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THE ARCHITECTURAL LIBRARIES OF
BENJAMIN HENRY LATROBE

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In the latter part of the eighteenth century and the early part of the nineteenth, architectural books were a critical resource for those who designed buildings of any cosmopolitan pretension, whether they were genteel amateurs, building tradesmen, or among the relatively few early professional architects in this country. These publications were a potent means of transmission, coursing with favored new forms and justifying ideas, and providing precisely recorded particulars of noted landmarks, current possibilities for specific building types, and a storehouse of appropriate detail. Forms and ideas on paper offered themselves up for ready application in stone, brick, wood, and plaster and were soon transported into the varied landscapes of the colonies and the early nation.

The tripartite cast among those providing building designs at the start of the nineteenth century was concisely described by Benjamin Latrobe (figure 7.1), one of the earliest professional architects to practice in the United States and in several ways the most influential. Writing to his student Robert Mills in July 1806, he explained: "The profession of Architecture has been hitherto in the hands of two sets of Men. The first, of those, who from travelling or from books have acquired some knowledge of the Theory of the art, but know nothing of its practice, the second of those who know nothing but the practice, and whose early life being spent in labor, and in the habits of a laborious life, have had no opportunity of acquiring the theory. The complaisance of



FIG 7.1 Portrait of Benjamin Henry Latrobe by Charles Willson Peale, ca. 1804. Courtesy of The White House.

these two sets of Men to each other, renders it difficult for the Architect to get in between them.”¹

The first sort of designer, whom Latrobe labeled the “Gentleman architect,” had reference to books presenting views of faraway places, the forms of approved new modernities, and the theories that supported them. These were often expensive folio or quarto volumes with many plates, which such men held individually or borrowed from elite subscription libraries. Most of the library titles that can be traced have been ably compiled into lists by Helen Park (through 1775) and Janice Schimmelman (through 1800).² The collections of architectural books held by individuals have proved less susceptible to modern compilation except where they were recorded in detailed invento-

ries or can be glimpsed at the time of their purchase, often recently imported, through the newspaper advertisements of booksellers—also rich sources for Park and Schimmelmann.

The second kind of designer, the kind Latrobe called the "Building mechanic," was also served by architectural books, if frequently of a different sort. Often octavo or smaller, these volumes were usually more formulaic, with greater focus on correct forms for specific details that could be readily adapted to a wide range of buildings, including frontispieces, mantels, and moldings on relatively modest houses. But toward the end of the eighteenth century there was a good deal of convergence in the use made of architectural books by these two types of designer—especially where a master builder had risen to the gentlemanly standing of a Robert Smith, Thomas Dawes, or William Buckland, or where builders pooled their resources, as in the case of the Carpenters' Company of the City and County of Philadelphia.

Designers of the third sort mentioned in Latrobe's account, professional architects like himself, emerged in a significant and lasting way in this country only during the last decade of the eighteenth century. This small but growing and influential group turned even more avidly to books, although theirs was a different kind of dependency. Whereas the key books of the midcentury used by amateurs and builders alike had been mostly contemporary English or earlier Italian publications that guided their users in the harmonies and proprieties of neo-Palladian design, the early professionals looked to a broader set of more current books whose formal range and aesthetic theory had diversified greatly. These books offered the necessary grist for the mills of both the Neoclassicism and the stylistic eclecticism just then emerging and soon to become dominant in the early nineteenth century. As architectural fashion turned toward models and styles rarely broached in the New World, this more wide-ranging class of books served a population of architects and then builders as well—most of whom had not seen such examples in modern European cities, nor their referents farther afield. They served even the few who had done so, though, by providing the useful currency of scaled drawings that could be readily adapted in new building designs marked by forms from distant times and places.

Advances in building technology and systems were also transmitted through publication in these decades. But the greater hunger was for books more directly addressing architectural form and style, for the tides of architectural form had begun to evolve and even reverse at an astonishingly accelerated rate from the 1790s on, if usually paralleling similar shifts in European architectural centers. Such changefulness, of which patrons were widely aware, required that building designers tap much more frequently into

what was still an almost entirely westward flow of publications—at least until American architectural books achieved wider circulation in their own country during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Architectural books and journals were the lifeblood of antebellum designers, and the wills of even modest housebuilders often mentioned sundry illustrated volumes to which they had made productive recourse.

This chapter explores the professional library of Benjamin Henry Latrobe, expanding the term to comprise the set of architectural and engineering books that, evidence indicates, Latrobe knew, and usually seemed to know well, whether or not he actually owned them. The word might also be pluralized, for he gathered and lost his own collection of books more than once.

Latrobe probably began to collect architectural books in the mid-1780s in England, as he adopted his vocation in his early twenties, but they were mostly lost when he emigrated to the United States in the mid-1790s. As he recalled in 1804, “When I came to America 10 Years ago I brought part of my library with me, the remainder being sent in another vessel about 1,500 valuable books, and several instruments was captured by the French and sold, so that I could never recover any part of it. By this means I have lost many professional books.”³ Latrobe subsequently began a new collection of books, creating what may have been one of the largest professional architectural libraries in this country until that brought together by Ithiel Town a few decades later. But like those of his leading pupils, Robert Mills and William Strickland, his second library too was dispersed, and no inventory or substantial survival of its contents seems to be known.⁴

In the surviving writings of these early professionals, however, one finds a good deal of evidence of the presence of architectural books. References to them in Latrobe’s writings between the 1780s and his death in 1820 were collected by the staff of the Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe, an editorial project initiated by the Maryland Historical Society which gathered, researched, and through Yale University Press published many of Latrobe’s writings and drawings.⁵ From such citations, mostly in letters, one can construct an “inferred” library of books and journals that the architect knew. Latrobe’s many mentions of particular authors and books, with his keen and sometimes mordant comments, offer the perspective of a remarkably well-read architect; he set a formative example for his students, and the profession at large, in thinking of books as essential tools of the architect, and of architecture as a high-minded liberal art and science.

Continuing on the subject of the 1,500 books lost at sea, he recalled: “This loss

would have rendered me almost incapable of doing business here, had not my memory been tolerably good, and I even designed and executed the bank of Pennsylvania without any assistance from books; the part of my library which I had saved been then in the custody of a friend." Despite that feat of memory, he clearly saw books as critical to his practice as architect and engineer, as he explained further on in the same letter: "I find a recurrence to books daily more convenient, and there are two or three works which are become almost indispensibly necessary to me. I have made several attempts to procure them, but have failed, the promises of my friends who have gone to France having been lost at Sea, I suppose."⁶ As this last line indicates, he was particularly eager to put his hands on books from the Continent, in addition to the many English titles he would mention.

He expanded a bit on the importance of books to the professional in an 1806 letter to his pupil Robert Mills: "Every architect who has been regularly educated knows what has been done before in the Same line. This knowledge he necessarily acquires in the office in which he studies not only from the books, and designs which he finds there, but in the instructions, and *actual practice* of the principal, provided [he] be a man of intelligence, candor, and of business." He illustrated his point with an example, recalling that when he had been "applied to for a design" for the Virginia State Penitentiary in 1796 or 1797, he enjoyed the advantage that "no one there could have the same means of information on this subject as myself, for independently of my general professional character I had been surveyor of the police [in] the districts of London, and had not only erected the buildings belonging to that branch of the government of the metropolis but necessarily acquired a knowledge of all that others had done in the erection and improvement of prisons."⁷

But not all architectural books were of equal interest to him. He was supremely aware of what he perceived as a revolution in taste, to which he enthusiastically adhered. Writing to the members of Congress in 1806, he explained his reaction upon first encountering the design of William Thornton (and others) for the U.S. Capitol: "I frankly confess that, excepting in a few of the details, all my ideas of good taste, and even of good sense in architecture were shocked by the style of the building. I am well aware that in what I shall say on this subject I am probably in a minority. All the books for the last three or four hundred years up to 1760, are against me, and many that have been published since stand on the same ground. But as the arts continue to be improved,—simplicity gains daily more admirers."⁸ This taste brooked no heterodoxy: hence Latrobe's confident view expressed in 1805 to John Lenthall, his clerk of the

works at the U.S. Capitol, about the taste of his client, President Thomas Jefferson. Latrobe saw himself as "cramped in this design by his [Jefferson's] prejudices in favor of the architecture of the old french books, out of which he fishes every thing."⁹

His students got the message. William Strickland recalled this generational shift in taste in an autobiographical sketch that he composed about 1825, looking back two decades to the time he had entered Latrobe's office: "I remained in this Office 4 years . . . At night I copied the Engraved plates and read the letter press of *Stuarts Athens, Ionian Antiquities &c*; and was soon enabled, by contrasting these works with *Batty Langley, Swan & my father's bench mate*, to discover the graceful forms of Grecian Architecture."¹⁰ Robert Mills echoed this sense of a sea change in one of his later autobiographical accounts:

Mr. Jefferson was a Roman in his views of architecture, as evidenced in Monticello House, his late residence, which was designed by him . . . The example and influence of Mr. Jefferson at first operated in favour of the introduction of the Roman style into the country, and it required all the talents and good taste of such a man as Mr. Latrobe to correct it by introducing a better. The natural good taste and the unprejudiced eye of our citizens required only a few examples of the Greek style to convince them of its superiority over the Roman for public structures, and its simplicity recommended its introduction into their private dwellings.¹¹

One must qualify this oversimplified opposition of Greek versus Roman, for in some respects Latrobe's work was more Roman than Greek. He and his pupils often combined Greek detail and simplicity with a Roman monumentality and spatial complexity; their building techniques and planning for large projects often drew on those of the great Roman bath complexes. In their work in the first decades of the nineteenth century these architects also ventured a bold element of invention, celebrating a potent contemporaneity and a breadth of possibility through the vehicle and individuality of the architect. Latrobe would probably have been more circumspect than Mills, who was typically blunt about this license to invent:

Many useful hints now are to be gathered from French works on Architecture; but the author has made it a rule never to consult books when he had to design a building . . . Books are useful to the student, but when he enters upon the practice of his profession, he should lay them aside and only consult them upon doubtful points, or in matters of detail or as *mere studies, not to copy buildings from*.¹²

One could certainly take Latrobe's students' references to books further, especially by turning to the manifold mentions in Strickland's Franklin Institute lectures of the mid-1820s or, a generation later, those of Thomas Ustick Walter in the early 1840s.¹³ Mills's papers, recently published on microfilm, would similarly reveal a long list of references to architectural books.¹⁴ This chapter, however, focuses on those mentioned by Latrobe.

Over the course of several years the staff of the Latrobe Papers maintained a file of the architect's references to books on all subjects—culled from the thousands of letters and other documents that survive from the architect's hand—and gathered them into a seventeen-page typescript list.¹⁵ Titles and partial references were matched with likely identifications as an internal tool for the project. Additional indications of his reading appear in other documents and even in some drawings or designs. Taken together, they help sketch out the range of the architect's reading and often give some indication of what he thought of these books. What follows is a selective list by likely author and title (editions are often uncertain), first of architectural books and then of engineering works, accompanied by the evidence from Latrobe's writings or elsewhere.

Taking the architectural books in roughly chronological order, one can start with Vitruvius.

• *Vitruvius, The Ten Books of Architecture*

The book of Vitruvius, a Roman, is indeed the only one on architecture, which has survived the rage of barbarians and the decay of time. But this work is of very inferior rank both in its literature, its taste, and its science, and is not now entirely intelligible. The only edifice which has been sometimes suspected to be of his design, the amphitheatre of Verona, has no extraordinary merit. (Latrobe, "Anniversary Oration to the Society of Artists," 8 May 1811, *BHL Corr.*, 3-73)

Latrobe's critical stance was not unparalleled among cosmopolitan architectural writers of the time, but it still seems quite a departure from the unqualified respect that Vitruvius had been widely accorded since the Renaissance. Some inkling of that respect, nevertheless, is implied by Latrobe's citing chapter and verse, along with his indication that he had consulted multiple editions of the text:

This question [of acoustics] has not occupied the attention of architects as much as its importance deserves. Even Vitruvius dismisses the subject in two paragraphs at the end of his