "A small wooden Chamber upon four Wheels," the Machine possesses a door and moveable steps at each end:

Into this machine the Ladies enter from the beach, and shutting the door, may undress in the most convenient manner. In the meantime a horse being harnessed to the end next to the sea, draws them into a proper depth of Water. He is then taken out. A Guide attends to assist the Ladies in bathing. When they have done, the horse being harnessed to the other end, draws them again on shore. During this journey they may dress themselves. Many of the Machines have a Canvass Awning towards the sea, which hides the bathers from sight.¹⁶²

161. Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 491.

162. *Ibid.*

These descriptions suggest a fascination for the inner lives of things, and, more importantly, the ability of objects to transform their appearance, and significance, by alternately revealing and hiding their interiors. Perhaps most importantly, the changing existence of these things in time demands a kind of engagement very different from that requested by a Picturesque landscape. What appears to be a dull blob at one moment can in the next exhibit a vibrant, feathery delight. What appears to be an anonymous box on wheels is now a vehicle, now an interior, now a screen for shielding its contents when they are deposited into the sea. And, suddenly, the horse being attached to the landward end, the object's very directionality is reversed. Attentiveness is rewarded by a delicious ambiguity.



Figure 2.12: BHL, [Sea anemone], *Essay* (Vol. 1), 1798. Watercolor, ink, and wash on paper. Library of Virginia.



Figure 2.13: BHL, [Bathing-machine], *Essay* (Vol. 1), 1798. Watercolor, ink, and wash on paper. Library of Virginia.

The second volume did not immediately return to these interesting propositions. As mentioned previously, Latrobe began by sharply and absolutely contrasting the “characters” of American and European landscapes (Figure 2.7). Latrobe derogated the American treatment of trees, observing that the “cultivated” landscape makes it appear “as if the War waged by Agriculture against our forests, had been a War of extermination, and that, while we combated the Nation of trees in our Woods, we had ungenerously extended our enmity to the individuals about our houses.”¹⁶³ This poetic vision of trees as individuals, even to the point of forming a Nation, is significant. “For my own part,” Latrobe confided, “I have a particular attachment to trees”:

Considering them as beings endowed with sensation—in which opinion I am not at all singular or original—I feel pleasure in preserving as many as possible from pain, mutilation, and death. You will smile at the sentiment and the expression; but if I thought you would forgive the seeming pedantry of a digression upon this subject, I might perhaps convince you, that we all believe, without hesitation, many things, less probable, and less innocent in their effects upon our principles. I will try.¹⁶⁴

Latrobe seems to have had very good luck in broaching his “animated vegetable” theory as a topic of conversation with women, and its reappearance in the *Essay on Landscape* (after its apparent deflation by Latrobe’s “Tale of Osbert,” a satire recorded in his journal two years prior) is probably motivated by this previous success.¹⁶⁵ Nevertheless, Latrobe’s very real knowledge of the plants and animals he

163. Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 500.

164. *Ibid.*

165. “The Tale of Osbert,” a satire of the difficulties that befall a hero over-sensitive to the sensate life of plants and objects, is a complexly layered tale. Towards the end, one of the characters reads a letter written by “Henry [presumably Latrobe] to “Lydia” [the real name of Latrobe’s first wife] before their union,” which falls decidedly on the side of pragmatism. Following the letter, the narrator comments that he has had “my own doubts resolved by two very sensible, humane, and cadid Sisters, Mrs. Paine and Miss Betsy Hay, both of whom agree that the said sensibility is very ridiculous.” Carter identifies both of these women as members of Latrobe’s Richmond social circle. *Ibid.*, 291-93.

describes is undeniable, as is his interest in emphasizing their particularity to the local *American* environment.

Latrobe began with some well-known examples of creatures who exhibit “a gradual sliding, if I may use the expression, of the one mode of life into the other.”¹⁶⁶ These included, among others, warm-blooded porpoises and whales, turtles, and flying squirrels. Claiming “a very large portion of reason” for the Ant, the Bee, and the Wasp, Latrobe expanded upon this claim in a footnote by relating the “considered” reaction of a “Mason” (wasp) whose “little town” of clay cells he disrupted (Figure 2.14):

As to their being rational creatures—if reason, as far as action can discover it, is the adapting, and changing our exertions according to the unexpected variety of circumstances—the following account of my own observation may throw some light upon it. . . If this proceeding was not the result of consideration, I give up all claim to reason, and am content that all my works, great and small, shall be ascribed to Instinct. At all events I think the Mason deserves to have his picture drawn.¹⁶⁷

It is important to reiterate that Latrobe's playful tone here is congruent with the *Essay's* intended audience, but the fact nevertheless remains that Latrobe, not content simply to blur the boundaries between animal and vegetable, was willing to compare himself to an insect.

166. Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 501.

167. *Ibid.*, 502-03.



Figure 2.14: BHL, ["The Mason"], *Essay* (Vol. 2), 1799. Watercolor, ink, and wash on paper. Library of Virginia.

Having described (and drawn with strangely enlarged proportion [Figure 2.15]), “a species of Barnacles that grow upon the bottom of Ships in their passage through warm Latitudes,” Latrobe assured Spotswood that closer examples were at hand: “our ditches abound in a numerous Class of Zoophytes, more within the reach of every ones examination: the Polypus.” He drew the species for her in its three states, and described its propagating abilities—not only could one obtain multiple Polyps by splitting a single one in various ways, one could also, after turning it inside out, observe it revise its insides and outsides accordingly (Figure 2.16). These creatures were not only strange by virtue of their ambiguous existence between “plant” and “animal,” but, like the sea anemone or the bathing machine, they rewarded extended—and extensive—observation with strange behaviors over time. In the case of the polypus, its truly wondrous ability was only revealed by a very unnatural human intervention: turning the poor creature inside out.



Figure 2.15: BHL, [Barnacles], *Essay* (Vol. 2), 1799. Watercolor, ink, and wash on paper. Library of Virginia.

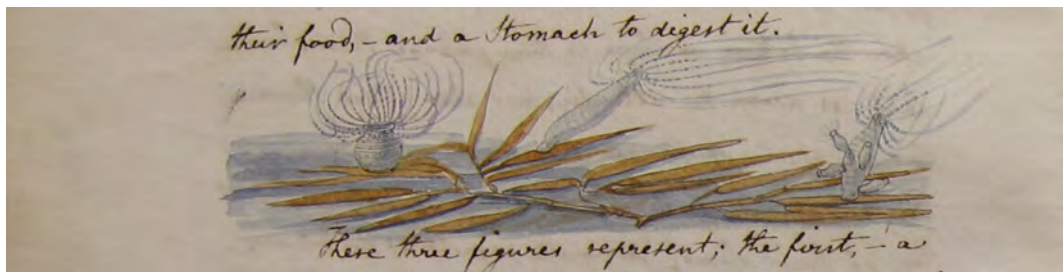


Figure 2.16: BHL, [Polyps], *Essay* (Vol. 2), 1799. Watercolor, ink, and wash on paper. Library of Virginia.

Having just described a local species, Latrobe's repeated emphasis of the native quality is striking: "our own marshes," he said, "produce a very curious plant. It is called the Flycatcher. Perhaps you have seen it. I met with it in a botanical Garden at Paris, but have not yet found it here" (Figure 2.17).¹⁶⁸ In the postscript to this volume, Latrobe would apologetically acknowledge that the Venus flytrap could not actually be found in the marshes of Virginia, though "the *description* which was wrote from memory, is accurate."¹⁶⁹ In the moment, however, he used it as a reason to quote a description of a similar plant, the *Silene*, in Erasmus Darwin's "The Loves of the Plants." This poem

168. Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 505.

169. *Ibid.*, 531.

was well-known in the late eighteenth century for its pleasantly titillating claims; Latrobe noted that “from the Sexual arrangement of plants, a most beautiful and fascinating system might be spun, which would confer on them, not only sensation, but sentiment and affection.”¹⁷⁰ As with the Mason (wasp), this statement suggests that the “sliding” of one mode of life into another was not simply physical but psychological.



Figure 2.17: BHL, [Venus Flytrap], *Essay* (Vol. 2), 1799. Watercolor, ink, and wash on paper. Library of Virginia.

170. Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 509.

Latrobe's presentation of natural histories in the second volume complicated his understanding of the relationship between beauty, utility, and potential. In general, the architect was there much more attentive to, and accords more importance to, nature as it is found. In this regard, scholarship that emphasizes the American Picturesque as a mode that “explored the premise that beauty could be derived from utility and the struggle for human existence within nature” misses the possibility that there was a preceding need: the need to see natural beauty in its own right *before* it “had been tamed and made productive by the tastes of humans.”¹⁷¹

Latrobe does not seem to have understood or acknowledged the American landscape as one transformed by its earlier inhabitants, but we should not assume that as an early American he necessarily saw the land as “empty, . . . silent, . . . and . . . untouched.”¹⁷² For Latrobe the land, even that which seemed empty of human remains, was filled with evidence of the passage of time. In the first interlude we described his observations of the Cape Henry Sand Hills and the unavoidably-incorrect hypothesis of a future philosopher. In the second volume of the *Essay on Landscape*, Latrobe himself acted as such a philosopher, speculating—while emphasizing the uncertainty inherent in such speculation—on the origin of some of the “singularities” of the Coal country west of Richmond.

Providing an annotated section of the river for Spotswood (Figure 2.18), Latrobe explained that “the wood that is found in it *seems* once to have been in a loose state, and to have been deposited by Water. It would *appear* as if the whole Mixture has been brought from some other part of the

171. Brett Culbert, “The Nascent Picturesque: Visualizing Wilderness and Industry in the New World” (Harvard University Graduate School of Design, 2011), 79.

172. Clive Bush, “‘Gilded Backgrounds’: Reflections on the Perception of Space and Landscape in America,” in *Views of American Landscapes*, ed. M. Gidley, and Robert. Lawson-Peebles (Cambridge [England] ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 27.

Continent, and had been left here by accident, having been, in its fall broken into large distinct Masses. They lie very irregularly, but their General arrangement suits the hollow into which they *appear* to have tumbled” [emphases added].¹⁷³ In each sentence, Latrobe’s emphasis on semblance draws the reader’s attention to the possible difference between the process as hypothesized and the process as it occurred. Indeed, his repeated use of these words (“appear,” “seem,”), and the emphatic re-use of “appear” towards the end of the last sentence of the paragraph does not just hint at that difference—it insists on it. At the same time, the curious phrasing of the last sentence introduces a complication: Latrobe suggested that though the Masses lay very irregularly, “their General arrangement *suits* the hollow into which they appear to have tumbled” [emphasis added]. Consequently, though Latrobe emphasized the incidental nature of the processes hypothesized (the Mixture left “by accident,” the Masses “lie very irregularly,”), he nevertheless suggested the observability of a certain suitability (which he leaves unspecified). At least two different implications come to mind: one, that Nature’s order, despite the intervening presence of a series of wayward processes, ultimately prevails; or two, that the first part of the clause is meant to cast doubt on the second part—that is, that the General arrangement suiting the hollow gives the lie to the notion that they appear to have tumbled into it. This latter is perhaps the more likely of the two when we recall the example of the Cape Henry Sand Hill example, in which a more dramatic change is posited than actually occurred.

173. Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 516-17.



Figure 2.18: BHL, "Section of James river, 20 miles from Richmond to Graham's Pits," *Essay* (Vol. 2), 1799. Watercolor, ink, and wash on paper. Library of Virginia.

While it could be argued that the human interest of this short section is made clear by Latrobe's opening allusion to the region as "Coal country," the relevance of these speculations remains somewhat obscure. In the section following it, however, which concerns the "chrystallized rocks" of the James River, Latrobe clearly outlined the relationship between natural order, beauty, time, and human order. If in describing the crystallized granite Latrobe was at first resigned to the erosion of their "distinct and regular shapes," his next passage suggested that the wear of natural processes could have its own appeal:

When I see in every part of our earth, such a confused and disordered state of its materials as is every where exhibited, such a jumble of finished workmanship as appears in all our chrystallized rocks, mingled with the wreck of ancient forests, and the petrified remains of sea and land animals, I could fancy myself imprisoned within the Walls of an old Cathedral, such as Europe every where exhibits—the fretted roof of which is broken down, the columns fallen, and the shattered pavement covered with the rubbish. Every attempt to clear a way through the ruin, bares the bones of some being that had once life like myself, and I puzzle my imagination to discover or to invent his history. The World, indeed, is a great Cemetery; every thing is composed,

and is upheld by the decomposition, and destruction of something else; and the gay tapestry of every spring, viels [sic] the murders of all the preceding seasons!¹⁷⁴

Latrobe's startling move here is not so much his recognition of what we might call "age-value,"¹⁷⁵ but his ascription of this value to human works *and* natural works alike. Thus, if the conventional Picturesque is that which rehabilitates nature by incorporating aspects of the genre of history (painting), Latrobe's sought to imbue nature itself with these aspects of history. However, unlike an "old Cathedral," the power of America's "chrystalyzed rocks, mingled with the wreck of ancient forests, and the petrified remains of sea and land animals," derived precisely from the fact that the great Cemetery of the World was absolutely *not* human-made and that it thus alluded even more strongly to the immense span of time that had preceded, and would underlay, the country's future development.

As this passage makes clear, though, nature thus ennobled had to resign itself to its destruction. Concerned that he had inspired melancholy in Spotswood by his speculations, Latrobe rushed to assure her that "the succession of being, to which our short sighted language has affixed the terms *death* and destruction, consists [sic] the perpetual renovation of youth, and the eternal round of the pleasures of varied sensation." Perhaps hoping to lighten the tone, Latrobe next conjured up, in text and images, the Butterfly, that "little instructive creature [who] may be said to die, and to be resuscitated nine times" over the course of a year (Figure 2.19).¹⁷⁶ If the generic Butterfly was presented as a

174. Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 518-19.

175. Alois Riegl, "The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin," *Oppositions* 25 (1982): 21-51.

176. Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 519.

metaphor for the necessary exchanging of one order for another, Latrobe's next comments recall the peculiarities of nature's particulars:

The butterfly I have represented is of the species that lie still in the day, and only fly at night. (*Phalaena*.) They are very common in Germany, and in England, and their caterpillar destroys the Aspin and Poplar. When irritated, he shoots from each of his tails, a fine scarlet thread, which curls, and is drawn into the sheath, as soon as he recovers his good humour. When ready to spin, he seeks a place to build his cocoon, and fixes generally on a piece of wood. He then spins a glutinous thread, and cutting chips from the wood he glues them together, and forms an enclosure, which a very sharp knife can scarcely penetrate. He is careful however to leave a weak place at one end, through which, in spring, he escapes, a *Butterfly*.¹⁷⁷

As with the wasp, or even the trees, Latrobe again painted the creature as one possessed of agency, who intentionally "shoots" the scarlet thread from each of his tails when irritated and who "is careful to leave a weak place" in his cocoon. And, small as it is, the creature could hold its own in a human-dominated sphere, destroying useful trees and resisting the penetration of even "a very sharp knife." As presented in these two paragraphs together, the butterfly summarized the paradox of nature as a noble, complex agent and nature that falls, unmourned, in the face of human development.



Figure 2.19: BHL, [Butterfly], *Essay* (Vol. 1), 1799. Watercolor, ink, and wash on paper. Library of Virginia.

177. Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 520.

A detour to Latrobe's journals may help us better understand his vision of nature and its relation to the human. While Latrobe certainly took advantage of the "animated vegetable" theory as a stimulating topic of conversation, he privately recorded some stranger, less playful reflections upon the subject. Regarding his "rational" Masons, for example, Latrobe's more extended description of their activities in his journals reveals a vitalist sentiment even as it recognized the potential errors of it—it was not an unselfconscious anthropomorphizing. Upon opening the "cells" created by the wasps, Latrobe found that each cell contained up to a dozen spiders, crammed in and only partially conscious, many of which died upon being exposed (Figure 2.20):

(I have been often shocked and distressed at the Scenes of cruelty and misery that seem to form part of the System of nature; but I scarce ever saw so dreadful a contrivance of torment as appears to be employed by the Masons against the poor Spiders; if we may reason upon their feelings from our own.) The variety of Spiders collected by these industrious Robbers is much greater than my own curiosity ever exhibited to me in my searches after subjects of natural history.¹⁷⁸

Even while hesitating to "reason upon [the Spiders'] feelings from our own," Latrobe drew complex conclusions from his comparisons of the behavior of the wasps to the behavior of humans. He had often been "shocked and distressed" by the cruelty of nature, but the "industrious Robbers [wasps]" had succeeded in collecting a much greater variety of spiders than that that achieved by this human practitioner of natural history. Anthropomorphization thus had the curious property of both demoting and elevating, and this double characterization is key to understanding Latrobe's complicated relationship with animated nature. For Latrobe, nature had an order which was independent of, and not fully comprehensible, to human understanding. If the incompatibility of natural order with

178. Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 159-60.

human order made necessary its destruction in the face of human development, its noble properties also rendered it a fitting antecedent for American civilization—which, in the eyes of early European Americans, lacked a true "history" on which it could build.



Figure 2.20: BHL, [Masons, or dirtdaubers], Journals, 1796. Watercolor and ink on paper. Maryland Historical Society.

While climate provided a way for Latrobe and others to imagine the natural refinement of American society, Latrobe's modified Picturesque supported a deeper, stranger understanding of the nature which underlies that society. It is paradoxical, perhaps, to suggest that a more sensitive understanding went hand-in-hand with an almost callously utilitarian perspective, but this does seem to be Latrobe's position. Whether nature, examined closely, revealed itself to be savage or merely inimical to human order, it could not be, in its untouched form, fully reconciled to "compleat cultivation." Latrobe's valuation of natural order came about because he wanted nature to provide America's history, and not because he wanted to preserve or romanticize it.

Interlude: Cape Henry in Transition

In his "Memoir of the Sand-hills of Cape Henry" (1798), Latrobe explains the siting of the Cape's public buildings. Set "upon the highest sand hill" available, the lighthouse, at the time of its construction, commanded "the most expanded view of the ocean, the Desart, the Chesapeak and its eastern shore." With this, it serves the mouth of the Bay, "perhaps the inlet to more ships than any other in the United States."¹⁷⁹

And yet the very wind that created the conditions for this structure is daily working towards its destruction. With each high tide, the wind heightens and extends the reach of the sand hills, gradually burying trees and buildings alike. Its influence extends beyond the coast itself; preventing the loamy soil from draining, the hills have created a swamp known by its residents as "the Desart." The very fact that the swamp has residents, and a nickname, suggests that the area is not quite as desolate as one might expect. Indeed, the "inexhaustible abundance of fish and oysters in the creeks, and the game," allows the skirts of the Desart to be "more thickly peopled than the sterility of the soil would give reason to suppose."

Even so, the residents of the Desart are only able to survive by adapting themselves to the natural conditions that are given to them. Resistance would be futile. As Latrobe says of the trees in the

179. Cape Henry was a site of both national and personal significance. The *Eliza* having been blown slightly off-course as it neared its destination in 1796, Cape Henry was the point of its first landfall. However, the architect's later visit to the Sand-hills seems to be motivated by more than an individual's desire to explore the place which provided the first glimpse of his new home. Though titled a memoir, Latrobe's paper is addressed more to Cape Henry's broader significance, and Latrobe thus decries the wooden staircase of the lighthouse, characterizing its susceptibility to fire "an unpardonable fault" (the building itself "is a good solid building of Rappahannoc freestone"). The Cape Henry Lighthouse is further distinguished by its status as "the nation's first public works project under the Constitution." Latrobe, et al., *Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, 1:109.

face of the encroaching sand, “their destruction is slow, but inevitable.”¹⁸⁰ The same could be said of the light house and its associated structures: “at present, a mound of sand surrounds them, which overtops the keeper’s dwelling, and has buried his kitchen to the eaves.”¹⁸¹ The illustration's shading reiterates the point: both the buildings and the “accumulation of sand since 1783” being drawn in white, it is as if the buildings at any moment could dissolve into their surroundings, as the trees, drawn in a mazy black to the right of the image, have already done.

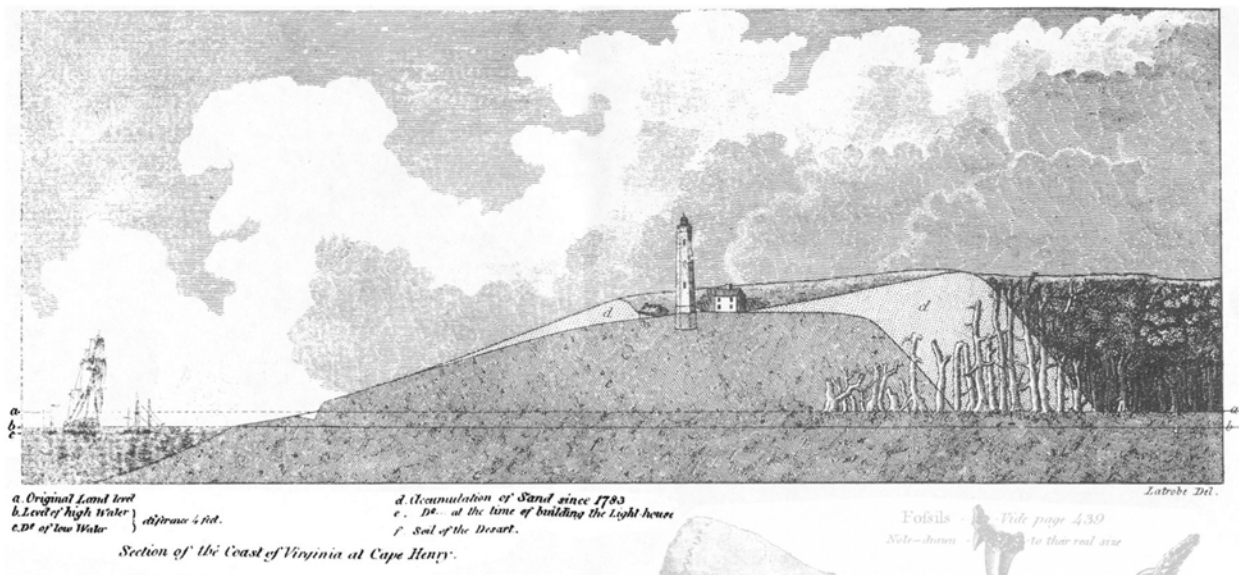


Figure I.2: BHL, Detail of Plate for "Memoir on the Sand-hills of Cape Henry . . .," 1799.

The lighthouse's architect is not to blame; indeed that individual did all that could be asked for in locating the site from which "the most expanded view" could be had. Like the philosopher who cannot avoid making an erroneous hypothesis about the Sand-hills' geological formation, the ar-

180. Latrobe, "Memoir of the Sand Hills of Cape Henry in Virginia," 256.

181. Ibid., 257.

chitect of the Light-house, having placed it “upon the highest sand hill” available, cannot avoid the inevitable, and unfortunate, transformation of his project. Latrobe’s summation of the situation is grim but stoic: “the sandy rim, while it protects the keeper from the storms, renders his habitation one of the dreariest abodes imaginable.”¹⁸²

182. Latrobe, “Memoir of the Sand Hills of Cape Henry in Virginia,” 257-58.

3. Urbanism, Submerged

The Philadelphia Waterworks (1798-1801), Latrobe's first completed project in the city, was initiated by the urgent need to combat repeated outbreaks of yellow fever. Feasibility and efficacy were thus the main concerns, and Latrobe responded with a simple design that made the best use of both natural and artificial conditions by re-contextualizing the city in a larger environmental order. Clean water, having been collected in a large retaining basin in the Schuylkill River to the west of the city, was drawn up by a steam engine to the Schuylkill Engine House and then passed through large, six-foot diameter pipes to the Center Engine House. Here the water was again drawn up by a steam engine to an elevated reservoir. From this height, the water could be distributed to houses and public fountains through a network of smaller wooden and cast iron pipes. "A necessary and unavoidable expense," the Center Engine House, Latrobe suggested in his original proposal, could for no greater expense, be made an "ornament" to the city.¹⁸³ A cubic, neoclassical structure topped by a cylindrically-based dome, the Center Engine House was immediately memorialized in William Birch's *The city of Philadelphia . . . as it appeared in the year 1800*¹⁸⁴ and stood in a "prettily planted" square at the center of the city until 1827, outlasting the rest of the Waterworks by about twelve years.¹⁸⁵

183. Latrobe, et al., *Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, 3:121.

184. William Russell Birch, *The City of Philadelphia in the State of Pennsylvania, North America, as it Appeared in the Year 1800: Consisting of Twenty-Eight Plates* (Springland Cot. Pennsylvania: Published by W. Birch, 1800).

185. Hamlin, *Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, 166.



Figure 3.1: William Birch, "The Water-Works, in Center Square, Philadelphia," 1800 (from *The City of Philadelphia . . . as it appeared in the year 1800*). Painted engraving.

As the previous sentence implies, it almost immediately became apparent that the Waterworks, though successful, was insufficient. In 1805, Frederick Graff, one of Latrobe's apprentices, began designing a larger system to replace it. Known as the Fairmount Waterworks, the enlarged system would serve Philadelphia for nearly a century. Despite its short-lived existence, Latrobe's original Waterworks had a lasting impact, not least because the Fairmount Waterworks, at least in its first incarnation, was little more than an enlarged version of Latrobe's design. The Center Engine House

was memorialized in civic images and, more generally, the Waterworks' "indirect advantages" were noted by at least one nineteenth-century historian. Latrobe's project was by no means perfect, but it came first and in doing so it assured Philadelphia's viability into the nineteenth century.

As in the previous two chapters, however, we are here more concerned with Latrobe's intentions, and ideas, as they are expressed in his explanations of the project. In particular this chapter looks closely at Latrobe's proposal (December 29, 1798), addressed to John Miller, Jr., chairman of the joint committee appointed to investigate alternative water supply plans. In this document Latrobe laid out his understanding of the project's requirements, his proposed method of meeting those requirements, and, perhaps most importantly, his ambitions for the project. The latter went beyond the mere eradication of yellow fever in envisioning a complete transformation of the behavior of the city and its inhabitants. More importantly, Latrobe suggested, these new modes of behavior—public bathing, for example—could offer an alternative foundation for a city's defining character that did not depend on wealth, fashion, or the vicissitudes of the natural environment.

A project that successfully combined Latrobe's engineering and architectural expertise at the urban scale, the Waterworks also functioned as a bridge between his hydro-engineering surveys of Virginia waterways and his architectural projects in Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington DC. Its success certainly helped generate those later commissions, but its importance to the development of Latrobe's conceptualization of architecture, and of rhetoric for architecture, cannot be overstated. Conceptually, the Waterworks hinged between Latrobe's participation in geological discussions and his later turn to climate as the primary external referent in his justifications of architecture. In his proposal to the Joint Committee, the architect-engineer made his first attempt to join architecture

with a broader understanding of climate, and to thereby make a case for architecture's more intangible and far-reaching effects. At the same time, he drew intensively on his understanding of geology to make the best use of the site's natural conditions by literally embedding the city's infrastructure within pre-existing river systems.

In his later projects Latrobe would sometimes refer to the "laws" of climate. This was an expedient way of assuring his audience of the rightness of his design, but it marked a distinct shift from the careful weighing of various factors that he outlined in the Waterworks proposal. To some extent, of course, this was determined by the extremity of the situation: the Philadelphia Waterworks was quite clearly borne out of a context in which nature's "laws" had proven inhospitable to human habitation. Nevertheless, I suggest that this shift represents a more significant change in Latrobe's work. Bridging between two contexts and two interpretive models (geology and climate), the Waterworks can be read as an architectural realization of Latrobe's interest in multiple, co-existing systems of order. Produced at the intersection of distinct influences, and under very extreme pressures, it posited an active vision of architecture's significance.

The Destitution Wrought by Yellow Fever

Not merely the state capital of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia was also, between 1790 and 1800, America's temporary capital. While by twentieth-century standards it was "little more than an overgrown town," the city and its adjoining districts supported 42,520 persons, the largest concentration of

population in America at this time.¹⁸⁶ The city's official status was supported by its active port, its collection of intellectual institutions, and the varieties of amusement afforded to rich and poor alike. Nevertheless, the rapid growth of the cities in the 1790s was not matched by a corresponding development in institutions of local government. Crime, unrest, and the threat of fire continually threatened to overrun local or private attempts at civic organization, but the city persisted in its use of neighborhood watchmen and volunteer fire brigades. In the 1790s, however, a more extreme problem forced Philadelphians to acknowledge the inadequacy of their municipal government.

By December 1798, when Latrobe wrote his proposal for the Waterworks, Philadelphia had undergone a devastating series of yellow fever epidemics. The first, in the summer of 1793, decimated nearly ten percent of the population. Nearly half of the city's population fled to the surrounding countryside, paralyzing activity in the nation's leading port. Trade and commerce came to a standstill. This calamity was followed by milder episodes of yellow fever in 1794 and 1797, and by an episode in 1798 whose severity approached that of 1793. Philadelphia was by no means the only early American city to suffer—New York, Boston, Baltimore, and Charleston were just some of the others affected—but its suffering was the most extreme. As the decade drew to a close, the city's very viability was in question. Latrobe, recounting a conversation with the prominent Philadelphian physician, Dr. Benjamin Rush in 1799, quoted the doctor's pessimistic summation:

We have now lost by the fever 10,000 of our citizens, more will now be sacrificed, terror reigns in every house, fear wings the arrows of death, and even to escape is only to be left to deplore the loss of all that were loved by the survivor. In the mean time our trade seeks healthier ports, our capital is wasted in the expence of removals, the

186. Nelson Manfred Blake, *Water for the Cities; a History of the Urban Water Supply Problem in the United States*. ([Syracuse, N.Y.]: Syracuse University Press, 1956), 4.

character of our city is lost, and what is more calamitous than any thing I have yet mentioned, *all that I have said and written has not been able to convince our citizens that the disease originates here, and is not imported!* [emphasis in original]"¹⁸⁷

As Rush made clear, the outbreaks taxed the financial and structural resources of the city. According to the conversation recounted by Latrobe, in 1798 a desperate State legislature had promised to reimburse the donors of any charitable sums. By the time of the 1799 outbreak, the sums had not been returned, and Rush lamented that this tardiness would "shut the hand of benevolence." It is unclear whether the delay was occasioned by a lack of finances, a lack of organization, or a lack of political consensus, but, in any case famine was assured for the poor, "and the better sort will have but little the advantage of them." If Americans in this period still hoped to run the country on a relatively weak, de-centralized government, supported by judicious help from private citizens, the yellow fever outbreaks revealed the impracticability of such a scheme with devastating clarity.

Ultimately, the repeated outbreaks of yellow fever forced city legislators to confront the need for greater, and more material, forms of civic organization. For example, an hypothesis of the disease's foreign origins recommended stricter quarantine laws surrounding the ports and incoming ships, and Boards of Health were established to deal with these and other related issues. More relevant to our discussion of the Waterworks was a countervailing belief in the fever's domestic origin, which blamed the "fetid marshes and the stagnant pools" of the urban context for the severity of the outbreaks. This theory suggested not only that the city needed to encourage (or mandate) greater civic cleanliness, but that it needed to provide the means by which one could achieve it—in other words, the city needed to provide abundant and pure quantities of water for personal and public

187. Latrobe, et al., *Journals, 1799-1820*, 9.

use.¹⁸⁸ After the third outbreak, Philadelphia's city councils appointed a joint committee to investigate the feasibility of an urban waterworks.

The suffering and destitution of Philadelphia in the 1790s takes on an even greater pathos when read against its maker's intentions. In William Penn's instructions to his commissioners, dated September 30, 1681, he repeatedly emphasized the need for a site that best met the demands for "navigation, healthy situation, and good soil for provision."¹⁸⁹ Penn further exhorted his representatives to "settle the figure of the town" such that the street pattern was uniform, the civic and market institutions centrally located, and the houses regularly and generously spaced (Figure 3.2).

188. The debate between the domestic and foreign origins of yellow fever—and the respective preventative actions implied by each—was understandably charged, and city officials ultimately attempted to act as if both possibilities were true. Latrobe himself records, at different times, differing opinions about the disease's origin and transmission. In his most extended consideration of this topic, Latrobe compares epidemics (which "rise out of particular circumstances" relating to situation, air, or diet) to contagious diseases (which are transmitted by "animal contact"). The rhetorical dangers of admitting America's climactic downsides paled in comparison to the unstoppable spread of contagion, and Latrobe seems well-satisfied to term yellow fever "little more than an epidemic."

Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 437.

189. William Penn, "Instructions given by me, William Penn, Proprietor and Governor of Pennsylvania To My trusty and loving friends, William Crispin, John Bezar, and Nathaniel Allen, my commissioners for the settling of the present colony this year transported into the said province," in Jean R. Soderlund, *William Penn and the Founding of Pennsylvania, 1680-1684: A Documentary History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press: Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1983), 83-85, quote on 85.

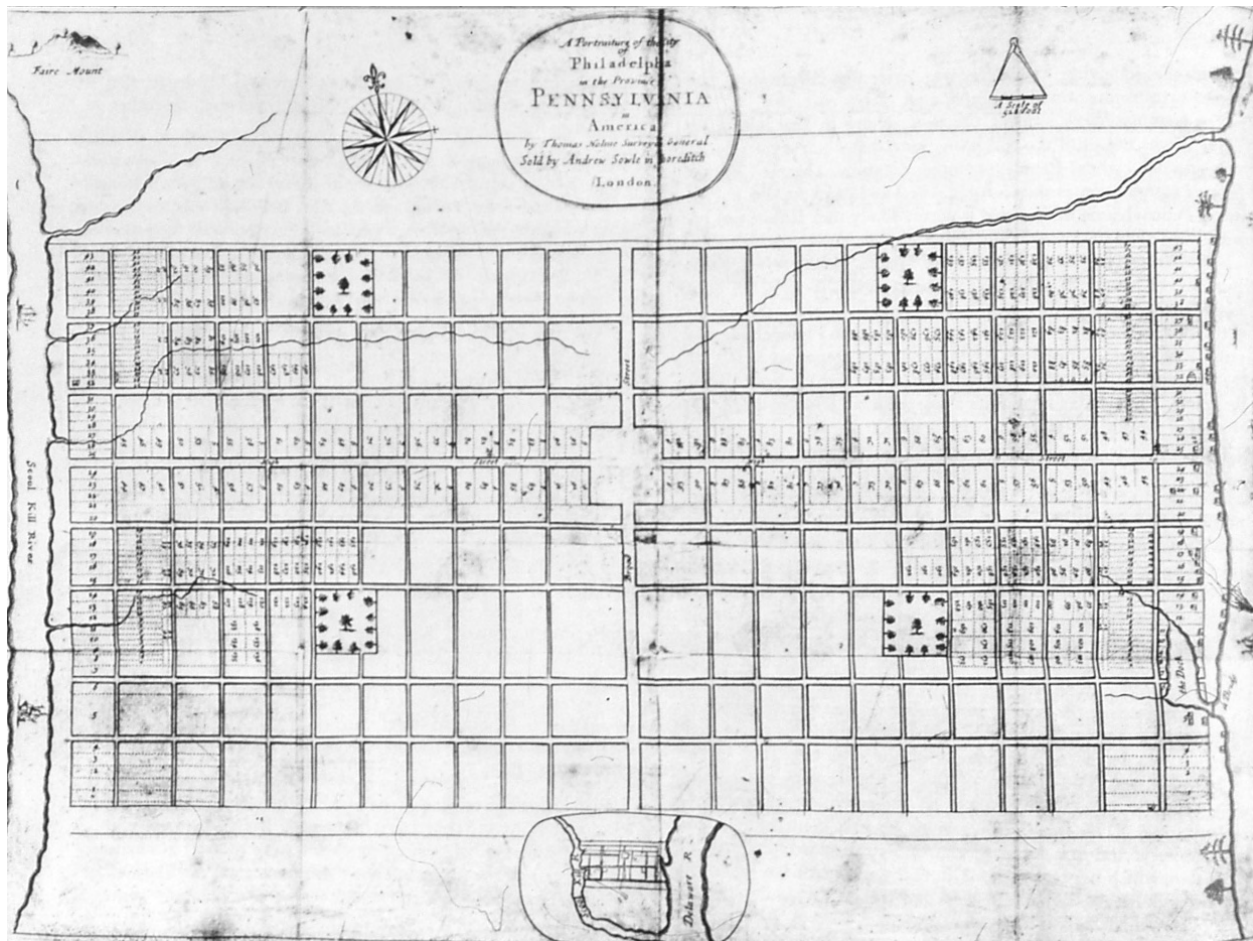


Figure 3.2: Thomas Holme, "Portraiture of the City of Philadelphia," 1683 (from a restrike in John C. Lowber, *Ordinances of the City of Philadelphia, 1812*. Philadelphia, 1812)

The width of the streets—100 feet for each of the two principal streets and half that width for the other streets—was “exceedingly generous” by seventeenth century standards,¹⁹⁰ and eighteenth-century miasmatic theory confirmed that such measures ought to provide an effective insurance against disease. Latrobe, in April 1798, elaborated upon the paradoxical situation in his journal:

On inspecting the plan of the City of Philadelphia, and observing the numerous wide and straight streets, it will not be easily believed that want of ventilation can be

190. John William Repts, *Town Planning in Frontier America* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1980), 147.

entirely the cause of the yellow fever which has made such dreadful and frequent devastations among the inhabitants. It is true that there are narrow and often very filthy Alleys which intersect the interior of the squares bounded by the principal streets and in which the air may stagnate. The back Yards of most of the houses, are also depositories of filth to a degree which is surprizing, if the general cleanly character of the Pennsylvanians be considered. There must be some cause more powerful and more specific.¹⁹¹

The architect's argument here echoes the ones he would make about the Cape Henry Sand Hills—an examination of the drawn plan, and even a generic assessment of the city's "numerous and wide and straight streets" had to be qualified by a more detailed and direct investigation of the city's alleys and back Yards—its "interiors," as it were. Even this more involved investigation, however, failed to provide a satisfactory answer, and in the next paragraph Latrobe went on to locate the cause "more powerful and more specific" in the subterranean conditions of the land between the Delaware and Schuylkill rivers. Again, this shift recalls Latrobe's description of the polyp, or of the ground near the James River, in his *Essay on Landscape*. Looking *into* nature reveals new truths.

With regards to Philadelphia's site, Latrobe carefully described the "excellent brick earth" which formed the top layer of the soil, and below which existed "universally a Stratum of Sand." Another stratum of water ran through this Sand, such that "it is impossible to dig into it without finding clear and excellent Water in an inexhaustible quantity, let the Wells and pumps be ever so near to each other." The sand acting as a filter, "the Water naturally therefore is universally as clear as chrystal and tastes as sweet and as free from heterogeneous particles as possible." So far so good. Latrobe now came to the central problem:

191. Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 379.

But this very circumstance, the unexhaustible supply of clear water, to be found in every possible spot of the ground, and which must have appeared the most tempting inducement, to found here a City to its projector Penn, is the great cause, in my opinion of the contagion which appears now to be an annual disease of Philadelphia: the Yellow fever.

Latrobe explained that Philadelphian households were forced, by the flatness of the natural condition and the lack of urban development (subterraneous sewers), to dig bogholes into which filth could be “lodged.” When these bogholes were “pierced to the sand,” they never filled up, and there was thus “a strong temptation to incur the expence of digging them so deep at first, to save the trouble and noisomeness of emptying them.”¹⁹²

In other words, Latrobe blamed the very goodness of Philadelphia's site for its scourge. The same conditions which produced the purity of the water also encouraged its citizens to adopt practices which pollute it. Latrobe placed an emphasis (though, importantly, very little blame) on the pragmatic actions of the citizen who sought to avoid “the trouble” of emptying the boghole. As with Latrobe's frank admission that certain scenes “peculiar to our Country” along the James river would soon cease to exist when the riverbanks were in “compleat cultivation,” this passage expresses a fundamental incompatibility of human and natural orders. The tenor of the Philadelphia example, however, differs sharply from the former in its necessary acknowledgement of human logic's fatal effects. If, describing later projects, Latrobe confidently described climate's beneficial effects—and architecture's contribution to those effects—the seriousness of Philadelphia's condition in 1798 resisted such optimism.

192. Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 379.

Latrobe's Proposal

Even prior to the outbreaks of yellow fever, the need for a better, and greater, supply of water had been recognized by Philadelphia's leading men.¹⁹³ Between 1792 and 1795, William Weston, an English engineer working for the privately-owned Canal Company, began construction on a new canal which would bring water from the Falls of the Schuylkill through the center of the city. However, difficulties soon undermined private investors' confidence in the project, and the project was suspended.

The third outbreak of yellow fever in 1797 concretized the need for urgent action on the issue of water supply, and a Joint Committee was appointed by the the city to investigate options for funding the Canal Company project. Despite extended negotiations, the Joint Committee and the Canal Company were unable to reach an acceptable agreement regarding ultimate control of the water system.¹⁹⁴ The ownership problem was compounded by the complexity of the canal project and the distance of the Schuylkill Falls. Even the Company's most optimistic estimates suggested that water would only be supplied at a date two years following the resumption of construction. These paralyzed negotiations were interrupted by the fourth, and very severe, outbreak of 1798. Desperate for a solution, some members of the city government began looking around for alternate sources of water—and alternate executors of a water supply project.

193. These included Benjamin Franklin, who recommended that the one thousand pounds he left to Philadelphia in his will upon his death in 1790 be used for the development of a civic water supply system; and, later, Pennsylvania Governor Thomas Mifflin, who in 1798 used the occasion of his annual message to ask for action that would prevent another outbreak of yellow fever. Nelson Manfred Blake, *Water for the Cities; a History of the Urban Water Supply Problem in the United States*, 3-4, 23.

194. For a full discussion of the negotiations and the issues involved, see *ibid.*, 21..

Early in the fall, Philadelphia newspapers began to mobilize public opinion on the issue, and on November 12, 1798, a Joint Committee on Supplying the City with Water was appointed. Samuel M. Fox, president of the Bank of Pennsylvania (for whose building commission Latrobe had moved to Philadelphia), was a member of this new Joint Committee and may have recommended Latrobe to its chairman, John Miller, Jr. By this time, Latrobe's work for the Dismal Swamp Canal Company, the James River Company, and the Appomattox Navigation Company had established his expertise in canals and river improvements. A relative stranger to the city, Latrobe nevertheless responded to the Committee's request promptly and with acuity. His proposal, sent a mere two days after the formal receipt of his assignment, reflected his grasp of the situation's urgency:

[The indispensable requisites'] importance is in the order in which I have arranged them:

- I. The works must be in full operation before the end of July, 1799.
- II. They must be certain in their effects, and permanent in their construction.
- III. They must not be liable to interruption from ice or freshes, but be equally useful in the severest winter, and in the wettest summer.¹⁹⁵

Based on these criteria, Latrobe advised against continuing the existing canal project. He also rejected Benjamin Franklin's plan as expressed in the great man's will, in which Franklin proposed bringing water to the city from Wissahickon Creek. More extended considerations were given to the Delaware River and the Schuylkill River, but only these two. Even with his relatively limited experience of construction in the country, Latrobe felt comfortable ruling out any other possible sources.

195. Latrobe, et al., *Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, 1:111.

Balancing the "indispensible requisites" against the young country's abilities, he asserted that in seven months no exertions could "in this country bring water from a greater distance."¹⁹⁶

Ultimately, Latrobe suggested that the Schuylkill River offered the most convenient and certain source of clean water, citing the "uncommon purity of its water" which derived entirely from lime-stone sources, the narrow and rocky river bed, and the mildness of the level changes wrought by the tide, which prevented the water from picking up sediment and foreign matter. The only argument against the Schuylkill, in Latrobe's view, was the greater expense of a project sourced from it, but, as the difference "on the largest estimate cannot exceed thirty thousand dollars," he believed the Schuylkill's positive qualities more than recommended it as the best available source.¹⁹⁷

Both in assessing the source of the problem and proposing its solution, Latrobe prioritized geological conditions over climactic ones. As we mentioned earlier, the failure of Philadelphia's urban plan, which ought to have promoted a healthful climate, suggested that the yellow fever was attributable to another, more tangible cause. In terms of identifying an appropriate water source, Latrobe considered the extreme variation of the Philadelphian climate merely a nuisance, a negative influence that had to be (and could be) moderated by burying the pipes underground. At first it thus seems that geology and climate are diametrically opposed: one is concerned with what is below, the other with what is above; one with earth, the other with air; the visible versus the invisible. One is more directly observable, and therefore malleable; the other is speculative and its influences uncertain. In Latrobe's other writings, moreover, geology is the study of existing conditions that offers hints about

196. Latrobe, et al., *Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, 1:112.

197. *Ibid.*

the past (as in the *Essay on Landscape* or the memoir of Cape Henry), whereas climate projections reflect one's hopes for the future.

If climate seems intangible and geology tangible, it is important to remember that, at least in the context of the Waterworks, even earth was not always available for inspection. Having been commissioned for a project proposal in late December, Latrobe noted that the season, the weather, and the time allotted to him prevented "an investigation of all the circumstances, which may affect a measure of so much importance." In this specific case, then, it was impossible to positively ascertain the geological conditions of the site. He nonetheless persevered, despite the antipathy to generalizations and hypotheses that we have seen in his other writings: "I have, however, endeavored to establish general principles, which cannot be affected by any variations, and to which every attempt to accomplish your object must be made to bend."¹⁹⁸ This statement does not merely point out the situational contingencies which every practitioner is forced, at some point, to accommodate. The last clause of the statement, with its strong assertion of human will, reminds us that the Waterworks proposal is by definition a document advocating the imposition of human order on natural order.

The decision to use river water, and the conditions placed on the Waterworks by this choice, admitted the force of nature. At the same time, Latrobe was very certain "that human ingenuity has not hitherto invented anything capable of producing the proposed effect with constancy, certainty and adequate force, excepting the Steam-engine."¹⁹⁹ Putting it even more strongly in his summation of the first part of the proposal, Latrobe assured the committee that the power thus supplied "is that,

198. Latrobe, et al., *Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, 1:112.

199. *Ibid.*

of which the amount, and the effect depends not on the variable seasons, nor on the natural advantages of the situation, but solely on the option of man.”²⁰⁰ Such an assertion was perhaps only to be expected, given how disadvantageous the natural situation of Philadelphia had proven, but the strength of its construction is also a testament to the concrete project and its necessary modification of abstract theory (as say, demonstrated in the *Essay on Landscape*). Philadelphia’s destitute condition was a testament to the power of autonomous nature that Latrobe had previously admired, but it was also this very autonomy, or indifference, which demanded nature’s transformation.

The Waterworks also marked a turn towards a different way of understanding urban character which may have been influenced by Latrobe’s recent geological pursuits. If Philadelphia, with its “numerous and wide streets,” offered a visual assurance of health, the repeated episodes of yellow fever had revealed the inefficacy of passive appearances. The Waterworks, so much of which was hidden—by distance, by burial, or by architectural façade—was an infrastructure which considered both visible and invisible contexts.

While Latrobe generally attributed the purity of the Schuylkill water to its source and its relatively calm surface—i.e., to natural conditions—it is also important to note that human conditions, or rather, a lack of them, played an equally important role. Upon his arrival in Philadelphia, William Penn had extended the urban grid so that it fully occupied the land between the Delaware and the Schuylkill, but by the turn of the nineteenth century Philadelphia had not yet grown to fill the allocated area. The city was noticeably concentrated towards the Delaware, which also served as a reposi-

200. Latrobe, et al., *Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, 1:114.

tory for sewage. As a major shipping way, the Delaware was further polluted both by the ships that traveled on it and the warehouses that lined it. The large retaining basin and the Schuylkill Engine House (the first, plainer engine house) were in contrast, more or less invisible to the Philadelphians by virtue of their distance from the city center.

Birch's plan, which reveals the asymmetrical development of Philadelphia around this time, also differed from the city's original plan in its presentation of the Delaware and the Schuylkill (Figure 3.3). In contrast to the 1683 plan, which de-emphasized the rivers by cropping in closely, Birch's plan made it clear that the city was suspended between two very different waterways. The shading of the rivers further highlighted them as natural boundaries. Even though Latrobe did not emphasize this conceptual understanding of the city in his written proposal, I suggest that he shared it. Drawing water in from the Schuylkill and ejecting its sewage into the Delaware, Latrobe's scheme inserted the city into a larger environmental context (both in section and plan [Figure 3.4]). At the same time this was not a passive insertion (as were the residents' individual bogholes): the Waterworks, in bridging the two rivers, introduced a new direction of water flow.²⁰¹

201. In one way Latrobe's scheme could be said to constitute a return to a historical condition. Latrobe notes in his journal that he believes "the soil between the Delaware and Schuylkill . . . has the appearance of being factitious, that is, deposited by the two Rivers; or perhaps it was the shallowest part of the Bed of the Delaware and Schuylkill united at the period when the waters of all these North American rivers were elevated between 100 and 200 feet above their present levels . . . At that time then, the present Delaware and Schuylkill were perhaps two Channels only in this immense River." Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 379.



Figure 3.3: William Birch, "Plan of the City of Philadelphia," 1800 (from *The City of Philadelphia . . . as it appeared in the year 1800*). Engraving.

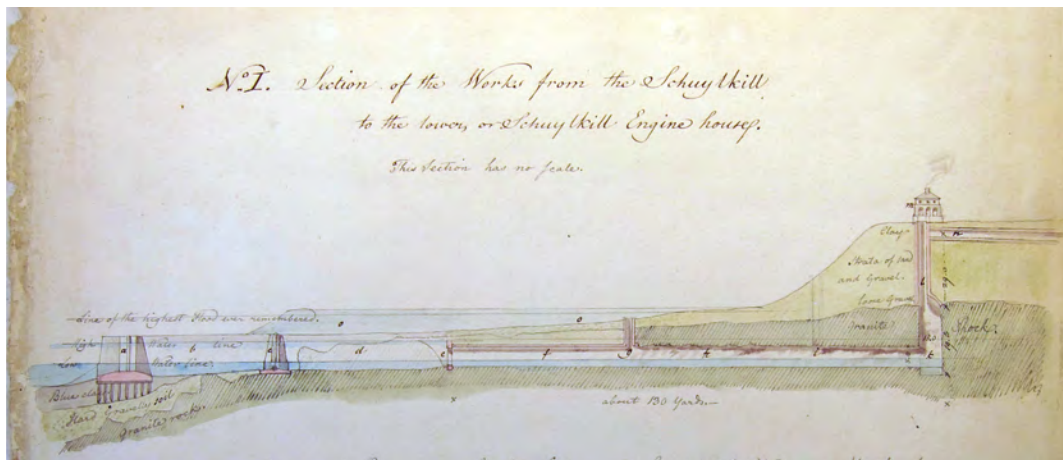


Figure 3.4: BHL, [Section through Philadelphia Waterworks], 1798. Pen and watercolor on paper. Pennsylvania Historical Society.

Latrobe's decision to bury the carrying pipes underground was justified by the need to maintain the water at an even temperature during its transport. The water thus traveled invisibly from river to city center, until it was released, as if by magic, from fountains and taps. The choice to bury the pipes deprived the architect of the possibility of designing aqueducts—a form to which he would refer, in the Oration of 1811, as the epitome of an infrastructure both ornamental and functional.²⁰² If Latrobe gave up an opportunity for artistic expression, however, he did so in a way which heightened the dramatic difference between staid, placid architecture (even the distant retaining basin had no active elements, as it used gravity to “purify” the collected water) and the movement of water on which so many hopes were pinned. In effect, the use of steam engines allow Latrobe to invent a topography that did not exist—technology created the level changes that allowed an easy distribution of water to all parts of the city.

Given that Latrobe advocated strongly for steam engines as a technology whose adoption would cause Philadelphia to vie with, or even surpass, large European cities like London and Paris, his architecture was surprisingly uncommunicative regarding their presence. Nothing in the exteriors of either engine house alluded to their machinic contents, and even the Center Engine House, described twice as an “ornament” to the city, provided that ornamentation by glossing over, or even actively refuting, its mechanical contents. The form of the Center Engine House, which featured a dome perched on a tall drum, concealed an elevated reservoir from whose height the water could attain the pressure needed to travel into the houses and fountains of the city. And yet, this reservoir,

202. Latrobe, et al., *Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, 3:75

the very reason behind the building's form, was crammed in between the inner and outer shells of the dome (Figure 3.5).

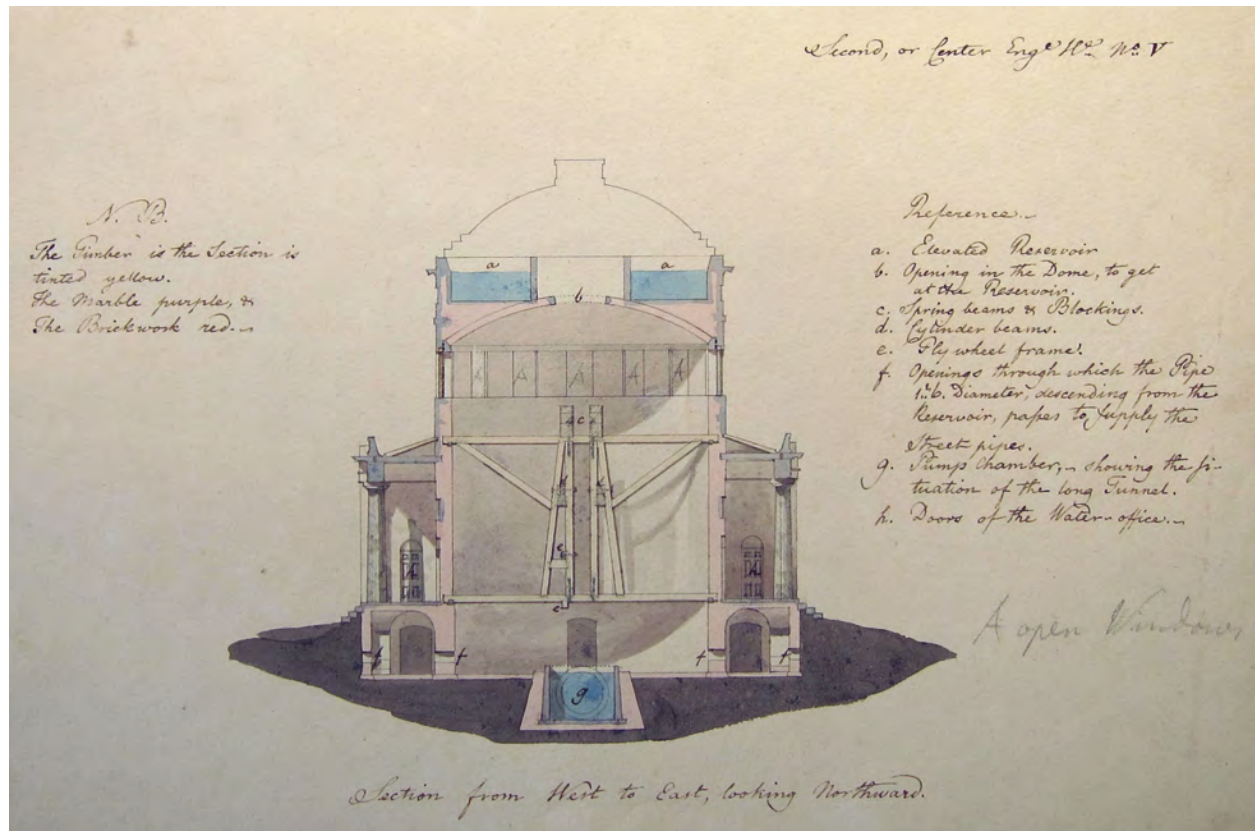


Figure 3.5: BHL, [Section through Center Engine House, Philadelphia Waterworks], 1798. Pen and watercolor on paper. Pennsylvania Historical Society.

Similarly, an examination of the Center Engine House's plan reveals a truly uncomfortable coexistence of machine and building (Figure 3.6). It is tempting here to label Latrobe's project as a victim of a premature modernism, to suggest that, despite his fascination with modern technology, Latrobe (and, by extension, America) was not yet ready for the aesthetic presence of modern technology. In this reading the classical facade is truly a mask that takes to the furthest extreme the disjunction between envelope and interior.

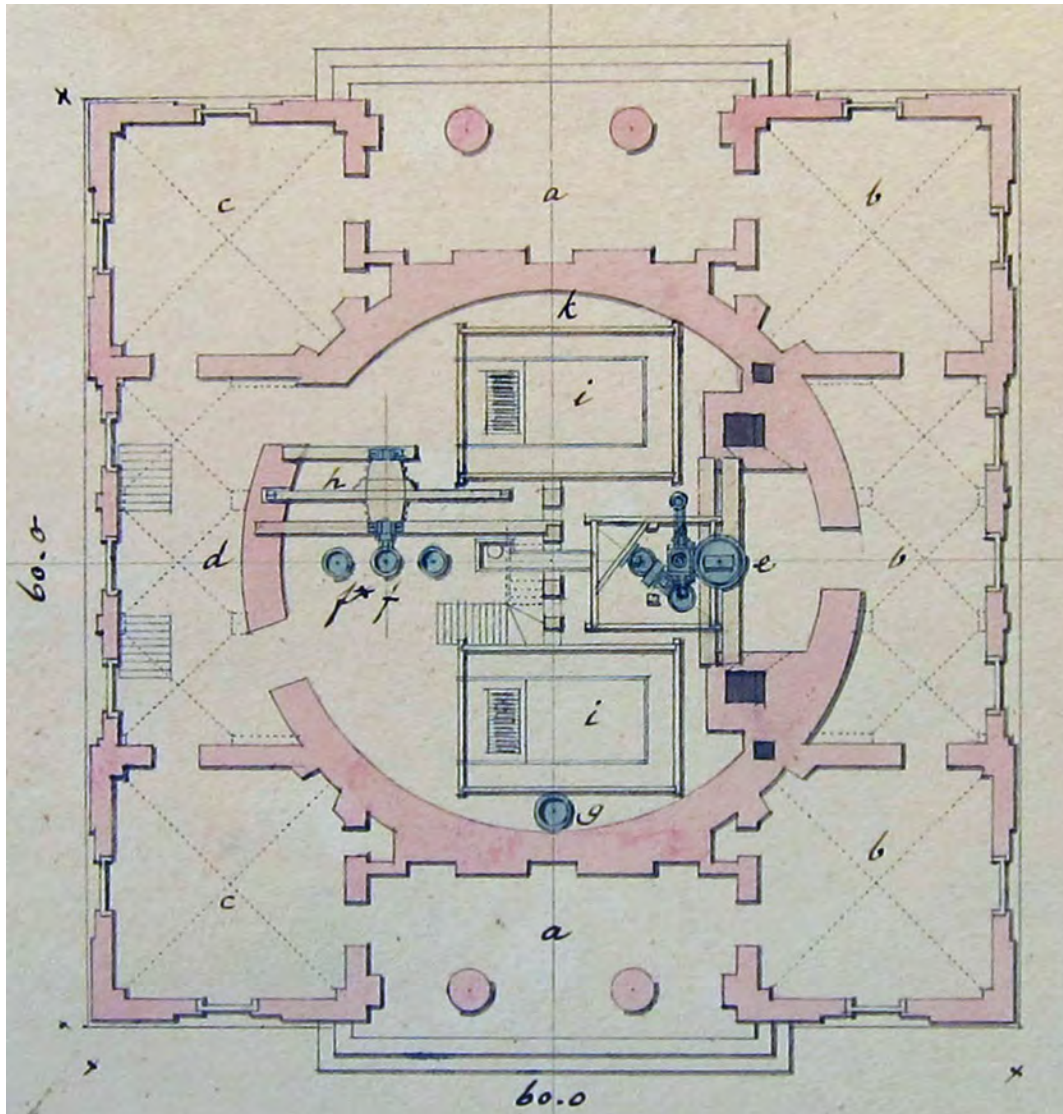


Figure 3.6: BHL, [Plan of Center Engine House], 1798. Pen and watercolor on paper. Pennsylvania Historical Society.

I suggest an alternative reading which emphasizes Latrobe's own interest in the distinction between looking at things, and looking into things. A disjunction between interior and exterior, or between visible and invisible, recalls the sea anemone or the bathing machine described in the *Essay on Landscape*. There, the distinction was not so much between inside and outside as it was between things as they appeared upon first glance and things as they transformed over time. Similarly, this

disjunction between invisible and visible evokes some of Latrobe's later writings. When Latrobe described the transformation of the neoclassical precedent in his letter to Jefferson in 1805, he emphasized the utility of it—it was not so much ornament, or mere surface appearance, that needed to be transformed as it was the larger forms and their relationship to the activities they housed. And, again, the "characters" of Athens and Philadelphia might seem superficially identical in their striving for a republican ideal (as Latrobe asserted in his 1811 Oration), but the history and process of their development was not.

Enacting Character

So far we have discussed Philadelphia's climactic and geological conditions as ones demanding a corrective response from its inhabitants. As with later projects, however, Latrobe drew upon the richness of climate as a concept in this period to broaden and multiply architecture's influence on behavior. In his initial proposal for the Waterworks, Latrobe added several postscripts, including one on the subject of "fountains" and one on the subject of "public baths." The fountains, which would supply the poor of the city with free water, would also provide the "only means of cooling the air." Air cooled by the agitation of water was, Latrobe asserted, "of the purest kind."²⁰³ While it is most likely that Latrobe was referring to physical purity (here significant because miasmatic theory charged impure air as a source of disease), the word recalls a classical climactic tradition, which emphasized air as the medium which communicated the specificities of the environment to the human body.²⁰⁴

203. Latrobe, et al., *Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, 1:121.

204. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore*, 76.

More specifically, the phrase resonates strongly with Latrobe's 1811 Oration praise of Philadelphia as a city "held responsible to the whole union for the purity of her taste."²⁰⁵

In connecting infrastructural development to a positive sociality via a changed climate, Latrobe was aligning himself with some thinkers, both American and European, who believed that cultivation would eventually result in a more congenial climate. Even Buffon admitted the significance of architecture in moderating the climate's effects upon men, as buildings created secondary environments within which humans were somewhat protected from climate's effects. However, Latrobe departed from these thinkers (as he did with his designs for the Waln House) in proposing that Americans should embrace the extremes of their climate, even to the point of adopting practices foreign, perhaps even distasteful, to them and their ancestors.

This belief was articulated in the third section of the proposal's postscript, which, comparing the hot climate of Philadelphia to those of "many despotic countries," recognized the "pleasantness of public baths, fountains, and porticos" and lamented their absence in the United States. While Latrobe commended the industriousness of the American public and their consequent avoidance of indulgence, he assured his audience that, because of Philadelphia's hot climate, baths were "almost an absolutely necessary means of health," and that the climate therefore warranted a move away from "the habits of our Northern ancestors" which have heretofore been retained "in our buildings, our diet, and our modes of life."²⁰⁶ In his 1805 letter to Waln, Latrobe would promote the adoption of French manners—a position which, considering American antagonism to all things French in this

205. Latrobe, et al., *Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, 2:79.

206. *Ibid.*, 1:122.

period, was quite radical.²⁰⁷ Here, in this earlier public proposal, he went a step further in promoting the manners of “despotic countries.”

The positive comparison is surprising enough given its early date, but it is even more so when we place it in the context of the climate debates outlined in chapter one. This was a moment when climate’s effects were generally understood to be uncertain—and frankly, in the context of the epidemics which engendered the Waterworks proposal Philadelphia’s climate must have seemed downright negative. It was thus a moment in which the relative effects of government and environment were particularly charged. As mentioned earlier, at least some Americans followed Hume in emphasizing the importance of societal influence on “moral” character, even going so far as to suggest that, for the inhabitants of Asia, “the most delightful climate and fertile soil that imagination can conceive” could be no compensation for their “subjection to the arbitrary will of a capricious and despotic tyrant.”²⁰⁸ In other words, climate was an important consideration, but democratic representation more so.

And yet, Latrobe proposed that Americans should consider modeling themselves after these unfortunate subjected souls. The architect was too wary to do so unreservedly, even if “French baths” had already been introduced to Philadelphia.²⁰⁹ He mentioned the possibility of baths “only as a hint,” and he further insulated himself against criticism by noting the more tangible benefits of this

207. Latrobe discusses this prejudice in a journal entry dated 23 August 1806. Latrobe, et al., *Journals, 1799-1820*, 85.

208. Currie, *An Historical Account of the Climates and Diseases of the United States of America*, 406-07.

209. In her book, *Foul Bodies*, Kathleen M. Brown notes that Saint-Domingue refugees arriving in the 1790s established “several public facilities known to customers as French baths,” though the reception of these baths is unclear. Certainly Latrobe’s hesitation suggests that they were not widely well-regarded. Brown, *Foul Bodies: Cleanliness in Early America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 200-01.

“arrangement.” Such baths would “be a source of a large revenue” and even, perhaps, induce greater immigration to Philadelphia by offering “conveniences, and advantages which cannot for many years be thought of in a city, which is at present almost destitute of dwellings.” Appealing to civic pride, Latrobe suggested that such amenities might “counterbalance the fashionable inducements which point to the Potowmac.”²¹⁰ The distinction drawn between “conveniences” and “fashionable inducements” recalls both Walter Jones’s fears about “the ruinous adoption of European Fashions” and, more generally, the “invention of comfort” in early America.²¹¹ Conveniences, even more than comforts, were defined by their pragmatic contribution to the greater good, or at least greater efficiency.

To focus on the statement about Philadelphia itself, however, is to catch a mirrored glimpse of Latrobe’s notions on urbanism. For Latrobe, the fountains and baths made possible by the Waterworks offered significant advantages to a city which is “almost destitute of dwellings.” The strength of this characterization implies something more than a relatively young city’s simple lack of buildings. It seems that Latrobe was here reminding his audience of the very thing that had prompted the request for a Waterworks: the havoc wreaked upon the city by repeated outbreaks of yellow fever. The emphasis on “conveniences, and advantages” as a counterpoint to the destitution of dwellings was brilliant. If Philadelphians could not hope to immediately rebuild and re-populate their devastated city, they can, in a matter of months, introduce a new, active infrastructure which could, by providing public and private sources of water, inspire a whole variety of new, improved behaviors: servants would no longer have to journey outdoors for water, men and children could drink without fear

210. Latrobe, et al., *Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, 1:122.

211. John E. Crowley, *The Invention of Comfort: Sensibilities & Design in Early Modern Britain & Early America* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

from the fountains, and people of all kinds might even be introduced to the pleasures of public bathing. Despite the prominent location and appearance of the Center Engine House, the true success of Latrobe's Waterworks would be not a transformation of the city's visual appearance—even as an ornament, the Center Engine House was just one, relatively small, structure—but a transformation of its practices.

In the *Essay on Landscape*, Latrobe repeatedly referred to the “character” of a country as that which defines the conscientious artist's limits—one might take licenses with “the face of Nature,” so long as the *character* of the country represented remained recognizable.²¹² Though he never defined it precisely, character was clearly something both visible and representable. In his discussions of the Waterworks, Latrobe moved decisively from this notion of visible character to a notion of character as enacted; that is, Latrobe articulated an understanding of a place's character as something defined by the behaviors of its contents rather than their physical forms. In making this move he distinguished himself from both the prevailing notion of the period and our understanding of the word today.

While today we tend to emphasize character's essential meaning (someone's character may be written on her face, but the face itself does not define one's character), the word's oldest meaning refers to “a distinctive mark impressed, engraved, or otherwise formed; a brand, stamp”²¹³; that is, to a sign applied afterwards to a thing, which does not bear a necessary relationship to that which it signifies. Similarly, French architectural theorists like Quatremère de Quincy and Jacques-François

212. Latrobe and Carter, *Virginia Journals, 1795-1799*, 475.

213. “character, n.” OED Online. March 2012. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/30639?rskey=y8H8JT&result=1&isAdvanced=false> (accessed May 10, 2012).

Blondel believed that character was articulated in a building's elevation, and that the suitability of a building to a given landscape occurred through the appropriate development of the façade.²¹⁴ In this sense, character is a visual consideration; buildings are given one kind of character or another so that they may best suit the appearance of their context. While not entirely rejecting this view of architectural character,²¹⁵ in his development of the Waterworks Latrobe articulated an understanding of character as something enacted. And, particularly for his "rational" houses in Philadelphia and his town plans of Nescopeck (Pennsylvania) and Newcastle (Delaware) Latrobe would single out the plan—that which corresponds to its inhabitants' movements and habits—as that which determined a design's fitness to its climactically-defined, and therefore mostly invisible, context.

In his proposal for the Waterworks, Latrobe drew on two distinct discourses by which the invisible can be rendered comprehensible: geology and climate. Their combination in the infrastructural project gave rise to an understanding of architecture as an active agent in the production of an attractive urban environment. In contrast to the passive (or at best moderating) role granted by Latrobe to his later house designs and the Cape Henry Lighthouse, the Waterworks promised to work actively—sensitively, but actively—for the benefit of its creators. It spanned between earth and sky, its pipes tunneling down and its (proposed) fountains stretching upwards. By accepting the ultimate irreconcilability of human and natural orders, Latrobe imagined a new way in which the human,

214. Vittoria Di Palma, "Architecture, Environment and Emotion: Quatremère De Quincy and the Concept of Character," *AA FILES* 47 (2002): 45-56.

215. Mark Reinberger, "The Baltimore Exchange and Its Place in the Career of Benjamin Henry Latrobe" (Cornell University, 1988). See particularly Ch. 6 and Appendix C.

working in a careful and controlled fashion, could use nature to transform nature. Laterally, his project bridged between two rivers; vertically it took cold, clean water from the ground and released it into the sky, where its moderation of the hot, humid climate could offer intangible but real benefits to the city.

This active architecture, which corresponded to an understanding of national and civic character which is *enacted*, rather than merely imaged, marks a crucial development in Latrobe's work. Even though he later moved away from geological concerns, his interest in climate, which was first articulated in this project, allowed him to talk about the American character as something rooted in behavior and action. As we saw in the Oration, Latrobe thus emphasized intention rather than substance. It mattered less what American cities look like, or even what the American landscape looked like, than how these environments—and their inhabitants—behaved.

If the Waterworks had a short lifespan, it seems that Latrobe's urban theories were somewhat more durable, and not just in his own subsequent proposals. His interest in the multi-valent effects of infrastructure, for example, were revived when an 1875 engineer credits the Waterworks with giving the city "character and impetus," among several other "indirect advantages" which include its effect on sanitation and "the early experience acquired by her mechanics."²¹⁶ These accolades, which emphasized effects and motions, justify Latrobe's claim that the Waterworks might well generate attractions for a city that was, at the time of his proposal, "almost destitute of dwellings"—that is, the tangible.

216. William H. McFadden, *Annual Report of the Chief Engineer of the Water Department of Philadelphia for 1875* (Philadelphia: E.C. Markly & Son, 1876), 18.



Figure E.1: BHL, [Passage of the Potowmac through the Blue-Ridge Mountains], Sketchbook, 1810. Watercolor and pencil on paper. Maryland Historical Society.

Epilogue

An 1810 watercolor sketch of Latrobe's depicts the passage of the Potowmac through the Blue-Ridge Mountains. The bottom portion of the sheet is unfinished, and—in comparison to the lush areas of color which depict the hills, sky, and water—starkly so. The threshold between the painted and unpainted parts of the sketch is marked by a few small, tentative marks of human settlement—a small grey house on the right, a ladder or some other structure on the left, the easy sweep of a cleared hill across the center. It thus seems that the forcibly empty portion of the scene, whose border is defined by these lightly pencilled marks, documents the gradual encroachment of human settlement on an untouched nature. At the same time, it *is* the untouched nature that Latrobe chose to render in greater detail—that he chose to complete, really—and consequently one can more easily imagine the watercolored area itself extending down over the vulnerable blankness of the sheet. The ambiguity evoked by this sketch is heightened by a collapse of flatness and depth that results from the juxtaposition of the unfinished foreground with the background's overlapping, receding planes and their spatial implications. I offer this drawing, which captures a moment of irresolution—is it the settlement or the wilderness that is spreading? is the blank portion of the page represent land in front of the hills in the middle ground, or earth beneath them? are the elements of settlement overrunning the landscape, or nestling into it?—as a last, lingering image of the transitional aesthetics with all of its paradoxes and tensions.

In a country fraught with uncertainty about the nature and means of its development, a nationalistic project required a re-casting of that uncertainty in a more positive light. The degeneracy which

threatened was both physical and political, and particularly with regards to the latter early Americans found it difficult to articulate an aesthetics that would be both independent and sufficient. Re-reading Latrobe's 1811 Oration, we find anxious comments about an American art which, unlike European art, "is not hot-bedded by imperial and royal patronage, nor even by the nobility of wealth." Similarly in his letter to Waln Latrobe emphasized the comfort, convenience, and moderate means provided by the American house, which did not require reference to "French or English palaces." And yet the extreme popularity of European—particularly English—manners books in this period suggests that there was no more desirable model of civilization.

Similarly did Latrobe love the art he had learned in his European youth, and in his new country he developed his projects according to an architectural style that historians have traditionally identified as Greek Revival—that is, a style which was indebted to a vision of time and culture past. Latrobe thus needed a metaphor by which he could provide that "slightest introduction" of European art and art practices to Americans, and by which he could assure them that such an art, once introduced, would uniquely express their concerns and aspirations.

With these conditions in mind, we can extrapolate from Latrobe's various writings a persistent interest in natural transition and its articulation by different kinds of scientific theories. Using natural metaphors, Latrobe suggested that an American art both grows out of the American environment and, more important, that it is *analogous* to the environment: its continual evolution is tied to the material cultivation of nature and society itself.

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