

**Capitol, Capital, and the Ancient City: The Influence of Roman Urban and Architectural Models on the Design of the Capitol Building in Washington D.C.**

**Author:** Gary F. Fisher

**Source:** *Midlands Historical Review*, Vol. 2 (2018)

**Published:** 14/06/2018

**URL:** <http://www.midlandshistoricalreview.com/capitol-capital-and-the-ancient-city-the-influence-of-roman-urban-and-architectural-models-on-the-design-of-the-capitol-building-in-washington-d-c/>

# Capitol, Capital, and the Ancient City: The Influence of Roman Urban and Architectural Models on the Design of the Capitol Building in Washington D.C.

GARY F. FISHER

In his 1992 landmark text *Architecture, Power, and National Identity* Lawrence Vale demonstrated the extent to which government buildings 'serve as symbols of the state' and how one can 'learn much about a political regime by observing closely what it builds'.<sup>1</sup> The Residence Act of 1790 gave the American founders the unique opportunity to select 'a district of territory, not exceeding ten miles square' and build upon it a wholly new Capital city, an opportunity which Pierre Charles L'Enfant, the city's eventual planner, commented 'No nation had ever before' been offered.<sup>2</sup> The architectural models and exempla that Washington D.C.'s designers drew on are thus of tremendous importance for understanding how they envisioned the development and identity of their new nation.

Visitors to Washington D.C. cannot fail to notice the classical aesthetic rampant in the city. Washington possesses the highest concentration of public buildings adorned with pediments of any city in Europe or North America, prompting Irish poet Thomas Moore to refer to the city as "this 'Modern Rome'" in 1804.<sup>3</sup> Despite this apparent abundance of classically inspired architecture, little work has been done to understand the process by which Washington D.C. came to resemble ancient models or the extent to which this seemingly ancient appearance represents the product of a concerted effort on the part of its designers to directly emulate ancient examples. Most commentators are instead content to simply point out the similarities between American and classical examples, making little effort to understand the reason for these design choices beyond them simply being part of a wider

---

<sup>1</sup> Vale, *Architecture, Power, and National Identity* (Yale, 1992), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Residence Act, 1790. L'Enfant to Washington, September 11, 1789.

<sup>3</sup> Ziolkowski, *Classical Influence on the Public Architecture of Washington and Paris* (1988, New York), p. 208; Moore. *The Works of Thomas Moore* (1823, Paris), p. 179.

international neoclassical fashion.

As a comprehensive study of the reception of ancient architecture within the entirety of Washington D.C. would require a monograph in itself, this article will instead focus on the appropriation of Roman imagery in the Capitol Building around which, to quote the anonymously published *Essay on the City of Washington* (1795), is 'fixed the centre of the city'.<sup>4</sup> After first examining some of the limitations of modern architectural history's approaches to Washington D.C. this article will discuss the Capitol Building's context within Washington and the extent to which L'Enfant's plan for the city was influenced by pre-existing examples. Finally, it will examine the Capitol Building's design process to demonstrate that its classical appearance was not simply derived from a desire to emulate contemporary architectural fashion, but was rather the product of a concerted effort to imitate the architectural and urban models of ancient Rome.

Various factors have contributed to the contemporary lack of understanding of how classical models influenced the architecture of Washington D.C. Qualitative assessments of L'Enfant's street plan for the city, discussions of the extent to which L'Enfant's plan reflects the U.S. Constitution's separation of powers, and dissections of the wider political compromises concerning where within the United States the city would be placed have all received a great deal of academic attention, yet little work has been undertaken to understand Washington's use of ancient architectural precedents.<sup>5</sup> Understanding of the

---

<sup>4</sup> 'Essay on the City of Washington', *Federal Orrery*, Feb 16, 1795.

<sup>5</sup> Examples of commentators either praising or critiquing L'Enfant's plan include: H.P. Caemmerer, 'The Life of Pierre Charles L'Enfant', *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington D.C.*, 50 (1948/1950), p. 340; E.C. Carter II, 'Benjamin Henry Latrobe and the growth and development of Washington, 1798-1818', *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington, D.C.*, 71/72 (1971/1972), pp. 136-138; A.C. Clark, 'Origin of the Federal City', *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington D.C.* 35/36 (1935), pp. 64-65; P.J. Dougherty, 'Baroque and Picturesque Motifs in L'Enfant's Design for the Federal Capital', *American Quarterly* 26 (1974), pp. 30-31; J.T. Flexner, 'The Great Columbian Federal City', *The American Art Journal* 2 (1970), p. 30; C.M. Harris, 'Washington's "Federal City," Jefferson's "Federal Town"', *Washington History* 12 (2000), p. 49; Hegemann & Peets, *The American Vitruvius: An Architects' Handbook of Urban Design* (1988, New York), p. 284-285; E. Peets, 'Famous town planners III: L'Enfant: The city of Washington', *The Town Planning Review* 13 (1928), p. 46; E. Peets, 'L'Enfant's Washington', *The Town*

extent to which the Capitol's ancient appearance was the product of a concerted effort to emulate ancient exempla is further limited by a refusal to understand Washington's classically-inspired architecture as anything other than part of a wider international trend towards neoclassicism. As Ziolkowski argues, 'at the end of the eighteenth century ... classicism was an international fashion in sculpture, painting and architecture' and thus the architectural decisions behind Washington D.C. 'seem natural in an international context'.<sup>6</sup> This failure to adequately contextualise Washington's architecture within its national, rather than solely international, social and political conditions, is compounded by current academia's excessive focus on certain minutiae of American neoclassical architecture. For example, the debate concerning the significance of the Capitol Building's colonnades has spilt a great deal of ink examining the extent to which the number of columns may reflect the number of states in the Union and yet has failed to question the significance of the decision to erect a colonnade in the first place, in many ways losing the forest for the trees (or rather losing the colonnade for the columns).<sup>7</sup> The result of all the above has been a divorcing of Washington's neoclassical architecture from its immediate cultural and political contexts and a failure to appreciate the significance of the decision on the part of Washington's designers to model their Capital city and Legislative house upon architectural examples roughly 2,000 years old.

---

*Planning Review* 15 (1933), pp. 155-164; J.L. Sibley Jennings Jnr., 'Artistry as Design L'Enfant's extraordinary city', *The Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress* 36 (1979), p. 245; Vale, *Architecture*, p. 67. The symbolic presence of the separation of powers in L'Enfant's plan is discussed in Dougherty, 'Baroque', p. 29; P. Scott, "'This Vast Empire": The iconography of the Mall, 1791-1848', *Studies in the History of Art* 30 (1991a), pp. 37-41; Vale, *Architecture*, p. 60-2. The political compromises that led to Washington being placed on the banks of the Potomac are discussed in Brandenburg, 'The Duc'42, 55; Bugbee 'Early Planning', p. 19; E. Dumbauld, 'Thomas Jefferson and the city of Washington', *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington D.C.* 50 (1980), p. 70; Peets, 'Famous town planners', p. 31; C.E. Peterson, 'The national Capital, 1790', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 10 (1951), p. 21; Reps, *The Making of Urban America, A History of City Planning in the United States* (1965, Princeton), p. 240-41; L.D. Scisco, 'A Site for the "Federal City": The Original Proprietors and Their Negotiations with Washington', *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington, D.C.* 57/59 (1957/1959), p. 124; Scott, 'This Vast Empire', p. 37; Vale, *Architecture*, p. 58-9; J. Valerie Fifer, 'Washington, D.C.: The Political Geography of a Federal Capital', *Journal of American Studies* 15 (1981), p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Ziolkowski, *Classical Influence*, p. 148. I. Gournay, 'The French Connection in Washington D.C.', in Field, C.R., Gournay, I., Somma, T.P. (eds.), *Paris on the Potomac: The French Influence on the Art and Architecture of Washington* (Ohio, 2007) pp. 1-3 is another example of such as view.

<sup>7</sup> The debate concerning this issue is discussed in Ziolkowski, *Classical Influence*, p. 96.

It is possible to understand the classically inspired architecture of Washington D.C. as being part of a wider trend towards neoclassicism within American urban design that had origins in the colonial period, rather than a phenomenon isolated to the post-revolutionary era.

Buildings such as the Old Brick Meeting House, completed in Boston in 1713, featured an entrance porch 'adorned with pilasters' as well as 'other bits of classical detailing'.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the Redwood Library, completed in Newport in 1750, included 'the first temple front in the colonies', complete with pediment and colonnade.<sup>9</sup> These examples would seem to suggest that the classically inspired architecture of post-revolutionary America, epitomised in Washington D.C., was simply part of a broader architectural movement within British North America. Despite these apparent continuities between colonial and post-revolutionary architecture there are fundamental differences between the use of ancient models in these respective forms of American architecture. While colonial buildings such as the Old Brick Meeting House and the Redwood Library may have been decorated with classical ornamentation they remain fundamentally 'un-classical' in their core design. Classically-styled porches and pilasters aside, they adhere to the standard specifications of colonial architecture which Handlin identifies as 'a simple, cubic structure, usually of wood ... an efficient enclosure, typically capped by a gable or hipped roof that could easily shed rain and snow'.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, the architectural projects of post-revolutionary America are, in their earliest instance, fundamentally classical in form and design. For example, the Triumphal Arches erected in Pennsylvania by Charles Wilson Peale in 1784 and in Boston by Charles Bullfinch in 1789 (the first Triumphal Arches this author has been able to identify in American architectural history) may have lacked the grandeur of the Arch of Titus, but, unlike the Old Brick Meeting House and Redwood Library, were fundamentally classically-inspired in

---

<sup>8</sup> Handlin, *American Architecture* (1985, New York), p. 28.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 33.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 22-23.

design.<sup>11</sup> They are variations of the triumphal arch, a uniquely Roman design with no precedent in colonial architecture. The post-revolutionary era thus represents a shift from using classical models ornamentally to using them fundamentally.

This internalisation of ancient design into American architecture after the revolution is demonstrated most effectively by the contrast between state buildings in colonial and federal Virginia, namely between the colonial Governor's Palace in Williamsburg (1722) (Figure 1) and the federal State Capitol in Richmond (1788) (Figure 2). Designed by Thomas Jefferson and modelled on the Roman Maison Carrée in Nîmes, France, the latter is fundamentally a Roman temple in all aspects of its structure and design.<sup>12</sup> Further examples of post-revolutionary buildings that represent a similarly fundamental, as opposed to ornamental, use of classical models include the University of Virginia, the Bank of Pennsylvania, and the Baltimore Cathedral.<sup>13</sup>

This internalisation of classical models into American architecture after the success of the American revolution demonstrates that the classically inspired grandeur of post-revolutionary American architecture did indeed represent a significant break from the colonial architectural tradition. The extent to which this use of ancient architectural models represented a concerted effort on the part of the American founders to make their capital city resemble ancient models has been largely ignored by present scholarship and will now be investigated.

---

<sup>11</sup> Tunnard & Reed, *American Skyline*, p. 50-1; Handlin, *American Architecture*, p. 40; Tunnard & Reed, *American Skyline*, p. 50-1; Handlin, *American Architecture*, p. 40.

<sup>12</sup> Jefferson's *Autobiography* for May, 6 records that he saw the building of a new state Capitol in Richmond as "favorable opportunity of introducing into the state an example of architecture in the classic style of antiquity, and the Maison carrée of Nismes, an antient Roman temple, being considered as the most perfect model existing" and Jefferson's letter to Dr. James Currie, January 18, 1786 states that his design was "copied from the most precious, the most perfect model of antient architecture remaining on earth; one which has received the approbation of near 2000 years." Vale, *Architecture*, p. 66.

<sup>13</sup> Handlin, *American Architecture*, p. 50. H.P. Caemmerer, 'Architects of the United States Capitol', *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington D.C.* 48/49 (1946/1947), p. 9-10. Handlin, *American Architecture*, p. 54.

In order to understand the influence of Roman models on the design of the U.S. Capitol it is first necessary to examine the building's envisioned context within its wider urban setting, namely the building's place in L'Enfant's plan of the city (Figure 3) and the extent to which the layout of Washington D.C. was derived from the example of Rome. The influence of the latter on D.C.'s street plan seems extremely limited if one accepts the commonly held notion that L'Enfant's plan for Washington was largely based on the layout of the Château de Versailles in France (Figure 4), which began construction in 1623.<sup>14</sup> The notion that the layout of Washington was, to quote Gournay, a 'French-inspired artifact' would somewhat preclude the argument that it was intended as a revival of ancient urbanism.<sup>15</sup>

The right-angled triangle in L'Enfant's plan created by the 'Capitol', 'President's Palace', and 'Equestrian Statue of George Washington' is similar to the layout of Versailles, which possesses what Peets calls 'a corresponding triangle'.<sup>16</sup> Sibley Jennings Jnr. understands the 'Capitol building [as] taking the place of the palace, our "Mall" replacing the French tapis vert and terraces, and the White House, the Trianon'.<sup>17</sup> Washington similarly makes use of a layout in which streets radiate out from the central buildings 'so that each front of each building commands a *patte-d'oie*, like that of Versailles'.<sup>18</sup> These similarities would seem to support the arguments of Ziolkowski that 'Versailles was the dominant source' for L'Enfant's plan.<sup>19</sup>

L'Enfant himself was the son of a 'Painter in Ordinary' to the French royal court and from the

---

<sup>14</sup> This view can be found to be expressed in Mumford, *The City in History* (1961, New York), p. 403-4; Peets, 'Famous town planners', p. 49; Reys, *Monumental Washington: The Planning and Development of the Capital Center* (1967, Princeton), p. 21; Ziolkowski, *Classical Influence*, p. 35 amongst others.

Reys, W. (1967) *Monumental Washington: The Planning and Development of the Capital Center* (Princeton).

<sup>15</sup> Gournay, 'Washington', p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Peets, 'Famous town planners', 43.

<sup>17</sup> Sibley Jennings Jnr., 'Artistry', p. 225.

<sup>18</sup> Dougherty, 'Baroque', p. 29.

<sup>19</sup> Ziolkowski, *Classical Influence*, p. 35.

age of four lived at Versailles, eventually serving as an 'artist of the Bourbon court' himself before volunteering to join the American Revolutionary War in 1777.<sup>20</sup> His connections to Versailles support the notion that these similarities are more than a coincidence and instead represent a conscious effort to imitate that palace.<sup>21</sup> Simple similarities between the designs of Washington and Versailles do not, however, conclusively demonstrate that L'Enfant's plan for Washington and the situation of the Capitol building within that plan were a direct imitation of the plan of Versailles. Jackson has criticised the 'notions that L'Enfant learned all about architecture by trotting in and out of Versailles as a boy'.<sup>22</sup> The argument that L'Enfant's plan is a direct imitation of Versailles is undermined by the fact that in none of L'Enfant's writings does he acknowledge an intellectual debt to Versailles, instead stating that 'it is my wish and shall be my Endeavour to delineate on a new and original way the plan the contrivance of which the President has left to me'.<sup>23</sup> While one might not expect a designer to acknowledge that his work is unoriginal, it is of significance that, as Sibley Jennings Jnr. points out, when L'Enfant contacted Jefferson requesting maps to study before designing his plan he 'did not request the grand garden schemes of the French chateaux, and particularly not the palace of Versailles'.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, this alleged imitation of Versailles seems to be a modern observation. No contemporary critics commented on the similarity – indeed they praised how original the plan was – suggesting that there is not enough evidence to demonstrate or substantiate the claims of commentators such as Ziolkowski and Peets that 'Washington owes much to Versailles'.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Caemmerer, 'Life of Pierre', p. 325; Ziolkowski, *Classical Influence*, p. 31; C.M. Harris, 'Washington's Gamble, L'Enfant's Dream: Politics, design, and the founding of the national Capital', *The William and Mary Quarterly* 56 (1999), pp. 537.

<sup>21</sup> Caemmerer, 'Life of Pierre', pp. 325-6.

<sup>22</sup> D.E. Jackson, 'L'Enfant's Washington: An Architect's view', *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington D.C.* 50 (1980), p. 402.

<sup>23</sup> L'Enfant to Jefferson, April 4, 1791.

<sup>24</sup> L'Enfant to Jefferson, April 4, 1791; Jefferson to L'Enfant, April 10, 1791; Jefferson to Washington, April 10, 1791; Sibley Jennings Jnr., 'Artistry', p. 232.

<sup>25</sup> Dougherty, 'Baroque', p. 32. P. Scott, 'L'Enfant's Washington described: The city in the public press, 1791-1795', *Washington History* 3 (1991), p. 98. Peets, 'Famous town planners'.

The argument that L'Enfant's plan was heavily based on the landscape's topography, rather than being derivative of one single city or model, offers a significantly more plausible explanation. It has been suggested that L'Enfant placed key government buildings on the tallest hills so as to grant them a 'pre-eminent position' and used radiating diagonal streets superimposed onto the standard gridiron structure to ensure that 'the topographically important points selected became multiple street intersections' whereby 'nature was enhanced rather than displaced'.<sup>26</sup> These claims are supported by numerous excerpts from the writings of L'Enfant and others involved in the planning. L'Enfant's initial reports to George Washington about his ideas concerning the plan for the city all focus almost exclusively on the topography of the region. L'Enfant calls Jenkin's Hill (the spot upon which he would place the Capitol) 'the most desirous position offer for to Erect the Publique Edifices thereon'.<sup>27</sup> L'Enfant further describes how he fitted his street plan to the landscape: 'having first determined some principal points to which I wished making the rest subordinate I next made the distribution regular with street at right angle north-south and east-west but afterwards I opened others on various directions as avenues to and from every principal places'.<sup>28</sup> L'Enfant even went so far as to call Jenkin's Hill 'a pedestal waiting for a monument' and informed George Washington that he would place the President's Palace 'on that ridge which attracted your attention at the first inspection of the ground'.<sup>29</sup>

L'Enfant's enthusiasm for the landscape is further evidenced by the diary of William Loughton Smith which details how, when the author went riding around the area with L'Enfant on April 22, 1791, 'The ground pleased me much; the Major is enraptured with it; 'nothing', he says, 'can be more admirably adapted for the purpose; nature has done much for it, and with the aid of art it will become the wonder of the world'.<sup>30</sup> That this enthusiasm

---

<sup>26</sup> Vale, *Architecture*, p. 60. U.S. Grant, 'Planning the Nation's Capital', *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington D.C.* 50 (1948/1950), p. 45. Scott, 'L'Enfant's Washington', p. 99.

<sup>27</sup> L'Enfant to Washington, March 26, 1791.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Reys, *The Making of Urban America*, p. 248.

for the landscape had a formative effect on L'Enfant's plan is demonstrated both by George Washington's diary and L'Enfant's own *Observations Explanatory to the Plan*. Washington's diary records how, on June 28, 1791, Washington 'went out with Majr L'Enfant and Mr. Ellicot to take a more perfect view of the ground, in order to decide finally on the spots on which to place the public buildings'.<sup>31</sup> L'Enfant's *Observations Explanatory to the Plan* explains how 'The positions for the different Grand Edifices and for the several Grand Squares or areas of different shapes as they are laid down were first determined on the most advantageous ground, commanding the most extensive prospects'.<sup>32</sup> Moreover the *Spectator's* article praising L'Enfant's plan for its 'variety of elegant prospects' and how the Capitol is 'situated upon the most beautiful eminence' demonstrates that this idea of L'Enfant basing his plan heavily on the region's topography rather than any pre-existing models is not a uniquely modern observation.<sup>33</sup> The effect of these excerpts is to demonstrate that L'Enfant's plan was not founded on either ancient or contemporary paradigms but rather was an original street plan which, while it may have held certain similarities to the plan of Versailles, was fundamentally original.

Although L'Enfant's plan was based more on the topography of the region than any existing precepts this does not necessarily preclude the notion of the ancient city exerting a less fundamental, more subtle, influence on the shape of America's capital city. It has been suggested that L'Enfant's decision to place the Capitol Building on Jenkin's Hill, 78 feet above the aptly named Tiber Creek, was intended to imitate the Roman example of the Capitoline Hill.<sup>34</sup> Yet just as the similarities between L'Enfant's plan and Versailles do not demonstrate that L'Enfant was imitating French models, the similarities between Washington's Capitol Hill and Rome's Capitoline Hill do not prove that L'Enfant was imitating

---

<sup>31</sup> Clark, 'Origin', p. 61.

<sup>32</sup> P. L'Enfant, 'Observations Explanatory to the Plan', in Reps, J.W. (ed.), *The Making of Urban America, A History of City Planning in the United States* (Princeton, 1791), p. 251.

<sup>33</sup> Scott, 'L'Enfant's Washington', p. 99.

<sup>34</sup> L'Enfant, 'Observations'; Jackson, 'L'Enfant's Washington', p. 416; Vale, *Architecture*, p. 11.

ancient models. This claim also fails to account for the fact that, as Hodgkins correctly points out, the placement of the Capitol on a hill owes 'at least as much to a general desire for such a placement of an important building as to any tradition based on Rome'.<sup>35</sup> The decision to adopt the name 'Capitol' for the seat of the legislature, however, is one loaded with classical allusions and implications.

While figures such as Upton may be content to assume that the naming of the Capitol at Washington followed in the tradition of 'prerevolutionary capitols that precedes it', Hodgkins has effectively demonstrated that in fact 'when the Capitol in Washington was planned and named, Virginia was the only American State ... which was currently using that name for the headquarters of its legislature ... elsewhere in this country State House was the prevailing name'.<sup>36</sup> It seems bizarre to modern readers that the designers of Washington gave the seat of the U.S. legislature a name which can only have been an allusion to either the then recently built Virginia State House or the Roman Capitoline Hill, especially when one considers that, as every classics student knows, the Senate did not generally meet on the Capitoline.<sup>37</sup> However, Ziolkowski has demonstrated that incorrectly placing the Roman Senate at the Capitoline is a mistake within English literature that dates back to Chaucer's *Monk's Tale* and is repeated in Shakespeare's *Anthony and Cleopatra*, *Hamlet*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Coriolanus*.<sup>38</sup> Thus it is understandable that Capitol would be seen as an appropriate name for the seat of the legislature because 'the Roman Capitol as a conspicuous example of a legislative building was then well known in English literature'.<sup>39</sup>

The decision to name the Legislative house the 'Capitol' thus represents a major break from the established naming tradition within America. Naming it the Capitol can only have been

---

<sup>35</sup> G.W. Hodgkins, 'Naming the Capitol and the Capital', *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington D.C.* 60/62 (1960/1962), p. 44.

<sup>36</sup> Upton, *Architecture in the United States* (1998, New York), p. 72; Hodgkins, 'Naming', p. 37.

<sup>37</sup> Ziolkowski, *Classical Influence*, p. 39-40.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* 40.

<sup>39</sup> Hodgkins, 'Naming', p. 40.

understood as an evocation of either contemporary ideas of the Senate in republican Rome or, at the very least, the Virginia Capitol in Richmond which, as has been discussed, was a near identical imitation of the Roman Maison Carrée in Nîmes. The effect of both of these possibilities would have been a very conscious allusion to the ancient world. L'Enfant's plan for Washington D.C., which uses the term Capitol, thus seems to have, to some extent, sought to evoke images of ancient Rome. Overall then it can be seen that while the ancient city did not serve as a fundamental basis for L'Enfant's plan of Washington, the city's designer attempted to evoke the image of Rome within Washington in more subtle ways with regard to his naming of the Capitol.

The notion that the actual design of the Capitol building is based on ancient models is one that at first seems to have a lot of credence. Even to the casual observer the design of the building, with its circular rotunda, vaulted ceilings, pedimented portico, and Corinthian columns (Figure 5), seems classically-inspired. Various commentators have discussed how the building is based upon Roman models, in particular the Pantheon.<sup>40</sup> Upton has described the building as 'clothed in Roman classical architectural garb'.<sup>41</sup> This classical styling extends to the design's interior also. Horatio Greenough's statue of George Washington that, similar to Phidias' statue of Zeus Olympia, depicts America's *pater patriae* 'seated on a throne, bare-chested with classical drapery, sandaled and gazing straight ahead' (Figure 6) was originally intended to be placed within the Capitol Rotunda.<sup>42</sup>

As with the similarities of L'Enfant's plan to that of Versailles, these similarities do not necessarily indicate imitation. It is true that Jefferson informed L'Enfant by letter that

---

<sup>40</sup> Examples of this view include Allen, *History of the United States Capitol – A Chronicle of Design, Construction, and Politics* (2001, Washington D.C.), p. 19; Caemmerer, 'Architects', p. 4; Harris, 'Washington's Gamble', pp. 551-2; Scott, 'L'Enfant's Washington', p. 108-10; Tunnard & Reed, *American Skyline: The Growth and Form of Our Cities and Towns* (1956, New York), p. 52-4; Ziolkowski, *Classical Influence*, p. 41.

<sup>41</sup> Upton, *Architecture*, p. 73.

<sup>42</sup> Ziolkowski, *Classical Influence*, p. 102

‘whenever it is proposed to prepare plans for the Capitol, I should prefer the adoption of ... one of the models of antiquity, which have had the approbation of thousands of years’.<sup>43</sup> Yet when it was decided to hold an open competition to propose a design for the Capitol the competition guidelines simply stated that a reward ‘will be given by the Commissioners of the Federal Buildings, to the person, who, before the 15<sup>th</sup> day of July, 1792, shall produce to them, the most approved plan, if adopted by them, for a Capitol to be erected in this City’.<sup>44</sup> The only further requirements that the competition mentioned were the rooms that were required. There were no specifications of preferred architectural styles.<sup>45</sup> The designs submitted by individuals such as Charles Wintersmith’s, which feature little or no overt classical references, demonstrate that it was certainly not a universal assumption that the Capitol Building would adopt a neoclassical aesthetic.<sup>46</sup> This suggests that it was not necessarily the commissioners’ initial intention that the design be classically inspired, but rather it just so happened that Thornton’s heavily classically inspired design was the most aesthetically pleasing. A possibility that is certainly believable when one compares it to some of the other submissions, such as James Diamond’s much maligned proposal.<sup>47</sup>

The extent to which the Capitol may have been envisioned along the lines of ancient monumental architecture is further limited by the plurality of voices that influenced its design. Upton has described the Capitol Building as being ‘created through acts of bricolage’ as the building was, to quote Caemmerer, ‘a composite, representing the work of a number of architects’.<sup>48</sup> While William Thornton’s entry may have been selected as the winning design there were frequent changes of lead architect and numerous conflicts during its implementation, such as is referenced in George Washington’s letter to the Commissioners

---

<sup>43</sup> Jefferson to L'Enfant, April 10, 1791.

<sup>44</sup> Johnson, T. & Jefferson, T., *Dunlap's American Daily Advertiser* March 24, 1792.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Wintersmith’s design can be found at [www.loc.gov/exhibits/uscapitol/images/thirty4.jpg](http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/uscapitol/images/thirty4.jpg).

<sup>47</sup> Diamond’s design can be found at [www.loc.gov/exhibits/uscapitol/images/fourty.jpg](http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/uscapitol/images/fourty.jpg).

<sup>48</sup> Upton, *Architecture*, p. 75; Caemmerer, ‘Architects’, p. 1.

in 1793, so much so that L'Enfant ultimately resigned his commission as city planner.<sup>49</sup> As the Capitol was the product of a plurality of voices, rather than a single designer, the extent to which it was envisioned as a piece of ancient monumental architecture is arguably limited due to the variety of visions that produced it.

While it may be true that the competition did not specifically call for classically inspired entries, its call for designs for a 'Capitol' uses a term loaded with classical implications, as has been discussed. The fact that the designs which received first and second prize in the competition (Thornton's and Hallet's respectively) were both extremely heavily influenced by Roman models (Thornton's being, as discussed, very similar to the Pantheon while Hallet's was, like the Virginia Capitol, based on the Maison Carrée) further suggest that it was the commissioners' intention to adopt a classically-inspired design. Furthermore George Washington's letter to the Commissioners on January 31, 1793, in which he discusses how Hallet 'was in some degree led into his plan by ideas we all expressed to him', demonstrates that, far from being passive recipients of entries, the commissioners were active in promoting their vision for the design of the Capitol.<sup>50</sup>

Similarly, while the Capitol's architects may have changed throughout the course of its production, it is important to note that rather than leaving the commissioners and designers to their own devices 'Both Washington and Jefferson were deeply interested in the building of the Capitol and participated in decisions at every step'.<sup>51</sup> This is evidenced by examples such as Washington's letter to the Commissioners on March 8, 1793 in which he influences the commissioners regarding Thornton's plan, stating that 'Grandeur, simplicity and

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 5 – 28 discusses how "The Capitol has passed through the control of men variously endowed and with conflicting ideals." Washington to the Commissioners, January 31, 1793 discusses how "Some difficulty arises with respect to Mr. Hallet." As is discussed in Washington to Stuart, November 20, 1791; Washington to the Commissioners, December 18, 1791; Washington to Stuart, March 8, 1792.

<sup>50</sup> Washington to the Commissioners, January 31, 1793.

<sup>51</sup> C. Verner, 'Surveying and Mapping the New Federal City: The First Printed Maps of Washington, D.C.' *Imago Mundi* 23 (1969), p. 59.

convenience appear to be so well combined in this plan ... that I have no doubt of its meeting with that approbation to you'.<sup>52</sup> Jefferson similarly states in his *Opinion on Capital* that the Commissioners will 'be subject to the President's direction in every point' in its production.<sup>53</sup>

That the adherence to ancient principles of architecture represented a significant desire of the Capitol's designers, particularly Jefferson, is demonstrated further by the controversy over the manner in which the chamber of the House of Representatives was to be lit. Latrobe (the architect at the time) had suggested that, for reasons of practicality, a modern lantern design be used to light the chamber.<sup>54</sup> Jefferson responded to Latrobe's suggestion by saying 'You know my reverence for the Graecian & Roman style of architecture. I do not recollect ever to have seen in their buildings a single instance of a lantern, cupola, or belfry', even going so far as to call them 'one of the degeneracies of modern architecture'.<sup>55</sup> The fervency with which the designers of the Capitol pursued adherence to ancient models is clear.

Therefore, a close reading of the correspondence of those involved in the production of the Capitol building, combined with an understanding of the contemporary implications of words that today are commonplace, reveals that from its very inception the Capitol building was the product of a concerted effort to emulate ancient examples. Through studying the textual evidence concerning the production and design of Washington it can be seen that, far from simply being the product of international trends, the classical architecture of Washington's Capitol was the product of a concerted effort to imitate the architectural models of ancient Rome. The argument that serves as the common basis that Washington's neoclassicism

---

<sup>52</sup> Washington to the Commissioners, March 8, 1793.

<sup>53</sup> Jefferson *Opinion on Capital* November 29, 1790.

<sup>54</sup> V. Daiker, 'The Capitol of Jefferson and Latrobe', *The Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress* 32 (1975), p. 27.

<sup>55</sup> Jefferson to Latrobe, April 22, 1807.

was an imitation of international fashion – that L'Enfant's plan for the city was based upon contemporary Versailles – is based on faulty assumptions that similarity is equivalent to imitation. It has instead been demonstrated that L'Enfant's plan for the city was a fundamentally original work, influenced by the topography of the region rather than an adherence to pre-existing exempla. Textual and semantic analysis has shown that, from its earliest designs, the Capitol Building was consciously based upon ancient, rather than modern, models. It was the product of a concerted effort to emulate classical, rather than contemporary neoclassical, examples.

## Illustrations

### Figure 1

Governor's Palace, Williamsburg.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Williamsburg\\_VA\\_Governors\\_Palace.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Williamsburg_VA_Governors_Palace.jpg)

### Figure 2

Virginia State Capitol Building, Richmond.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Virginia\\_State\\_Capitol\\_late\\_morning.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Virginia_State_Capitol_late_morning.JPG)

### Figure 3

L'Enfant, P.C. (1791) *Plan of the city intended for the permanent seat of the government of t[he] United States : projected agreeable to the direction of the President of the United States, in pursuance of an act of Congress, passed on the sixteenth day of July, MDCCXC, "establishing the permanent seat on the bank of the Potowmac"*

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:L%27enfant\\_plan\\_of\\_Washington,\\_D.C..jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:L%27enfant_plan_of_Washington,_D.C..jpg)

### Figure 4

Plan de Versailles.

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4a/Plan\\_de\\_Versailles\\_-\\_Gesamtplan\\_von\\_Delagrife\\_1746.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4a/Plan_de_Versailles_-_Gesamtplan_von_Delagrife_1746.jpg) [Accessed 22/03/2016].

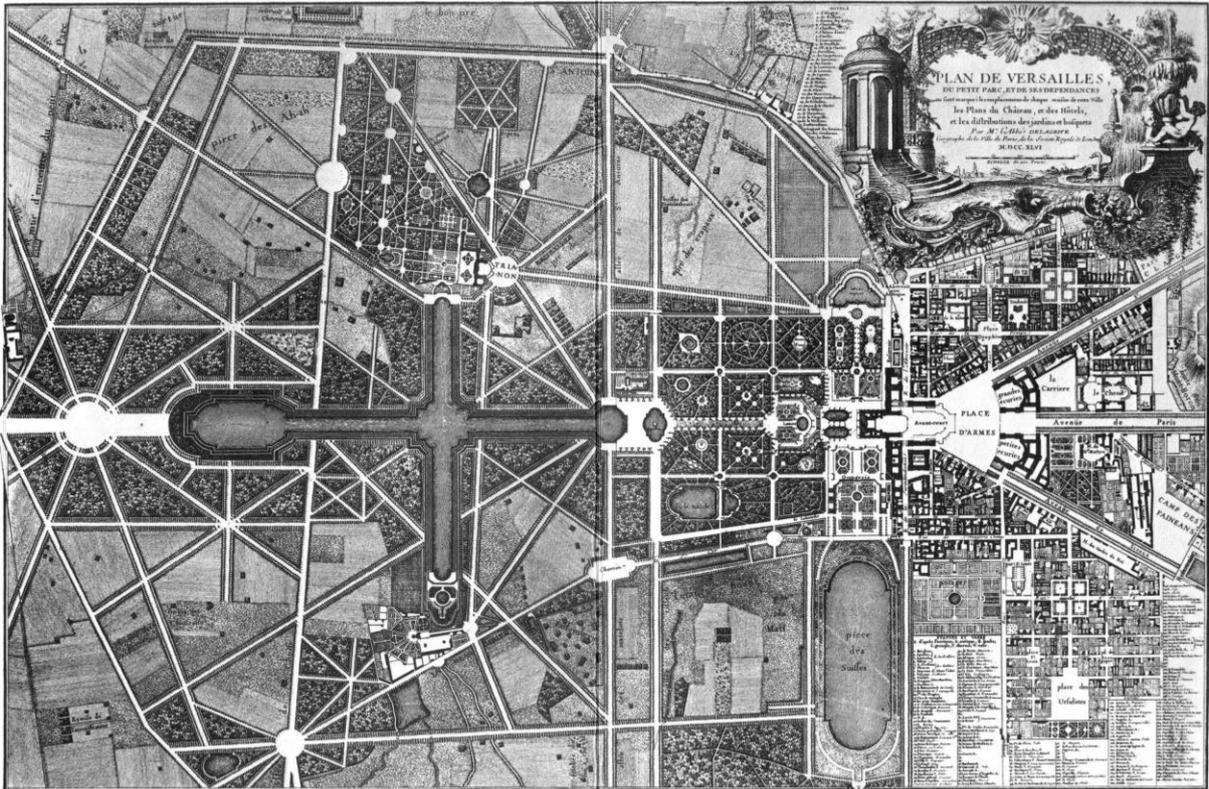


Figure 5

William Thornton's Successful Design for the Capitol.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flickr - USCapitol - Thornton Capitol Winning Design.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flickr_-_USCapitol_-_Thornton_Capitol_Winning_Design.jpg)

Figure 6

Horatio Greenough's Statue of Washington.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:George Washington Greenough statue.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:George_Washington_Greenough_statue.jpg)

## Bibliography

### Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Sources

Anon., 'Essay on the City of Washington' *Federal Orrery* (Feb, 16 1795)

[<http://www.rarenewspapers.com/view/601963>] Accessed 21/03/201.

Jefferson, T. 'Autobiography, May 6' in *The Works of Thomas Jefferson, Vol. 1*, Ford, P.L.

(ed.) [<http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/jefferson-the-works-vol-1-autobiography-anas-1760-1770>]

Accessed 22/03/2016.

Jefferson, T. 'to Dr. James Currie, January 18, 1786'

[<http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-09-02-0209>] Accessed 22/03/2016.

Jefferson, T. 'Opinion on Capital November 29, 1790' in *The Works of Thomas Jefferson,*

*Vol. 6*, Ford, P.L. (ed.) [[http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/jefferson-the-works-vol-6-](http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/jefferson-the-works-vol-6-correspondence-1789-1792)

[correspondence-1789-1792](http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/jefferson-the-works-vol-6-correspondence-1789-1792)] Accessed 22/03/2016.

Jefferson, T. 'to L'Enfant, April 10, 1791' in *The Letters of Thomas Jefferson 1743 – 1826*

[<http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/presidents/thomas-jefferson/letters-of-thomas-jefferson/jefl90.php>]

Accessed 22/03/2016.

Jefferson, T. 'to Washington, G., April 10, 1791' in *The Works of Thomas Jefferson, Vol. 12*,

Ford, P.L. (ed.) [<http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-20-02-0001-0015>]

Accessed 22/03/2016.

Jefferson, T. 'to Latrobe, B, April 22, 1807' in *Thomas Jefferson and the National Capital*,

Padover, S.K. (ed.) [[https://memory.loc.gov/service/mss/mtj/mtj1/038/038\\_0321\\_0322.pdf](https://memory.loc.gov/service/mss/mtj/mtj1/038/038_0321_0322.pdf)]

Accessed 22/03/2016.

Johnson, T. and Jefferson, T. (1792) 'Announcement of Capitol Design Competition'

*Dunlap's American Daily Advertiser (Philadelphia), March 24, 1792*

[<https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/us.capitol/thirty.jpg>] Accessed 22/03/2016.

'L'Enfant, C.P. 'to Washington, G., September 11, 1789' in 'Origin of the Federal City', Clark, A.C. (ed.) *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington D.C.* 35/36, pp. 21.

'L'Enfant, C.P. 'to Jefferson, T., April 4, 1791' in Glaab, C.N. (ed.) *The American City: A Documentary History* (1963, Illinois), pp 38.

L'Enfant, C.P. 'to Washington, G., March 26, 1791' in 'L'Enfant's reports to President Washington, bearing dates of March 26, June 22, and August 19, 1791' *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington D.C.* 2, pp. 27 – 32.

L'Enfant, C.P. 'to Washington, G. June 22, 1791' in 'L'Enfant's reports to President Washington, bearing dates of March 26, June 22, and August 19, 1791' *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington D.C.* 2, pp. 32 – 37.

Pierre L'Enfant, 'Observations Explanatory to the Plan' (1791) in Reps, J.W. (ed.) *The Making of Urban America, A History of City Planning in the United States* (Princeton, 1965), pp.251.

Moore, T., *The Works of Thomas Moore* (1823, Paris).

Washington, G. 'to Stuart, D., November 20, 1791'  
[<http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-09-02-0118>] Accessed 22/03/2016.

Washington, G. 'to the Commissioners for the District of Columbia', December 18, 1791'  
[<http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-09-02-0183>] Accessed 22/03/2016.

Washington, G. 'to Stuart, D. March 8, 1792' in *The Writings of George Washington, Vol. XII* Ford, W.C. (ed.) [<http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/washington-the-writings-of-george-washington-vol-xii-1790-1794>] Accessed 22/03/2016.

Washington, G. 'to the Commissioners for the District of Columbia', January 31, 1793 in *The Writings of George Washington, Vol. XII*, Ford, W.C. (ed.) [<http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/washington-the-writings-of-george-washington-vol-xii-1790-1794>] Accessed 22/03/2016.

Washington, G. 'to the Commissioners for the District of Columbia', March 8, 1793 in *A Documentary History of the Construction and Development of the United States Capitol Buildings and Grounds*, United States Congress House Commission on Construction of House Office Building (ed.) pp. 24.

#### Modern Sources

Allen, W.C., *History of the United States Capitol – A Chronicle of Design, Construction, and Politics* (2001, Washington D.C.).

Brandenburg, D.J. & Brandenburg, M.H., 'The Duc De La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt's visit to the Federal City in 1797: A new translation', *Records of the Columbia Historical Society*, 49 (1973/1974), pp. 35-60.

Bugbee, M.F., 'The Early Planning of Sites for Federal and Local Use in Washington, D. C.', *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington, D.C.*, 51/52 (1951/1952), pp. 19-31.

Caemmerer, H.P., 'Architects of the United States Capitol' *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington D.C.*, 48/49 (1946/1947), pp. 1-28

Caemmerer, H.P., 'The life of Pierre Charles L'Enfant' *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington D.C.*, 50 (1948/1950), pp. 323-40.

Carter II, E.C., 'Benjamin Henry Latrobe and the growth and development of Washington, 1798-1818' *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington, D.C.*, 71/72 (1971/1972), pp. 128-49.

Clark, A.C., 'Origin of the Federal City' *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington D.C.*, 35/36 (1935), pp. 1-97.

Daiker, V., 'The Capitol of Jefferson and Latrobe' *The Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress*, 32 (1975), pp. 25-32.

Dougherty, P.J., 'Baroque and Picturesque Motifs in L'Enfant's Design for the Federal Capital' *American Quarterly*, 26 (1974), pp. 23-36.

- Dumbauld, E., 'Thomas Jefferson and the city of Washington' *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington D.C.*, 50 (1980) pp. 67-80.
- Flexner, J.T., 'The Great Columbian Federal City' *The American Art Journal*, 2 (1970), pp. 30-45.
- Gabriel, R.H., 'Thomas Jefferson and architecture' *OAH Magazine of History*, 8 (1994), pp. 36-44.
- Grant, U.S., 'Planning the Nation's Capital' *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington D.C.*, 50 (1948/50), pp. 43-58.
- Gournay, I., 'The French Connection in Washington D.C.', in Field, C.R., Gourney, I., Somma, T.P. (eds.), *Paris on the Potomac: The French Influence on the Art and Architecture of Washington* (Ohio 2007), pp. 1-35.
- Handlin, D.P., *American Architecture* (1985, New York).
- Harris, C.M., 'Washington's Gamble, L'Enfant's Dream: Politics, design, and the founding of the national Capital' *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 56 (1999), pp. 527-64.
- Harris, C.M., 'Washington's "Federal City," Jefferson's "Federal Town"' *Washington History, Vol. 12, No. 1, Coming into the City: Essays on Early Washington D.C. Commemorating the Bicentennial of the Federal Government's Arrival in 1800*, 12 (2000), pp. 49-53.
- Hawkins, D.A., 'The city of Washington in 1800: A new map', *Washington History*, 12 (2000), pp. 74-7.
- Hegemann, W. & Peets, E., *The American Vitruvius: An Architects' Handbook of Urban Design* (1988, New York).
- Hodgkins, G.W., 'Naming the Capitol and the Capital', *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington D.C.* 60/62 (1960/1962), pp. 36-53.
- Jackson, D.E., 'L'Enfant's Washington: An architect's view', *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington D.C.* 50 (1980), pp. 398-420.
- Morales-Vázquez, R., 'Imagining Washington: Monuments and nation building in the early Capital', *Washington History* 12 (2000), pp. 12-29.
- Mumford, L., *The City in History* (1961, New York).
- Peets, E., 'Famous town planners III: L'Enfant: The city of Washington', *The Town Planning Review* 13 (1928), pp. 30-49.
- Peets, E., 'L'Enfant's Washington', *The Town Planning Review* 15 (1933), pp. 155-164.
- Peterson, C.E., 'The national Capital, 1790', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 10 (1951), pp. 21-2.
- Reps, J.W., *The Making of Urban America, A History of City Planning in the United States* (1965, Princeton).
- Reps, W., *Monumental Washington: The Planning and Development of the Capital Center* (1967, Princeton).
- Scisco, L.D., 'A Site for the "Federal City": The Original Proprietors and Their Negotiations with Washington', *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington, D.C.* 57/59 (1957/1959), pp. 123-147.

Scott, P., "'This Vast Empire": The iconography of the Mall, 1791 – 1848', *Studies in the History of Art*, 30 (1991a), pp. 36-58.

Scott, P., 'L'Enfant's Washington described: The city in the public press, 1791 – 1795', *Washington History*, 3 (1991b), 96-111

Sibley Jennings Jnr., J.L., 'Artistry as Design L'Enfant's extraordinary city', *The Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress*, 36 (1979), pp. 225-78.

Tunnard, C. & Reed, H.H., *American Skyline: The Growth and Form of Our Cities and Towns* (1956, New York).

Upton, D., *Architecture in the United States* (1998, New York).

Vale, L.J., *Architecture, Power, and National Identity* (1992, Yale).

Valerie Fifer, J., 'Washington, D.C.: The Political Geography of a Federal Capital', *Journal of American Studies*, 15 (1981), pp. 5-26.

Verner, C., 'Surveying and Mapping the New Federal City: The First Printed Maps of Washington, D. C.', *Imago Mundi*, 23 (1969), pp. 59-72.

Ziolkowski, J.E., *Classical Influence on the Public Architecture of Washington and Paris* (1988, New York).