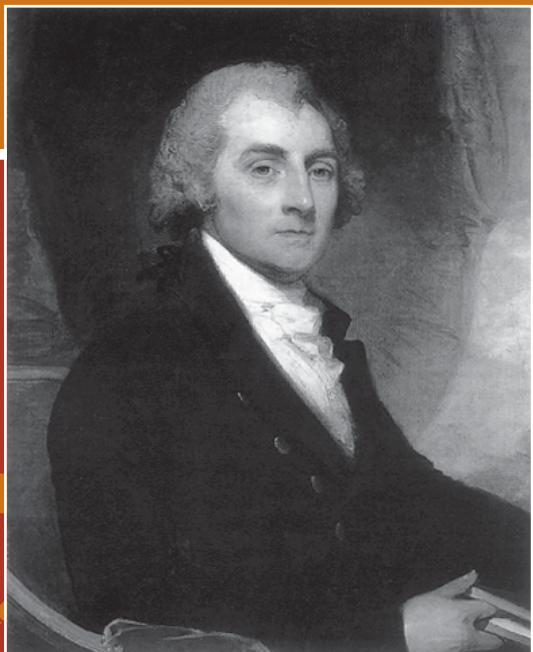


# William Thornton, M. D. Gentleman of the Enlightenment.



George W. Paulson, M.D.



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*Dedicated to my beloved wife, Ruth B. Paulson, D.D.S.*

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<i>Table of Contents</i>		<i>page</i>
Introduction		1
Chapter 1	Young Immigrant and His Coming to America, 1786	7
Chapter 2	Education and Thornton	29
Chapter 3	Tortola, Slavery, and Thornton	53
Chapter 4	City of Washington, and Thornton	87
Chapter 5	The Capitol Building	123
Chapter 6	William Thornton, Residential Designer	135
Chapter 7	Republican versus Federalist in the Time of Dr. Thornton	151
Chapter 8	Publishers and Publications in the Time of Thornton	163
Chapter 9	The Friends of Thornton	169
Chapter 10	William Thornton and the Patent Office	241
Chapter 11	Thornton's Business Ventures and His Legacy to His Wife	257
Chapter 12	Thornton, South America, Greece, and Liberty	265
Chapter 13	Scientific and Religious Interests	279
Chapter 14	Anna Maria Thornton	297
Chapter 15	Last Days	309
Sources/Bibliography		317



## Introduction

**William Thornton: He was born May 20, 1759, at Tortola, British West Indies; served a medical apprenticeship 1777-1781; attended medical school at the University of Edinburgh, 1781-1784; and received his M.D. degree from Aberdeen University in 1784.**

**He moved to the United States in 1787 and became a citizen in 1788.**

**Encouraged by Benjamin Franklin, Thornton won the competition to design the Philadelphia Library in 1789.**

**Living in Philadelphia he married Anna Maria Brodeau in 1790, and then returned to Tortola (1790-1792) to live on his plantation there.**

**Writing from Tortola, he submitted the winning design for the U. S. Capitol and returned for a lifetime of involvement in the new Federal City.**

**He was appointed by President Washington to be a Commissioner of the District of Columbia (1794-1802). He was the founder of the U.S. Patent office, and was its Director from 1802 until 1828.**

**On March 28, 1828 he died.**

**Is that all there was? Not really, and to remember him is to celebrate his times, and to cherish our own.**

William Thornton, M.D. (1759-1828), one of the most gifted men of his time, never became as famous as many of his contemporaries during the exciting childhood of the United States of America, the time the Federal City became Washington, D.C. If not famous, then should anyone care to hear about him? Even if he was actually only a lesser light among the revered Revolutionary Band of Brothers, he was an intriguing polymath who contributed, wrote, and dreamed along with the best of them. His and their efforts, and his friendships



*William Thornton.*

and multiple conflicts, are presented as a tribute to the time, to the dreams, and to the man. The time has been referred to as the “Enlightenment”, and the ideal for the educated gentleman of the day was to be involved, at least a dilettante, in many things. Agriculture and the mechanic arts were to be understood, that at least, and for sure. It may not have seemed so at the time, but probably those who cared and were also literate could master much of the entire body of knowledge in Science and Medicine. Literature,

Classics, Art and Architecture were other obvious areas the cultivated gentleman should pursue. Jefferson is one example of a polymath of the Age, and gentleman Thornton was similar but perhaps less talented than Jefferson. He was certainly less politic. There was an age a man was expected to be skillful in many areas, not necessarily to specialize in a single focus of scholarly activity. Thornton was a gentleman of that age, and a slave owner, to boot.

The national motto “*E Pluribus Unum*” fits Thornton himself. Just as one united nation was forged out of many units, units from several states and from various cultures, so too from a rich mix of creative individuals a new American citizen appeared. This new American, and there were many of them, including Thornton, was not purely English, was surely not French, but was firmly launched on the road to become an authentic and uniquely American patriot. New immigrants arrived in America daily and gradually much of their prior identity was shed or rubbed off. It was in the process of such loss, the inevitable change, that they became truly American. William Thornton was one of these new immigrants at a time we were blessed with a remarkable cluster of leaders, brothers in the spirit of the new freedom. He had turned to America from his native West Indies, and from the home of his youth, England, to seek a better life. Thornton was top-heavy with his many areas of interest, and with a soul burdened by a conflicting variety of aspirations and skills, but judged by modern times he may have lacked “bottom”, “stick-to-itiveness”, persistence. His true personality, the true heart of the man, was hard for others to fathom then, and is even harder to comprehend two hundred years later. He had



independent financial support, possessed intense hunger for fame, evidenced aristocratic graces, and demonstrated scientific and artistic talent. Why was he not more successful, then? And why has he been so easily forgotten now? The ironies, the ambivalences and alternatives in his character, are readily apparent. Who was this man, this gentleman, Dr. William Thornton?

He was a trained physician who had been educated at superb schools, but a physician who practiced everything except medicine. He either did not believe in fees or, perhaps, was sure they were too small ever to merit his attention. The daily routine of medicine may have failed to interest him, since it seemed to lack the finer virtues, and a busy practice could have limited the upper class ties he so eagerly sought. His recognized skills, for a time in great demand, were elsewhere than in medicine. Whatever the reasons, Thornton certainly never became recognized as a skillful practitioner of medicine, the one occupation for which he was actually well qualified. He was respected as a designer. He often reminded others that he was untrained as an architect, but his was the plan accepted for our U.S. Capitol, and several of our national architectural treasures owe their beauty to him.

He was intensely, and always, uncomfortable as a slave owner, as his writings testify again and again, and he was a devout apostle of John Lettsom, his mentor, who was also a Quaker and physician and who freed his own slaves. Lettsom was a leader during the decades of British efforts to free all slaves. Nevertheless, Thornton, who wrote frequently and eloquently about the tragedy of slavery, always relied on his personal slave holdings in the West Indies for his basic income. He bought and sold, but he did not free, his slaves. Were there other inconsistencies in his character?

Thornton wrote persuasively of the need for general and universal education for the average child in the United States, but he himself was most comfortable in the company of the privileged and aristocratic class of Washington. Certainly he never became a teacher. His papers, those that are still preserved through the Library of Congress, reflect the typical religious sentiments of the time, sentiments that sound sanctimonious to a modern reader. Nevertheless he readily expressed boredom with his native Quakerism. Thornton was clever and talented in multiple areas, but despite this managed to lose much of his fortune not only through unwise speculation, as in gold mining

in North Carolina, but also by continued devotion to racehorses, many of whom were simply not fast enough.

There are similar contrasts in Thornton's business and creative life. Thornton's fertile imagination presaged the development of both the steamboat and the machine gun, but he never manifested enough sustained effort to deserve full credit for any single major invention. As the first Superintendent of the United States Patent Office, he set the pattern for much of America's later creativity and productivity, but in the process he also received official reprimands for overt conflicts of interest. In the Patent Office he established what served as the first museum in Washington, a collection of models now long since destroyed, and he was once a friend of James Smithson, the Englishman whose legacy stimulated a national effort in collection and display. The Patent Office was important for young America, but Thornton felt that his position in the Patent Office was inadequately supported financially by his superiors and inadequately respected by his colleagues. Described by some as charming and witty, he seemed unable to avoid friction with other men who manifested a clearer focus, and he was particularly quarrelsome with several who displayed true creative genius.

Thornton was not the first person to write novels that were neither published nor read, but he published dozens of short articles and many sage comments in the category of *letters to the editor*. His interest in language led him to a once honored, but now totally ignored, concept of a universal system of instruction in language and orthography. These techniques preceded the suggestions of the much more famous Noah Webster (1758-1843), author of *An American Speller*. Thornton's concepts of dreams and sleeping were decades ahead of their time, but this scientifically trained physician was convinced that fish could be frozen for months and then still restored to life. His draftsmanship was exceptional, and he painted well, but he discarded many of his drawings and after his death his wife sold, or gave away, the rest. Ambiguity, mixed signals, forgotten conflicts, and a desire to both have more and to be more, were intrinsic to the man. So who was this man Thornton, what were his real accomplishments, and which ones really do deserve renewed recognition in our times? How did an educated European contribute in rustic America? In the process of

recalling the man Thornton, it is possible to assess the major concerns of his day through his written thought and recognized accomplishments.

This book attempts, in a time of specialization, to interpret this kaleidoscope of a multifaceted man while describing aspects of his time. The form is less a conventional or chronological life story than a discussion of the major themes of his life and times. Other American leaders, many of whom were his personal acquaintances, contributed to the excitement of the period. We glimpse Thornton and his times through what these people did and said. Through his story we can also witness them, and our own past.

Thornton's papers are available on microfilm from the Library of Congress, as are the papers of his wife. These have been read with the increasing certainty that Thornton's wife purged key notes, particularly those between 1810 and 1820, and continued to do so during her many years of life after the death of her husband. He ordered his papers sealed until 1915, perhaps because he was well aware of the large numbers of letters that reflected conflicts. Many of those letters that are available have become more readable through the published selections by C. W. Harris. In addition, many writings about other figures of the time have served as sources for reference, and these are listed in the bibliography. When quotations from him are utilized they are usually from the tapes of the papers supplied by the Library of Congress, or are from the sources listed at the end of the book.

Thornton lived in interesting times, had remarkable friends, and managed to acquire a few implacable enemies. What a time it was, and again, just who was this cultured gentleman of that time?



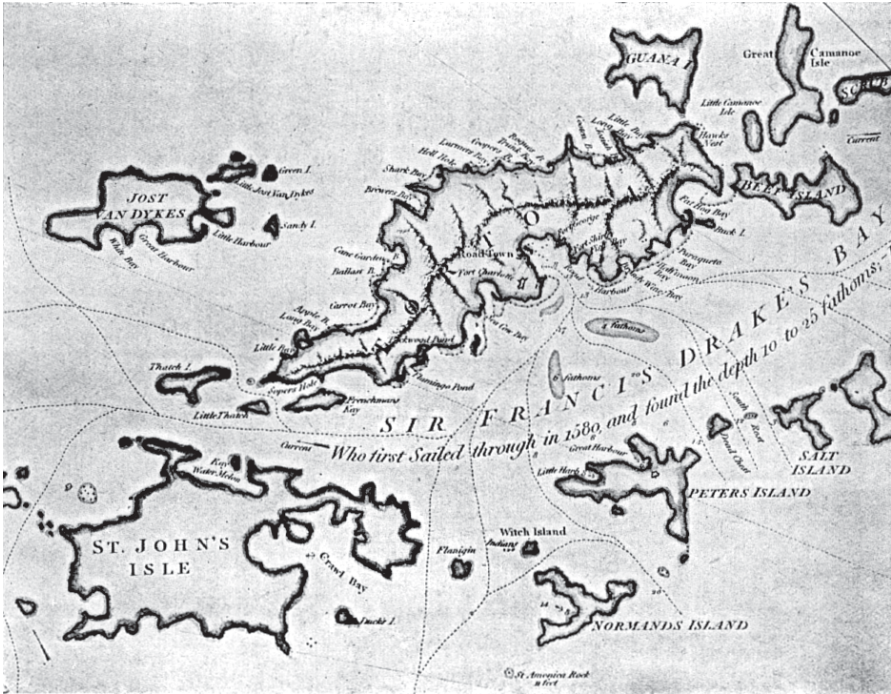
## CHAPTER 1

## A Young Immigrant and His Coming to America, 1786

- 1759** William Thornton, Jr. is born to Dorcas and William Thornton at Tortola Island.
- 1764** Sent to live and be educated with Quaker relatives in England.
- 1777-1781** Apprenticed in medicine with a nearby physician and apothecary.
- 1783** Internship and art studies in London.
- 1781-1786** Various travels in Scotland, France, etc.
- 1784** After study in several places was awarded M. D. degree in Aberdeen , Scotland.
- 1785** Returned briefly to Tortola.
- 1786** Arrived in America.

William Thornton, Jr., was the first child of William Thornton and Dorcas Zeagurs Thornton. He was probably born at the family plantation in Tortola, although Jenkins reports he was born on Jost van Dyke, the nearby island where his mentor Lettsom was born. Little Jost Van Dyke Island is a tiny 3.5 square miles of land, named for a Dutch buccaneer, and is within eyesight of Tortola Island, which is a bit larger at 21 square miles. Both islands are part of the British West Indies, and located in the Caribbean. For decades Tortola sheltered a Quaker, or Friends, congregation that came to the Indies before 1750. It was out of what was left of this small Quaker settlement that William Thornton, Jr., originated. His family came from the north of England, near Lancaster, at least his father's family did. A supportive relative, James Birket of Lancaster, who had lived in Tortola and Antigua, had encouraged a flourishing trade in sugar from the Indies as well as sponsoring Quaker connections in the islands. The Birkets and Thorntons shared several business and familial relationships during

the middle of the 1700s. Three of the four Thornton sons, Thomas, William, and Jonathan, eventually settled on various islands in the West Indies, each seeking to prosper as sugar merchants.



Map of Tortola Island.

The Quakers in Tortola traced their origins to John Pickering, who had probably been influenced in Antigua by James Birket himself. According to Abraham, Pickering came out of Antigua, also in the British West Indies, and established the first Tortola-based meeting group in 1741. Pickering became the highly respected Governor of Tortola. He died when William Thornton, Jr., was only 10. The prominent families in the Islands often knew each other well, and Pickering had personal relationship with the Thorntons. After Pickering lost his first wife in 1747 (Jenkins), he looked to the people he knew in Antigua for her replacement, and, possibly related, Absalom and Rebecca Zeagers brought their two daughters, Rebecca and Dorcas to visit. After all, there were very few successful whites living in the islands. In 1756 there were only 460 white persons with 3864 slaves. (Hunt) Pickering married Rebecca Zeagers. Accord-

ing to Jenkins, who romanticized the story, when Pickering returned to England to visit the Quakers in northern England Pickering and Dorcas Zeagers met William Thornton, the father of our subject. Thornton came to Tortola Island and then became the bridegroom of Dorcas. It was considered very important for Quakers to marry within their somewhat persecuted faith, and William Thornton arrived in Tortola as an accepted Quaker. Perhaps not an ideal Quaker, however, since he was once disciplined for laxity, then disowned by the sect for his “*human frailties*” in 1760. The family of Dorcas Zeagers owned some of the best land on the island, near Sea Cow Bay, land that was highly desirable for the cultivation of sugar cane. The Thorntons were also affluent as part of a successful merchant family living on an estate called Greenaire, near Lancaster, England. The estate was close to the home of the Birkett family that included the wealthy uncle of Dorcas Zeagers Thornton. So there were business, religious, and personal links that tied the group together. The origin of the Zeagers family is unknown. Jenkins suggests the name Zeagers might represent an anglicized version of a French name, Sejur.

William, Jr., the son and our subject, was born to Dorcas and William Thornton, near the family plantation, called Pleasant Valley, on May 20, 1759. There is some uncertainty about the dates, Hunt says Thornton was born on May 27, and Hunt seems uncertain about the exact year, but the Thornton tapes do suggest 1759. Thornton himself wrote that his birthday was May 20. William Thornton, Sr., died suddenly and without a will on July 23, 1760. A second son, Absalom, was born, possibly in 1760. (Stearns and Yerkes) Jenkins also names Edward as a brother but that name doesn't seem to appear elsewhere. After the father's death, Dorcas married Captain John Baillie in 1766, and the couple agreed to divide the Tortola property into shares for the boys and to give the property to them when they reached twenty-one. Baillie died soon after the wedding and Dorcas, the now quite wealthy widow, married Thomas Thomason, from St. Croix Island in the U. S. Virgin Islands. William, Jr., always referred to Thomason as “my father,” and his letters mention his profound grief on the occasion of the later deaths of both Absalom, his natural brother, and Thomason, his step-father. Harris writes the clearest summary of any of the biographers, and the tapes of Thornton are confirmatory (Harris, xxxv): “*Not surprisingly, Dorcas Zeagurs Thornton remarried in 1766 and, on being widowed a second*

*time, married a third husband about 1773. William Thornton's second step father, Thomas Thomason, merchant, of Tortola, whom he would call "my father" in his manhood, proved to be long-lived (1740-1813?) and an able protector of the family estate, if, unfortunately for Thornton, more sensitive to the interests of his own son, Thornton's half brother, who, undoubtedly with some calculation in mind, had been given the name James Birket Thomason."* Both William and his wife, Anna Maria, lived several later years on the plantation with the Thomasons, but all was not sweetness and light, and there were several times when the man he called "my father" did not support projects proposed by Thornton.

Four years after the death of Thornton's father, William and Absalom were sent to Lancaster under the official supervision of their great-uncle James Birket. Lancaster, an ancient castle town, was a long, long, way from home and mother. Upper class families in both England and America often sent sons abroad for schooling, but in Tortola there was also the danger of early death, exposure to the evils of slavery, and temptations to leave the Quaker model of simplicity and frugality. Much of the supervision of the boys must have been given by grand-mother Margaret Birket Thornton and two aunts who lived on the estate. These two loving maiden aunts in Lancaster, Mary and Jane Thornton, supplied much early guidance, but young Thornton also attended school near the Quaker meetinghouse, in a setting where the classics were emphasized. The numerous books in the Birket library interested Thornton and some volumes were enthusiastically mentioned later. Probably his great-uncle Birket could spin stories of the West Indies he knew so well. James Birket, reportedly a strict man, tried to limit the escapades of the vigorous youth, who was soon to receive personal income from his biological father's estate in Tortola. Possibly experience in the accounting or business aspects of the family were tried, without success, to attract the young Thornton into the offices of the firm. At seventeen or eighteen years of age, a bit late for the time, William became an apprentice to Dr. John Fell at Ulverstone. Government or military service was not encouraged for Quaker boys, and if they were bright medicine offered a worthy alternative.

Thornton's diary, June 20, 1777, records: *"I am bound apprentice from the 10<sup>th</sup> May, 1777 (being the day I came to Ulverstone) to the end of the*



*abovement four years.*” Ulverstone, near the Cumbrian Mountains, had a long tradition of Quakerism and Quaker churches, and a proud history of Quaker courage in the face of overt hostility from neighbors. The Fell family had been prominent within the group of Quakers ever since George Fox, a leading Quaker missionary of the day, had married the widow Dame Margaret Fell of Swarthmore Hall. Thornton worked in Doctor Fell’s apothecary shop. Most doctors of the time compounded drugs and dispensed them to augment their income. It seems to have been a relatively happy time, with some recreation, and a chance to draw as witnessed by a mezzotint engraving that remains.

It is possible that Thornton’s decision to become a physician was influenced by what he experienced as apprentice with Dr. Fell, but he was even more influenced by his much admired and illustrious older friend, John Coakley Lettson, a physician who originated from the same Caribbean Quaker tradition as Thornton. William Thornton’s apprenticeship with Dr. Fell was completed in May of 1781 and the following fall he formally enrolled in the most famous medical school in Britain, the University of Edinburgh. By this time, as an independent and even affluent student away from his family, William was receiving income from personal holdings back on Tortola Island, and with this he could buy scientific books and travel around Scotland and northern England. He also enjoyed travel the summer after the completion of the apprenticeship, after writing on May 10, 1781; *“this day does my four year chain drop off.”* Among the people he met on his travels was the poet Thomas Wilkinson (1761-1836), a Quaker poet who readily discussed the evils of slavery with Thornton. So the young medical student began his studies in a superb medical school in Europe; with the Quaker admonitions about slavery drilled into him, property in Tortola that depended on slaves, a penchant for travel, and an attraction to art. Plus he possessed a restless, inquisitive, and perhaps somewhat inconstant nature.

At the time, Edinburgh, Scotland, was renowned for scientific effort in medical areas ranging from Human Anatomy to the study and humane treatment of the insane. Thornton was in Edinburgh in the midst of its exceptional faculty for two years. In addition, there was the Scottish countryside for Thornton to visit, young women to meet, and a chance to study the then modern elegant Georgian architecture characteristic of that part of Scotland. Young William

sketched some of the better buildings, plus a few of the ruined castles, and retained for his lifetime a keen interest in several of the more memorable estates. These days of youthful growth and study help account for his later firm fixation on formal Georgian architectural tradition, and his lifetime interest in buildings, parks, and city management.

But he was actually in Edinburgh to study science and medicine. There were numerous natural scientists and engineers in Scotland for Thornton to meet, including James Watt with his interest in steam engines, and James Lynn who had discovered that lemon juice protected against scurvy and who discovered fresh water could be distilled from seawater. Thornton may have been influenced by men such as the Quaker and philanthropist William Tuke who publically urged humane treatment for the mentally ill in 1792. Years later Thornton expressed the view that mental illness was largely organic, and had a physical basis. Dr. Benjamin Rush of Philadelphia, who received his M. D. degree in Edinburgh in 1768 and is now acclaimed as an early psychiatrist in America, began to develop his philosophy about mental illness when he too was in Scotland. Rush and Thornton were friends, but Thornton later criticized Rush for his overly enthusiastic bleeding of patients during the 1793 yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia. William Cullen, the teacher of both men, had suggested judicious blood letting as a major therapeutic measure. There was, however, ample reason for Thornton's dissent by 1793. Both Thornton and, even more vigorously, his mentor John Lettsom, disagreed with Rush when he insisted Yellow Fever originated in the United States, spontaneously appearing as a new disorder. The two men from Tortola were positive the condition had been present earlier in the Indies. (Abraham) On hand, as a teacher for Thornton, was Dr. Francis Home, the man who pioneered the boiling of water as a preventive measure to avoid infections. Later, while back in Tortola, Thornton pioneered a filtration system of his own to purify water. He, or his wife who lived long after him, kept few notes of lectures given by his medical professors, but he mentioned comments from John Brown, the physician who ultimately signed the degree of M.D. for Thornton (Jenkins). Brown, who injured his own health as he encouraged the liberal use of alcohol and opium in treating disease, vigorously discredited the practice of blood letting. He did so long before strenuous bleeding was discontinued by most of the physicians of the time.

While still a student of medicine, Thornton continued to slip away for trips to the nearby castles where he measured and sketched some of the Gothic arches. *“The pillars are nine feet, eight inches. The capitals are peculiar, among them is an angel weighing souls,”* reads one of his entries. Thornton watched and listened to people while they talked, and he observed their numerous dialects. He noted that sound was modified by the lips to produce speech. It is reported that Thornton himself stuttered or stammered, and perhaps because of this he may have watched lips particularly closely. He reported later that he discovered the need for a new way to teach language; not from any handicap of his own, however, but while trying to teach one of his slaves how to read. From observation of varied accents and dialects he later produced *Cadmus*, a published scheme of simplified spelling with a concept of how to teach the deaf to speak. His letters, and the brief remaining notes of his trips, show that his interest in sleep and dreams began at about the same time, while wandering around Scotland.

Thornton matriculated at the medical school in October 1781, and did attend the University of Edinburgh for the sessions 1781-1782 and 1782-1783. He next began travels in Europe and Scotland, with visits in London and Paris. He did not graduate from Edinburgh. Thornton received his official, but labeled *“collateral”*, medical degree from the Protestant alternative to Kings College, Marischal College of Aberdeen University, on November 10, 1784. On November 23, 1784, Dr. John Walker wrote to Aberdeen: *“I have presumed to give you this trouble in favor of my friend Mr. Thornton, and of his application to the Marishal College, for a degree in medicine. He has gone through all the medical classes here, except the botany, and by the rules of this college he would be thereby prevented from receiving his degree till next Septr., but of this delay his affairs will not admit since he is obliged to return soon to the West Indies. During his studies here I have had particular access to observe his behavior and qualifications, and am persuaded, that he will do honour to any university that may bestow upon him the favor he requests. He has been all along one of the most respectable medical students in this place; and has an excellent literary and publick spirit and has been much noticed and regarded. He was elected a member of the Antiquarian and Royal Medical Societies, and has been one of the presidents of our Society of Natural History.”*

So Thornton actually cut short part of the time for formal medical training at Edinburgh, as he had unsuccessfully asked his Great Uncle Birket to allow him to do when he was an apprentice. He nevertheless succeeded in obtaining his diploma. According to Harris's summary, Thornton had begun to move in the higher social circles of Scotland and London, surely a change from the hours alone with books, other students, or in the company of his Quaker aunts or Dr. Fell. Thornton's social awareness and charming manner, his ability to draw, and his family connections, opened doors to great houses for him. Thornton helped Sir John Dalrymple in designs for guns, and interacted with other inventors as well as with social luminaries in Scotland and England. His family patron, James Birket, died in 1783, and, apparently finally choosing to complete his medical training, shortly thereafter Thornton attended St Bartholomew's Hospital in London for six months. He served there in a position similar to a modern externship for students, or an internship for beginning doctors. While in London he became acquainted with members of the artistic circles, and even while still a student of medicine he registered for courses at the Royal Academy of Art. In London he also had ample opportunity to chat with his admired mentor, Dr. James Lettsom. When Thornton prepared to go to America in 1784, it was Lettsom who wrote an introductory letter to Benjamin Franklin.

William lost his half-brother Absalom to disease in 1781, during the time of training and travel. Of course William did not remember his biological father who died when William was a child. Since he had been sent to England, Thornton and his mother had been separated for over a decade. Mother Dorcas, probably independently wealthy even before she was twice widowed, visited London at a time that coincided with the completion of his final duties at St. Bartholomew's Hospital. It was reportedly a joyous reunion for both mother and son. For a time Thornton lived with the Thomasons, relatives of his mother's third and current husband, and located at 15 Norfolk Street in London. He attended formal art classes in the evening. Thornton had the pleasure of introducing his mother and stepfather to Lettsom, and both mother and son corresponded for years with the senior physician, fellow native of the West Indies and well respected in the Indies.

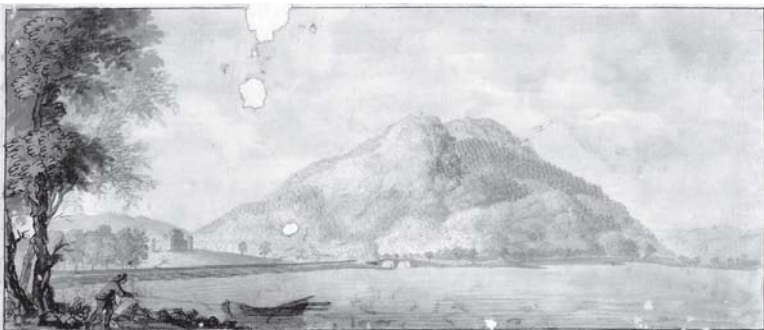
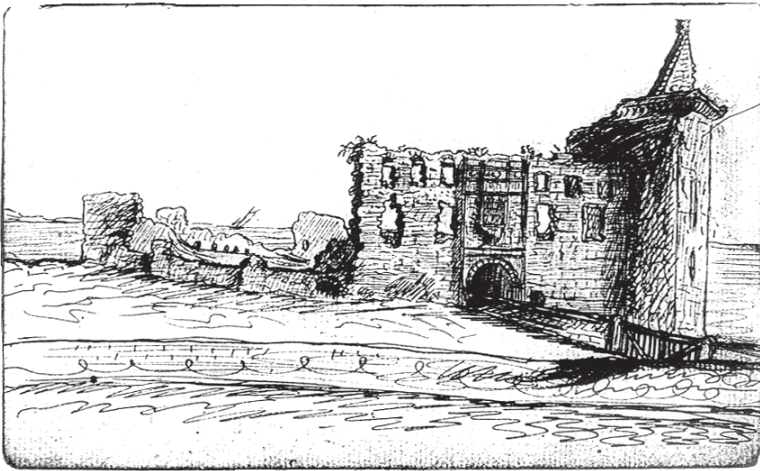
While he was still a youth in England, Thornton became keenly sensitive to the miseries of slavery. In a letter home he commented on the persistence of

the lesions he had seen left by whips made from the strands of date palm leaves. Thornton himself did return briefly to Tortola in May 1785, and again from 1790-1792, but despite the urgings of Lettsom William Thornton never did return extensively to England to build a life or to establish a medical practice.

During his time in France in the 1780s Thornton met with Benjamin Franklin, and with some of the local physicians, but he was more entranced with an older beauty who wrote about him, and to him, even after he left Paris. She was the Countess D. Beauharnais, or “*Fanny*”, and he surely at the very least admired her. She approved a lovely sketch he made of her. The Countess’s brother-in-law was the Governor of the Caribbean Island of Martinique and it seems probable that Thornton had known some of the family earlier. One of the Countess’s family members later became the Empress Josephine, whose baby girl was the Queen of Holland. The Countess, who became such a dear friend of Thornton, was a prominent hostess for literary salons in Paris, and a bit of a poetess in her own right. She composed several poems that praised her English friend Thornton, “*anglais, indien, et quaker*”. Several examples of doodling or sketches done by Thornton decades later look a bit like the careful one he did of his friend the Countess years earlier. She helped him apply to the Spanish Court for a chance to travel and study in the Spanish colonies. He was unsuccessful then, and later, in achieving any significant Spanish connection. In France, Thornton sketched both pastoral scenes and buildings, but most of these drawings are now lost or were destroyed after his death. The time in France was probably spent largely in Paris, but the notes and sketches confirm visits and sketches out into the countryside and even over to Switzerland. There is no record of the Paris correspondence, and it is probable that Anna Maria, Thornton’s wife, later destroyed all records of Thornton’s stay in Paris. She stated, after her husband’s death, as recorded in Harris and confirmed from her tapes, that the Countess sent “*the doctor*”... “*the most impassioned epistles*” and “*the adoration she expressed amounted almost to impiety.*” Thornton watched hot air balloons and traveled on boats in France,



*Thornton sketch.*



*Thornton sketches.*

and on the trips he was with Countess Fanny and a new good friend, Count Andreani, later a much celebrated visitor to America. While on the leisurely canal trips the talk may have included the possibility of boats powered by steam, and did include discussion of eventual flight by humans. During these formative years he was financially secure, with a steady income from his share of the plantation at Pleasant Valley, back in Tortola Island. His French and his social polish both improved, and Fanny may have been a great help in his developing sophistication.

Thornton's ideas of social reform preceded his time in France, but must have been reinforced when he was there. The French Revolution was soon to erupt. Thornton was never truly enamored with French Revolutionary fervor and its push for "equality", but as an adult he was always involved with plans for liberty for Blacks in his native environment in Tortola and for Blacks already free in America. Nevertheless, despite the intense stirring of the youthful Quaker conscience of young Doctor Thornton, he seems to have been very comfortable, probably most comfortable, in the presence of the wealthy and sophisticated of the day in both France and America. He continued to correspond with several of his European friends for decades, often about slavery, freedom, and the rights of man.

In France Thornton met Henry Smeathman again, having met him earlier at joint meetings organized by Lettsom. Smeathman was already well known in England for his efforts to repatriate freed slaves. Smeathman was a Biologist, an expert on ants, and a popular figure on the lecture circuit, and he and Thornton corresponded for years. Another friend Thornton met in France, the geologist Barthelemy Faujas de Saint-Frod, easily persuaded Thornton to join him in 1784 for a three months tour of Scotland. Through this relationship and at dinner parties on the way, Thornton visited with Sir Joseph Banks, the naturalist, political figure, and President of the Royal Society of Scientists, and he also visited with Sir William Herschel, the astronomer, who was later asked to supply Thornton with one of his high-powered telescopes. On the geological tour of Scotland, Thornton and Faujas were accompanied by Count Andreani and by James Macie, later known as James Smithson, who endowed what became the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.

In Scotland the young men visited daily with each other, even seemed to “rough it”, for the three months while also calling on established scientists, miners, and simple folk. They collected specimens and studied local geological formations. On uncomfortable occasions Smithson and Thornton had to share a tent and then once a frighteningly cold and damp cave. Smithson, destined to be always a bachelor, died on June 24, 1829, Thornton on March 28, 1828. Both Smithson and Thornton were already becoming ill when Smithson wrote his final will, which designated his gift to establish an institution in a city he had never seen: *“for the increase and diffusion of Knowledge among men.”* John Quincy Adams, the neighbor of Thornton, did more than any other single legislator to direct the gift for the purpose intended by Smithson. The decision was much discussed in D.C., but never appears in the daily diary kept by Thornton’s wife.

It has never been clear why Smithson endowed science in a country he had never visited, though some have suggested that it was the extensive contact with Thornton, when both were young men, that influenced Smithson as he wrote his will on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of October, 1826. Nina Burleigh states: *“Recently a theory was advanced that Smithson’s interest in Washington and its institutions might have been as a result of his acquaintance with the only other man on the expedition who was around the same age. William Thornton, the future designer of the American Capitol was in his mid twenties when he and James Macie (Smithson) and the others adventured across Scotland and made the wild water crossing to Staffa. Throughout his life one of Smithson’s side interests was in buildings and architecture.”* No supportive letters or other proof has turned up. Smithson’s letters burned before they were carefully studied, and Thornton’s wife and his executor pruned his letters. The gift from Smithson was extremely controversial for over a decade and the socially conscious Anna Maria Thornton said she destroyed letters from Europe. Why would such a gift be controversial? There was disagreement about how to use the money. Perhaps for some people there was also concern that Smithson was an unmarried gambler, and illegitimate to boot, and as John C. Calhoun and others stated, surely the U. S. A. did not need to take money from an Englishman.

The travel report published by Faujas years later praises Thornton’s humor during the trip in 1784, and mentions the careful drawings of the



landmarks when Thornton (page 22, vol. 2) “took some sketches of it.” Once he “took a drawing of the cave which could be seen in a true point of view from the sea only” and in the rowboat “my dear Thornton became sick with her rolling.” And later (page 26) Faujas noted: “My intrepid friend, William Thornton, scarcely yet recovered from his fatigue, notwithstanding all the dangers he had already met with, told me that he was also ready to recommence the voyage. This young American had so strong a desire of information, particularly in everything connected with Natural History, that nothing was capable of dampening his ardor.” Then, after his apparently wonderful time in France, his geological experiences with the guys, and a briefer return to Britain, in May, 1785, Thornton was off to consolidate his fortune in the Caribbean. There were multiple reasons to return to the land of his birth. Countess Fanny later said he was prompted by loyalty to his mother. As Harris summarizes, he was thinking of ways to advance the goal of abolition, hoped to contribute to science by defining the plants in Tortola, and, most relevant of all, he needed to define the extent of his holdings. He expected to practice medicine, and make a bit of money, as Lettsom had done so successfully.

Thornton was well aware of the example of Lettsom, who returned to Tortola, freed his slaves, and still managed to make a profit by practicing medicine. Things didn’t go as well as all that for Thornton. He did practice a bit of medicine in Tortola, but said later he did not often charge the patients, and found collection of fees to be uncertain. He also discovered it was unclear which portion of the estate was his and which portion was that of his stepfather or his stepfather’s son. In addition, the stepfather had made improvements that did not involve Thornton. Possibly Thornton, having spent his youth in Europe, never felt himself to be a full participant in the culture of Tortola Island. He had written a great deal already that suggested freeing the slaves was an ultimate necessity, and such a suggestion would hardly have endeared him to his white neighbors in Tortola, all of whom owned slaves.

Nevertheless, Thornton did try hard to be successful back on the plantation he called home. Scholarly activity, and writing, continued, always continued, for Thornton. He wrote detailed letters back to England describing the plants that were native to the island, indeed planned to write a scientific book about the flora of his birthplace, but despite dozens of pages of data he never

completed that project. He camped on Sage Mountain on the ridge of Tortola, and he established a garden in the valley to study specimens of plants. Despite his energy, and his charm and erudition, his abolitionist views labeled him a clear threat to the neighbors and also distressed his mother and his stepfather. In addition, Thornton was said to have felt that medicine could be disgusting and messy, and perhaps in Tortola it was indeed so. And besides all that he probably became ill more than once since he lacked the immunity to island infections that lifetime residents would have shared.

Lettsom had been a bit cleverer when he returned to practice medicine on Tortola. Lettsom revealed his plan to free his slaves only after he had succeeded in attracting wealthy patients, and freed the slaves at the end of his time on the island. In addition Lettsom owned fewer slaves than were held on the Thornton's Pleasant Valley Estate, and they were all owned by Lettsom, not as in Thornton's place by a family consortium. Despite freeing his slaves, Lettsom was so respected in Tortola that when former Governor John Pickering was dying it was Lettsom who held his hand, and addressed the distraught slaves. Lettsom named his handsome youngest son Pickering (Abraham), a man who died a month after he married the wealthy widow Ruth Hodge Georges in Tortola, on September 22, 1808. The wife, at 42, was 16 years older than her husband. Two months after the loss of her husband she also died.

It was not only the strained relationships with his stepfather, nor just his failure to achieve fame as a local physician, that prompted Thornton to leave Tortola. Worst of all for Thornton, or so his wife reported in her diary, Thornton had failed, according to Mrs. Thornton due to intervention by others, in efforts to court an heiress, one that Anna Maria called "*Miss R. H.*" The prospective bride was probably a member of the Hodge family, major landholders and possessors of 1000 slaves. (Abraham) The Ruth Hodge in Tortola mentioned above would have been 18 or 19 when Thornton left Tortola for Philadelphia. Apparently secondary to this romantic setback, and his financial, family and medical disappointments in Tortola, but more statistically likely to have been related to mosquitoes, Thornton acquired a serious illness, or so his wife reported years later in her diary. These experiences prompted him to move to the former British colonies that had recently become the United States of America, and the young Quaker arrived in Philadelphia in October 1786.

Brissot de Warville's book, *New Travels in the United States*, recorded Thornton's views on the eventual necessity to eliminate slavery, and there is later correspondence with other Frenchmen Thornton felt he could enlist in the battle against slavery. Thornton met Brissot de Warville, founder of a major French society to alleviate the distress of slaves, in New York in February, 1788, and wrote Brissot detailed plans for African colonization on November 29, 1788. Brissot was guillotined in 1793, and that event must have enhanced the Quaker Thornton's evolving, and finally intense, distaste for the bloodshed produced by the French Revolution.

By 1787, by the time Thornton was well settled, briefly in New York, and then in Philadelphia, he had learned a great deal about America. His contacts in revolutionary Paris surely enhanced dreams that he brought with him to his new land, especially the aspirations with regard to slavery. He was readily accepted by many, Harris (xlii) records: *"In her informative journal Ann Warde took notice on two occasions in November 1786 of ' the greatly talked of and much admired Dr. Thornton,' who was ' eminent for his understanding, being an author, and traveling now for information to publish a book.'"* He was idealistic and full of both curiosity and erudition, but what did he actually look like at the time? Several portraits do exist, including a self-portrait, and these show a man who is confident, even arrogant, to the modern eye. P. J. Staudenraus, (page 5) following review of many of the old records, suggested: *"Self-assured, intelligent, and well groomed, Thornton wore his Quaker label lightly. His co-religionists called him a 'wet Quaker' because he wore a powdered wig, silver buckles, and other accouterments frowned on by the Friends. His clothing and manners betrayed a characteristic tendency to shun modesty. He searched the large towns for a wealthy wife and won his way into the upper circles of New York City society."* Staudenraus mentions Thornton's contact with Brissot de Warville who reported: *"Mr. Thornton, who by his vivacity and pleasant manners seems to belong to the French nation, was born in Antigua. His mother owns a plantation there, and it was there, instead of growing callous like most other plantation owners, he acquired that humanity and compassion for Negroes which is a source of torment for him. He told me that, had he been able to do so, he would have set his Negroes free, but since he could not, he treated them like human beings. Since his father likewise followed the same principle, there*

*was no recruitment of Negroes on his plantation.*” According to Brissot, *“This energetic friend of the Negroes is convinced we cannot hope to see a sincere union between them and the Whites in the United States as long as the difference in color exists and as long as they both do not enjoy the same rights.”* Brissot, who until he was executed remained Thornton’s friend and correspondent, states Thornton sent an observer to Africa at his own expense in order to determine prospects for industry in Africa for the Blacks he planned to resettle there.

The large number of his letters, more than any single note or portrait, lets us know Thornton had acquired many admirers, friends, and important acquaintances, and that he relished his extensive correspondence. That was expected for a gentleman of his social standing. It is not, of course, possible to know exactly what Thornton felt in his heart despite the numerous letters and the repetitive themes that appear in the surviving documents. He does offer us clues, however. Some writers refer to his playful, but at times biting, doggerel verses, some of it written just for humor and others to convey a positive message, such as his poems eulogizing Jefferson and Adams. Entire busy periods of his life are missing from the tapes, but some themes, as variations on a poem comparing sleep to a little death, appear literally dozens of times. Similarly his interest in the failings of Napoleon, the need for ambassadors in South America, and his concerns about the priority of his own work or to defend the inventive originality of John Fitch, appear like an insistent red thread throughout the papers. His wife left some of his sketches and poems with the papers and did copy some of the letters, but we are missing many sketches or paintings that she specifically mentions. She herself was skilled with drawing, and was a remarkably supportive helpmate. Occasionally it is uncertain in the documents which of the pair actually wrote a particular letter, but both Thorntons do regularly let us read their opinions. And they do so repetitively.

Thornton lived in what has been called the Age of the Enlightenment, a time with great upsurge in humanitarian sentiments; and he arrived in Philadelphia, the most political town in America, as a Quaker who still owned slaves. How could his, and then all other, slaves be freed peacefully? In New York, then in Philadelphia, and later as a resident in the Federal City, Thornton had sufficient money from Tortola to live comfortably by the standards of the day, but he certainly never had enough money to sponsor his long fantasized expedition

to return freed Blacks “home” to Africa. Despite this, soon after he arrived in America, he went to New England to discuss his concepts of African colonization with the Reverend Samuel Hopkins, a leading anti-slavery spokesman of the day. Hopkins considered him flighty and impractical. (Harris) Thornton also traveled to Rhode Island and Boston to meet with black men and women and with other abolitionist leaders of the time. There were rumors that Africa was inhospitable, and the freed Blacks may have been dubious about Thornton’s plans for an African colony.

During these early times in America, Thornton continued his extensive communication with Lettsom. He once sent money to Thornton from the London relatives, the Thomasons. The two physicians corresponded about many things in addition to slavery, and in one letter Lettsom thanked William for his gift of peculiarly American pets, a bear cub and a squirrel. Both of these were reportedly simply “*too mischievous*” to survive.

Regarding their mutual interest in slavery, Lettsom specifically warned Thornton to forget his frequently reiterated desire to go to the African West Coast to assuage the slavery issue, and to do it almost single-handedly. Thornton wrote Lettsom in May 1787 (Harris): “*I know of no other person who will make the same sacrifices of family, friends, fortune and an expensive education, with the most precious years in the prime of life, to live with the most rejected and despised part of mankind, and in an unhealthy climate...My lands in the West Indies...I mean to give to my mother, and the blacks, their liberty.*” Maybe he did mean to give the Blacks liberty, but exhortations from his family reminded the young man that the slave property was not his alone to sell. Dr. Lettsom wrote Thornton, and several similar letters are in the papers compiled by Harris: “*This project has to do with thy fortune. Thee did not make them slaves, and has not this circumstance to answer for . . . if thou observe superior understanding in any of them, give such the post of manager, or a larger condition of freedom, if unable to bear total emancipation. Thy business is to render them as happy as their moral constitution will allow, and that is by ordering mild treatment and a generous subsistence. The liberation of thy slaves would prove an extensive injury to them in my opinion, from every consideration of their happiness, and of thine own.*” Thornton remained conflicted while he corresponded with abolitionist friends in Europe and

America, and urged colonization for freed Blacks, and he continued to receive, and spend, the proceeds from his estate in Tortola.

As he arrived in Philadelphia he had first talked of just a visit to the United States, but in January, 1788, Thornton took an oath of fidelity to the State of Delaware. Delaware was a member of the Union and this step assured him full American citizenship. Only four years later, and then accompanied by his bride, did he return to Tortola. He and his bride stayed there for only two years, and after that he was never to return to Tortola.

Looking for that bride was not easy, and he aimed high. He lived for a while with former Governor John Dickinson of Delaware, and asked to marry his daughter, Sally Norris Dickinson (born in 1771) but was turned down by the father. Thornton later said the father respected him but felt the lady was too young to marry. Harris suggested the father questioned Thornton's commitment to the Quaker faith they both shared. The family back in Tortola may also have expressed a bit of dismay when Thornton wrote and asked how much additional financial support there would be if he did marry.

Philadelphia was not only a major metropolis for the time, but as the founding home of the church in America was also the most comfortable location in America for any devout young Quaker, and Thornton treated it as his own American home for years. Interest in science and in abolitionist concepts was common in the educated citizens of Philadelphia, and Thornton's personal interest in organized religion was less than his interest in science. Thornton became settled and secure, and for a time lived in the boarding place of Mary House at Market and Fifth Streets in Philadelphia. The lodgings were close to the Philadelphia State House and young James Madison was one of several politicians who also lodged in the house. In Philadelphia, probably at the invitation of Franklin, Thornton went to meetings of the American Philosophical Society and was fascinated by the science he heard. According to his papers, while in Philadelphia he toyed with the idea of buying additional farms in the West Indies, even wrote his family re help for the financing, and also considered spending his life living on a farm near Chesapeake Bay, or just outside Philadelphia. Indeed he did buy a farm in Pennsylvania later. After his marriage and then his two years in Tortola, his bride wrote (Jenkins, page 48): "*On his return from Tortola he fixed in Philadelphia where his mother-in-law engaged and*

*furnished a house ready for his reception and where he intended, and indeed commenced, the practice of physic, but it was so disagreeable to him and he thought the fees so small, having been accustomed to the West Indies fees which are very high, that he relinquished the house and the practice and in consequence of his unfortunate passion for raising horses, he took a small place a mile from Phila., where he remained till he received from President Washington the honorable appointment of Commissioner of the new city of Wash'n, or Federal City."* Thornton was certainly always an aristocratic gentleman in the sense of land ownership and farm management. But, as a typical cultured gentleman of the age, he had many other skills, and in Philadelphia he began to demonstrate his multiple interests. During these days in the late 1780's and early 1790's Thornton designed Philadelphia's new Library Hall and became heavily involved with John Fitch's early attempts to develop a steamboat.



*Library Hall, Philadelphia.*



Anna Maria Brodeau.



William Thornton. (Octogon)

Also it was during these days that William, now a citizen of America and still looking for that special wife he had mentioned to Lettsom, courted Anna Maria Brodeau. He married her on October 3, 1790. They married, without the approval of the Society of Friends, in Christ Church of Philadelphia, and possibly because of the non-Quaker marriage in this prestigious Anglican parish, or even because of his possession of slaves, the Quakers disowned him. In essence Thornton also “married” Anna Maria’s mother,

Ann Brodeau, who was to outlive him by almost a decade (she died in 1836) and lived with the couple for almost all the rest of their life in America. Anna Maria, only 14 when Thornton became aware of her, and 15 years old when they married, had acquired all the graces one expected from a life with her mother, the director of an academy for young women. Jenkins described her as she appeared in Thornton’s portraits and in one by Gilbert Stuart: *“She had lovely chestnut curls, a firm little mouth with no simpering, and a clear direct gaze.”*

There was uncertainty about the origins of Ann Brodeau, Mrs. Thornton’s mother, and even after her mother died Anna Maria printed rebuttals about unspecified rumors. Katherine Anthony’s comments about Anna Maria’s mother reflect these issues: *“Aside from the fact that the famous Dr. Rush- the author of a book entitled Female Education- had recommended and sponsored her, no one in Philadelphia knew anything about Mrs. Brodeau. Presumably a widow when she arrived from England, she never mentioned her late husband with grief or otherwise. People were always arriving from England and were always taken on face value in the new country. But as time went on they usually revealed their backgrounds. With Mrs. Brodeau people waited until the end of her days for some explanation of her former life, and it was never forthcoming.”*



Thornton visited with Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790), in Franklin's home, several times, including in February of 1789. After all, they had met earlier in France. Probably through his contact with Franklin Thornton became a member of the American Philosophical Society in 1787. Franklin encouraged Thornton's interest in freedom for the Blacks and in education, and it seems to have been Franklin who secured for Thornton a chance at the contract for the new library to house the books of the Philosophical Society. This triumph was early and tangible fruit of Thornton's varied education, his architectural interests, as well as the beginning of his American success.

Thornton would, after his 2 year-return to Tortola with his new wife, build on his initial success in Philadelphia, submit designs for the Capitol, become a friend of the leaders of the day, and dabble in science, politics, and good works. Always he was vigorously supported in these activities by his bride and by her mother.



## CHAPTER 2

## Education and Thornton

- Childhood: Maiden aunts, and a Quaker school.**
- 1777-1781 Apprenticeship with John Fell, Physician and Apothecary.**
- 1781-1783 Studied medicine in Edinburgh, traveled in Scotland.**
- 1782 Elected a Corresponding Member of the Society of Antiquarians of Scotland.**
- 1783-1784 Travels in Europe and then in Scotland with Faujas de Saint-Fond.**
- 1784 Awarded M. D. degree.**
- 1787 Elected member of the American Philosophical Society.**
- 1792 Awarded Magellanic Premium (Medal) of the American Philosophical Society for “Cadmus”.**
- 1793 Published “Cadmus”, a treatise on language.**
- 1796 Began a series of “Memorials” urging a National University.**
- 1800’s Thornton’s letters to Lettsom and others about education, and notes from his tapes regarding universal education.**

Thornton, the perpetual busy-body, was involved in planning for a national university, public education, and allocation of land for these purposes; and he once received an award for his writings regarding the education of the deaf. So this man, never officially a teacher, was keenly interested in education. He had been the beneficiary of a solid Quaker education, medical apprenticeship, formal medical lectures at Edinburgh, artistic study at the Academy of Art in London, and multiple educational experiences during travels. His architectural designs reflected his studies, his scientific concepts were recorded, and his erudition continued throughout his life. He proposed a national policy of universal education supported by taxation. This concept was not new with him,

nor was it original to America. In France, even in an England very aware of class, there was heady talk of a new, freer, and educated population. Thornton's concepts of education appeared in a series of papers beginning as early as 1795 and continuing until as late as 1820. Education was pivotal in his life.

Thornton reviewed his basic concepts of education with Franklin and Jefferson, as well as with his admired mentor, General Washington. Thornton was well aware of prior proposals for a broad national educational policy, stemming in large part from the ideals of Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) and Dr. Benjamin Rush (1745-1813), both of whom Thornton knew personally. According to Unger, Jefferson and Madison *"had a scheme to build a national educational system with a common school in every town, an academy in every county, and a college in every state."* So education of the populace was in the mind of many of the leaders of the time. Thornton shared Jefferson's love of France, and Thornton did live in France long enough to be comfortable with French people, relish their language, and admire their system of education. Thornton's concepts derive predominantly from the French sources, particularly those of Charles Talleyrand and C.F. Volney. As so often was true, at least when he was writing for others to read, Thornton begins or ends his comments on education with a religious note, even if the religious statements seem to us stereotyped and as much perfunctory as believed. From the tapes (2496): *"The first object of education is to train the mind of man through the paths of humility and virtue to the fear and adoration of the divine author of our beings; for, without an inward communication with the Almighty, all our knowledge is vanity."* He does admit that education can also make us useful and render our lives *"comfortable, easy, and pleasant"*. With the enthusiasm of an immigrant intensely committed to the potential of his new country, Thornton felt that absolutely no fetters served to limit human genius in America, and he said through American commitment to freedom, plus a unique mixture of people from all nations and all climates, all the blessings of the earth should now become available. Available for all, or did Thornton feel education should be available only for the few? Did he really mean available for all? Perhaps he did, in fact, mean what he said, and he himself had taught even slaves to read. Thornton stated that the freedom of America meant that minds should not be constrained by ancient customs and prejudices. He recognized that many of the

citizens never had any formal opportunity to learn, and therefore as a first remedy Thornton suggested institution of a general and universal system of education for the entire new republic. This system, as noted above, was to be a national system, somewhat akin to that of France, and was not to be one that was tightly limited by local control.

Such a national system of education was not going to be easy to organize in the United States. At the time Thornton discussed education in America, local control, and “*do it yourself*,” were beliefs fundamental to society. That was a logical approach, on the far-flung and wild frontier. He suggested modeling of the new system from international sources, from countries such as France that were achieving a standardized national approach, with modifications in America to reflect local needs, was the correct approach. But specifically, how should the country proceed?

Thornton wrote there should be deliberate effort by governmental administrators to invite qualified professors and teachers from all over the world to come to the United States. Such major recruitment was to be a national effort, not one just done by the existing schools or states. Even if experts were to come from overseas, education, no matter how universal, was to begin in the home. To parents, although we have essentially no data about how Thornton himself ever treated children, he suggested that parental example is always more important than parental words: “*Above all things, be yourself what you desire them to be ...honest, humane, charitable, meek, forbearing, chaste, virtuous, and religious.*” Parents should “*avoid unseemly company themselves and maintain awareness of their duty to instruct the young in moral obligations as well as in generosity and pity. At least as is appropriate,*” added Thornton.

How would the nation pay for a Thornton program of universal educational? Thornton suggested a portion of every man’s wealth be demanded for the support of education, and that a specific percentage of this wealth be designated for the education of the young. Those with the most property would be expected to do the most for the good and safety of others, and those that were gifted should contribute more toward new national initiatives, including supplying provisions for universal education. Thornton pointed out that apprenticeship begun too young, and lack of literacy, prevented full development of the arts in America and stifled full development of the individual. Writing

about the uneducated apprentice, he suggested: “*He absorbs, as precious truths, the absurd prejudices of his illiterate master. They sink deep into his mind, and exclude the light of reason . . . their ignorance keeps them in subjection, and among the tens of thousands who are confined to sharpen pins during life how many would have shone as suns in the scientific world?*” Thornton’s scheme for state supported education for all was offered at least 100 years before the national income tax actually became a reality.

Thornton went farther and suggested that a special new educational tax be placed on every individual, again particularly on the wealthy, and that these funds be appropriated primarily to fund programs for the broad national program in education. It seems likely that as an early Federalist, rather than as the Republican he later claimed to be, he was convinced of the importance of a strong central government with built in checks and balances. He thought first in terms of the national patterns of education in France and in England, and he had limited awareness of the potential power of individual states in the Federal Republic of America to make, as well as to break, any effort at a universal education policy. This was a time in America when grants of open forests or back lands were being used to cover multiple governmental expenses, and the question of raising additional governmental funds from taxes, from collection of duties on imported goods, or from wealthy citizens, no matter how enlightened the purpose, was sure to be vigorously contested. And, of course, it still is.

Thornton recognized funding would be a problem for any school system. Nevertheless, and in this aspect Thornton was clear, the national government must be involved in both funding and planning; since private, even free, local schools and religious schools alone would never be sufficient to educate his entire adopted country. There were many reasons the national government must supervise and support education. For one thing those who were poor might not wish to be labeled as taking advantage of charity, and the “*sensible poor*” thus would not stay long enough in school to develop “*the feast of reason*”, the divine banquet of the brain. Thornton suggested that no serious citizen could deny that some sort of provision should be made for universal education of all our citizens, and in several of his letters he commented that the potential of education for Negroes, in particular, had never been approached. These educational opinions of Thornton were radical for his time. All were to be

educated, emphasis on the youngest citizens, and there was to be education for the Blacks. What would be the mechanics of such a universal educational effort, exactly how could it be done? Thornton certainly thought he knew, and in page after page he offered specific programs. What were these programs?

A general committee of education was to be appointed by elected representatives, with subcommittees to decide the proper places to locate educational facilities. There should, first of all, be strong primary schools. Thornton suggested that there were at the time as many as four million inhabitants of the United States, and two million of these were still under 16 years of age. He estimated that of this group at least 370,000 children were from 7-10 years of age, if one included all males and all females regardless of whether they were free or in slavery. Thornton argued that it would not be proper to send children before age 7 to a formal school, and surmised that in fact not more than one in four could actually ever be sent to the new national schools, because some children lived too remotely, because some parents would prefer to do the teaching themselves, and because a few would seek education from another and more private source. Thus, in the plan of Thornton, as many as 95,000 children would require education for three years, and he calculated that approximately £311,000 per year would be sufficient to procure the instruction of all the available children scholars in the United States who were under 10 years of age. What might it have done to our later educational efforts if that overarching national proposal for all the country had been enacted 200 years ago? And who, by the way, did Thornton feel should be the teachers in these new schools?

Teachers should be first class, of course, and Thornton discussed ways to increase the skills and enthusiasm of any potential group of teachers. One of his incentive plans linked teacher's salary to the number of pupils as well as to the amount of time spent by the teacher. The teacher was to have freedom for innovations, but Thornton had suggestions for a universal formal curriculum. Testaments and books of theology could be used, not to encourage any particular form of religion but rather to convey broad general principles of virtue. In contrast to now, a time when most primary school teachers are not encouraged to read Biblical scriptures, during the time of Thornton most people agreed that teachers should consider Biblical readings to be a major duty of the job, and that the teacher should expect to use some extra expenditure of time to discuss basic

moral issues. Thornton admitted that if there is only one teacher for an entire class, or school, then little could be done except to teach children to read, and print, and to hope that during the process each child would somehow acquire the basic rules of mathematics. “*Amusing and useful*” experiments or facts from natural philosophy could be added, since these may make a strong and lasting impression on young minds. As Jefferson himself did at an early age, Thornton suggested one of the best scholastic exercises for any youthful student is just to copy useful information from the standard classics.

For the child who reached 10 years of age, Thornton suggested that the government should order special examinations to determine those with extraordinary talents, but he also urged care not to decide too soon that someone has already reached his or her full potential. The issues he raised really sound very similar to those of our own time; we still encourage, and yet we still fear, formal testing.

High schools, after the primary years, were to be designed to include all children above 10 years of age, but such schools should include youths of acknowledged ability even when they were still below age 10. By the time the child was age 10, grammar, mathematics, science, and even some of the “*living*” languages, particularly French for Thornton, the Francophile, should be taught. Thornton did not share the later opinion that dead languages such as Latin or Greek have no real value, but he did champion chemistry, drawing, and painting. It is interesting that Thornton, along with only a few others of his time, considered formal education in swimming and diving to be mandatory. He lamented that since he was not able to dive he was once unable to save a young man who drowned in a river in Scotland, although he did make an unsuccessful effort to resuscitate the man after a long pole had brought the victim up from the bottom. In a day in a new and wild country when even many sailors could not swim, formal education in swimming would have been wonderful indeed. He regretted the tendency of many teachers to rely heavily on dictionaries, feeling that students become bored when referring to such difficult texts. It seemed, to Thornton at least, worse than just foolish for up to one-third of the time used for study to be spent thumbing through a dictionary, simply in an effort to jumble together new words in an irregular translation. Thornton also thought loading the mind with uninteresting memorization was a total waste of time and would



surely chase away, rather than attract, pupils to learning. Is it possible that his reported tendency to stutter made him uncomfortable with public recitations? And did his early rigorous Quaker education in the classics serve to turn him away from these as well?

Thornton, surprisingly, offered no firm statement regarding just how many colleges should be established to complement the high schools he planned. This was at the time when he was still enamored of the possibility of a National University, and at a time one could barely glimpse the potential results of universal education. He felt, however, that all colleges and universities should be under national regulation, governed by the same basic principles, and administered through senior trustees. He suggested a need for clearly provided provision, salary, and designated duties for each individual professor who had been hired to teach philosophy, chemistry, oratory, etc. Thornton also wished to emphasize bodily exercises as an integral part of modern education, perhaps for once the physician in him speaking out.

This extensive curriculum, the one under the Thornton plan, was at a time that universities, ones that have since become world famous, felt lucky to have even a half-dozen part-time faculty. Thornton was far ahead of his time regarding the need for general education; but his love, his often stated educational passion, was for a major new and truly National University. What is that story? During all of his life, and for at least eight decades after Thornton's death, there was discussion of the potential for a major new official national university. This future University of Learning was to be based in Washington. Thornton's writings and suggestions for education, and on behalf of what was soon being called the National University, are scattered in a dozen places throughout the manuscripts available in the Library of Congress. In the midst of his comments on advanced education, Thornton expressed, at the same time, continued interest in basic education for people of all ages and in all levels of society within America.

America has never really had the single National University in Washington, the one once envisioned by Thornton. George Washington University sounds about right, and that and Georgetown University may be as close as we will ever get, but the later school was actually founded as a Catholic institution. American University in D.C. has existed from 1893. Thornton

insisted that just as Congress had placed the permanent location of our capital on the banks of the Potomac, Congress should at the same time plan for the truly National University, and even pick its precise location as well. Parents were sending talented sons to other countries simply to study the sciences. Thornton mentions that science has tended to travel from east to west historically, and thus it seems: *“probable that in a short time the principal seat of learning will be placed here in America.”* At the time Washington seemed accessible and central for the country, but this was before Americans had spread widely across the Appalachians, the mountain chain that was harder than the Rockies to cross for settlement. This was also at a time President Washington could imagine a lucrative canal system leading from the Potomac all the way to the Ohio River. Washington City was not really going to be central, but it seemed so at the time. Thornton pointed out that one of the potential benefits from a successful university in Washington was that wealth would be brought into the town by such new schools. The towns of Oxford and Cambridge in England were, according to Thornton, almost entirely supported by their universities, as was Leiden in Holland.

What were the new American universities, or the projected National University of Dr. Thornton, supposed to teach? Thornton suggested that some of the new universities should be devoted purely to instruction in mechanics, and that these schools would help the young avoid the usual prolonged seven-year apprenticeship while they learned a business or trade. Necessary skills could be acquired in just a few months, if the sole purpose was learning rather than apprenticeship work for the benefit of a master. His plan sounds similar to the various state colleges of agriculture and engineering that followed the Morrill Act after the Civil War. Thornton dreamed that his glorious National University, one he sometimes called Columbia University in the City of Washington, would include botanical gardens, a national museum, printing offices, libraries, an observatory, plus a forest of the different trees of America. In fact Thornton suggested the allotment of a large tract of ground for all these purposes, land precisely in the middle of the city. We still do have the Botanical Gardens close to the Capitol, placed in a location encouraged by Jefferson and Washington as well as by Thornton.

We don't have an official National University, but one can assume Thornton would be thrilled at the current Smithsonian Museums lining the mall, in large part a product of the efforts of Thornton's neighbor, John Quincy Adams (1767-1848), and initially stimulated by the gift of Thornton's English friend. Many of our current museums in Washington now rest on what was once idle marshy land in Thornton's time. We now do have these national museums, important ones, but we lack his single and beloved National University, his Columbia University, in Washington. We have prominent universities with national, even international, impact, but there is not any single agreed upon home of learning that all agree should be called the "*National University*." Thornton pointed out that men of great ability do not choose to live in a retired or isolated place, they prefer a city, and he argued that a major university in D.C. would be a sure way to attract scholars to the new capital. Teaching by the "*private gentlemen*" residing in Washington could, in turn, additionally enrich the University. Thornton was just such a private gentleman, one with varied tastes and multiple skills, but we don't know if he wished to be one of the teaching gentlemen.

At the time of his writing there were few houses in the district to interfere with plans for a major educational center. The plan of Washington as proposed by L'Enfant did not, however, at first include any specific tract of land dedicated for education, although Jefferson may well have penciled in a potential area. Thornton pushed for such an allocation of land. He wrote, "*While hundreds of acres are thrown into walks and gardens bordering on and belonging to the President's house, which as a Republican I think useless, no provision has been made for the seat of learning. Gardens and extensive walks are proper appendages to the house of the people, and though I think too much attention cannot be paid to the existing President of the United States I always ask who shall succeed him? This President is modest, dignified yet free from hauteur; he despises little vanities, and never forgets that man is equal to man. He is virtuous, and an example to his fellow citizens. But who shall succeed him? Avoid palaces and the gardens of palaces. If you build a palace I will find you a king.*"

Thornton repeatedly, truly repeatedly, urged his friends and the members of Congress to plan for the National University. On November 18, 1796, he and

the other two commissioners of the federal district prepared several formal memorials for the purpose, offering specific written suggestions to President Washington and to the Congress. The concept of a National University was favorably reported in the House of Representatives, but a major federal center of learning in the Federal City was viewed with suspicion by opponents of the administration, as well as by the larger and prouder cities. The project was postponed again, and then again, and ultimately forever. Neither Thornton nor anyone else at the time, however, could have come close to guessing how many hundreds of exceptional colleges and universities we now do have, nor how widely they would be spread across the country. Thornton's plan to attract international scholars was perhaps never really necessary, since freedom to learn and to achieve will always attract scholars. There was powerful, one would have expected ample, political support for the planned University. President Washington announced his personal support for a National University on January 28, 1795, in an official letter to the Commissioners, who by that time included his newest appointee, Thornton. Thornton, who idolized Washington, vigorously supported Washington in this, and in all other Presidential dreams.

Where was Thornton's National University, with or without foreign scholars or Congressional support, to be placed? One proposed location for the official National University was adjacent the Potomac River, near New Hampshire, Virginia, and New York Avenues. What might it have meant for the future of the city to have a green university campus extending right down to the Potomac? The University of Washington, in the state of Washington, displays such a watery border and the walks along the edge can be magical for young and old. The American capital city is also lovely, particularly if one walks among the cherry trees in bloom, or beside the Jefferson Monument placed now where there was once marshland. But although there are attractive universities in Washington, it is not on their campuses where one walks easily beside the Potomac.

On February 18, 1795 the commissioners announced that they had indeed chosen the piece of ground for Washington's approval, ground between 23<sup>rd</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup>, and E Streets, NW, with the Potomac River as the southern border. At the time the Potomac shore was closer to Capitol Hill than it is at present and the location offered only approximately 20 acres. The same area was in future years

proposed for a naval observatory, a national medical school, and for a hospital. Washington offered his personal 50 shares of the Potomac Company as a gift for the projected university and stated, *“I have not the slightest doubt that this donation when the navigation is complete in operation, which will take less than two years, will amount to £1200 or £1500 a year and become a rapidly increasing fund.”* The value of each share at the time was \$444 so this was a significant contribution from the first President for the new, but never to be built, National University. Madison, almost a decade earlier, had suggested that the constitution formally include provision that Congress be empowered to establish a national university, but this was never included in the final document.

Two decades after Thornton’s proposal, in 1819, an association presented Congress with a plan to establish a college and theological institution, and James Monroe, J.Q. Adams, and John C. Calhoun all offered to contribute money or land. Congress rejected national support for this school, perhaps due to the fact religious institutions were involved, but beginning in 1821 Congress did allow the non-denominational *“erection of a university at the seat of the Federal government.”* This was called Columbian College, surely a name Thornton welcomed, and associates of that institution wore mourning badges at his funeral. This school was located between 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> streets, and was north of Florida Avenue. Attendance required morning and evening prayers and offered a classical education. Later called Columbian University, in 1904 it became George Washington University. Because of his interest in teaching the deaf to speak, and his preference for the name Columbian, Thornton would probably have also welcomed the Columbian Institution for the Instruction of the Deaf, Dumb and Blind, the label of one of the schools for the deaf established by members the Gallaudet family, several of whom were friends of the Thornton couple.

In 1794 Jefferson offered a plan to supply university professors when he suggested transplanting the entire faculty of the University of Geneva to our country. Just hire them all for the projected National University. It is probable that the universally esteemed Albert Gallatin from Geneva was the one who actually initiated this plan. During all these formative years Thornton was one of the most enthusiastic supporters of any plan, offered by anyone, for a new university and he wrote separately and repeatedly to Washington as well as in

the public press regarding the desirability of formal educational efforts on a national scale. The ubiquitous entrepreneur Samuel Blodgett was, not unexpectedly, also involved in the projected real estate that would be needed for the university, and in plans for its potential construction. This common interest in a national university may have been part of what pulled Thornton and Blodgett together, to the benefit of neither. The Commissioners, including Thornton, were not only involved with plans for a university but considered other possible reservations of federal land, for example scheduled areas for banks, a mint (which ultimately remained in Philadelphia), a national church, planned markets, etc.

Probably the major reason for the failure to move ahead briskly with planning for a National University was the financial difficulty of the city, and of the time, difficulty which the city-wide lottery organized by Blodgett had not only failed to eliminate but had actually exacerbated. The history of the search for funding for money for all of the construction for our Federal City is complex and involved Commissioner Thornton to only a limited degree. James Greenleaf in 1794 was empowered to borrow money for the new capital of Washington in Europe, and he and Robert Morris were expected to be major sources for funds, and in turn Greenleaf was to convey lots and deeds to leaders in the district.

*“Philadelphia, Nov. 5<sup>th</sup> 1794.*

*GEN’N: Mr. James Greenleaf has requested me to express in a letter to you my approbation of the transfers which have been made to his name of certain building lots in the city of Washington purchased on his and my joint account, which I now do in compliance with your desire and his said request. I am, Gent’n,*

*Your most obed’t & humble servant*

ROBERT MORRIS.

*To the Commissioners*

*For the City of Washington.*

*December 5, 1794*

*If the Loan now in contemplation and which James Greenleaf is authorized to make by his Letter of Attorney from the Commissioners, dated the 18<sup>th</sup> of October last, shall take effect so that the Commissioners are thereby*

*aided with funds as expected, then they agree to release the said James Greenleaf from his engagement to loan them one thousand pounds per month in the year 1795.*

DAN<sup>L</sup> CARROLL

GUSTS SCOTT

WILLIAM THORNTON

*Comsrs.*

Greenleaf as consult for the new republic was not entirely successful in obtaining funds, so he approached bankers in Rotterdam:

PLAN

OF A

LOAN

*of \$400,000 Dollar American money or \$1,000,000 Dutch currency at 5 ½ per cent interest, annually besides a distribution of premiums to the amount of \$50,000 to be made at the final discharge of the Loan, in lieu of further interest*

AT THE COUNTING HOUSE

*Of*

MESSIEURS ROCQUETTE, ELSERIER AND BEELDEMAKER AT  
ROTTERDAM

*On account of JAMES GREENLEAF, ESQUIRE;*

*Consul appointed by the United States of America, with the States of the United Provinces to reside in the City of Amsterdam.*

*For the security of this Loan 1500 lots of ground lying within the city of Washington in North America all property situated for houses and other Buildings to be erected on the same and averaging at least 27 feet by 110 feet or 2970 square feet each lot will be mortgaged at the rate of one and a half lot for every \$1,000 Dutch currency being the amount of each share of this Loan. The said 1500 lots of ground are to be transferred in the names of*

GILLES GROENVELD

RUDOLF MEES

PIETER VAN DER WALLEN VAN VOLLENHOVEN”

By July 10, 1795 James Greenleaf, the primary trustee with Morris, began to buy and sell lots, hundreds of them in fact. Some lots were obtained from actions of the Commissioners of the District of Columbia, some came from the original landowners. Greenleaf was eventually destined, along with Morris, to be subjected to suspicion and public criticism of his motives, but his efforts did produce gradual evolution toward a firm currency as well as clearer federal laws about land usage. If nothing else, at least Turkey Buzzard Point at the tip of the district sounded more sophisticated after its name became Greenleaf Point. Greenleaf and Morris were the main financiers of the time, but many others were also involved. Even Thornton, a Commissioner as the effort continued, became an integral part of the effort. Thornton was given the job of approaching individuals in both England and Maryland as potential sources for the needed financial capital. He was also sent to Philadelphia to obtain money for a loan to the District of Columbia, such money to be used for further public construction. Greenleaf went farther afield than Thornton, spending a year in Holland in search of money for the capital. He returned with a new wife, but little new money.

Perhaps reflecting Washington's view that public servants of the district should live within the District, it was during this time that Thornton offered up for sale his own house in George Town in June of 1800, and he and the two ladies, his wife and mother-in-law, moved permanently from M Street near 32<sup>nd</sup> Street. They left a house which at the time contained four rooms, three guest rooms, plus a kitchen and a back building with three rooms. He, along with Mrs. Thornton and Mrs. Brodeau, moved into their new home at 1331 F Street NW, Washington, and he lived there until his death. For years Thornton retained financial interest in several other houses and lots in addition to his personal home. Mrs. Thornton stayed in the same house for 35 years after her husband died, but she was apparently disconcerted to discover at his death that he had willed it to the African Colonization Society, although she was allowed to keep a lifetime interest in it.

It is hard to believe how limited and insecure the capital city was at the time of these speculative ventures in education, real estate, and governmental buildings. The area was largely unsettled. Many letters describe the heavily wooded aspects of the district at that time, and there is more than one report of



people lost in the woods while rambling on horseback or in a carriage. A post road was finally successfully carved through the woods, and in the process some grieved as hundreds of ancient trees were cut down. Thomas Jefferson particularly regretted the loss of the old trees, and often stated his wish to preserve an example of all our native trees within the limits of the district. Jefferson pushed hard for a formal botany area near the projected area of the never-to-be-established National University. A portion of the “*President’s Square*,” which at the time was at the back of the White House, eventually did become a garden. Later the same area was renamed Lafayette’s Square by an act of Congress when the last surviving important General of the Revolution returned for a last visit to America. This is the area where local militia practiced maneuvers for many years, and where varied protesters and Lafayette’s statue have stood, or camped, in our own time.

Education for Thornton and others involved books, and by 1796 a public library in Washington had already opened, and Nicholas King is mentioned as librarian in January 1797 in a letter to subscribers reminding them that subscriptions were now due. George Town established a library two years earlier and it is probable that Alexandria soon had a library after the Virginia legislature granted a charter to the Library Company in the Town of Alexandria in January 1798. It was difficult for newspapers to survive in the new town, partly because of continuing controversy and vitriolic discussions in the press, but more relevantly because there was lack of solid money at the same time there was such extensive speculation in city lots and through the lottery. The *National Intelligencer* survived in large measure because of its success in obtaining government printing contracts.

Entertainment was certainly also present, and there was soon a track for racehorses just west of the President’s Square. More than once the horse of Thornton’s friend John Tayloe won on the oval-shaped racecourse at the west end of what is now Lafayette Park. There was another race ground to the east, and Congress easily could, and did, recess to attend the races. Jenkins reports: “*Racing activity was first carried out at a well known course in Alexandria, and also at the course Col. Tayloe laid out in the fields near the Octagon, until the selling of lots and the reservations for the Mall and the Ellipse interfered. Thornton, Blodgett, and some others started the first official racecourse in the*

*District of Columbia on the high ground beyond Columbia Road and Fourteenth Street; this site became increasingly popular. In the cool days of October, Race Week occurred, and certain Congressmen tried to get the House adjourned for this. Sometimes they succeeded...It is said that in October, 1814, less than two months after the disaster of the British invasion, Race Week had as plentiful and as gay a crowd in attendance as ever. Thornton's racers, Rattler, Driver, the Duchess of Marlborough, and Eclipse Herod became well known; the last one so fine a specimen that Thornton spent an entire Sunday on a drawing of the beautiful beast."*

Thornton owned several lots close to the area for the planned university and he particularly wished to see the university near land he owned. Another possible location for the university mentioned at the time was close to the proposed National Hospital, also never to be in existence. This hospital was to be placed at the eastern branch of the Potomac where Massachusetts and Georgia Avenues converge. In 1855, thanks to the persuasive skills of the reformer Dorothea Dix, the federal government did construct St. Elizabeth Hospital, a psychiatric facility placed on a beautiful hill southeast of Washington, a location with still one of the best views of the city. This was never intended to be a hospital for general diseases, and medical care in the District remains, to this day, a patchwork of public and private efforts.

The dream of a clearly designated and adequately supported National University died hard, but the National Institutes of Health, the National Academy of Science, and the Smithsonian Institution are noble substitutes. For a time, as noted earlier, Thornton's artifacts in the patent office served as the first national museum for the edification of the curious. As late as 1892, ninety years after Thornton, Senator John Hoyt summarized in a memorial letter to the Senate his opinion that a "*great and true university is the leading want of American education.*" His summary first outlines the purposes of such a university; to represent the sum of human knowledge, to develop new professions, to lead in original research, etc. He next argues that the national government should found such a university so that it can coordinate, strengthen, and elevate the schools of all the states, and at the same time be wholly free from any sectarian or religious bias. The author points out that the University of Paris and the University of Berlin serve in this role for their respective countries. One

can discuss critically the concept of placing a university in Washington, or question that Washington is in fact the center of the nation, but Washington and the District seemed to Hoyt the only suitable spot under federal jurisdiction that could house a National University. This was true even if by 1892 it no longer was accepted, as George Washington claimed, that our capital is in the central part of the country.

Senator Hoyt pointed out that the city of Washington, even in the 1890s, already had a cluster of scientists doing original work. He re-emphasized the large number of people who have spoken eloquently about the need for a National University, leaders such as Washington, Jefferson, Adams, and Madison. Several speakers in the following hundred years after the city was founded regretted that the commitment from our founding President had never been matched by a similar commitment in his name by the United States. A letter from Washington directed to the Commissioners confirmed his commitment to the university, and Washington's letter is followed by a letter from the Commissioners addressed back to Washington. This second letter was almost certainly written by William Thornton himself. The past problems of sectarianism, or favoritism, were considered less of an issue by 1890, and previous concerns about Federal power localized in one place could have been offset by the fact that a National University would represent no single political power. Major educational, scientific, or research advances often do need to be centralized.

Senator Hoyt, in 1892, pointed out that there would soon be a large celebration to remember the arrival of Columbus 400 years before, and indeed there was such a celebration. Planning for the famous Chicago Fair was a part of that effort. Hoyt felt that the precise time, 1892, would also offer a chance for a great advance towards the national "*Columbian University*." It is perhaps sad, if unsurprising, that such a University did not appear, and also sad that the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1992 elicited no new commitment. Indeed the Columbian celebrations of 1992, ostensibly designed to remember 1492, consisted far more of a whimper than a bang. One official national remembrance held in Columbus, Ohio, carefully avoided any issue that might offend Indians or others as it presented Ameriflora. The event had little obvious linkage to 1492, except that the Ameriflora flower show opened in 1992.

Possible cost was an obvious objection to the repeated proposals for a National University. In addition, Presidents of the major universities in 1890 were far from convinced of any need for a designated and competitive National University at any time. Much earlier Jefferson himself had questioned the federal government could properly establish any institutions for scientific learning. Jefferson, as Henry Adams and others have suggested, felt the federal government's role was properly in international affairs, with all other issues reserved for the states. This reluctance to support science on a national, not state, scale was from the same President who sent Lewis and Clark on one of the greatest scientific explorations of all time.

President Washington December 26, 1796 urged Thornton to leave George Town and move to the capital city, and the General, his preferred title, urged all major political officials to live in the District. Space and housing was already at a premium, but gradually the overall area of the District, including who was to live there, became clearly defined. Thornton eventually helped Washington to locate space, select a design, and then construct two homes in the District of Columbia, property for the President to use or to rent. Washington did not accept Thornton's plan for a quadrangle to house all the Congressmen as a group and Washington resisted formal government involvement in supplying housing for any of them. Mount Vernon was the first President's beloved home, and his desire to acquire property in the city was strictly as a business venture at a time public housing was short. Perhaps Washington would have been willing to occupy the new President's house, the White House, if it had been completed in time.

George Washington, in a letter to Thornton on 14 July, 1799, revealed the General's concepts as landlord: *"I am not disposed to fix this at an unreasonable rate – on the contrary I had rather be under than over a just standard – but I must not lose, because I do not mean to extort – in a word I wish to know what others, who are building in the vicinity of the capitol (on the principle which has governed me – namely – the accommodation of Congress) mean to ask as an interest on their expenditures, and if it should fall in your way to make this enquiry I would thank you for the results, as it will enable me to speak decisively to Mr. Francis – with esteem and regard I remain dear sir your most obedient and obliged humble servant George Washington."* Another

example of Washington's care in financial matters is seen in a letter to Thornton on 18<sup>th</sup> November, 1799, almost exactly one month before the general died, regarding employment of house painters for the rental houses then being constructed: "*I have no objection to Mr. Blagden's frequent calls for money – but I fear the work which is not enumerated in the contract with him, is pretty smartly whipped up in the price of it – I had no expectation (for instance) that a wall a little more than 30 feet deep was to cost me upwards of £70 – I may, however, have misconceived the matter, from ignorance of the usual rates – with great esteem and regard I am, etc. George Washington.*" An historical marker is present on the Capitol grounds at the place of Washington's rental properties.

Thornton, as commissioner, seems to have been interested in all aspects of the District of Columbia, not just the National University. During these times of ferment, rapid change, controversy, and unbridled ambitions for the new Federal City, Thornton outlined in minute detail the residual open sections, at least ten of them consisting of 11 acres in total; areas that he suggested should be taken over by the city for the location of fountains, statues, and small public parks. Washington responded to this suggestion by Commissioner Thornton within a couple of weeks, and insisted that any owners should be recompensed if they lost part of their land for the accommodation of the little squares or for public memorials. It seems probable that Thornton, with others, was envisioning the fountains and small "squares" of both England and France. How wonderful for all citizens that many such petite parks are still present in Washington, even if the National University is not.

One of Thornton's efforts on behalf of education was his book on written and spoken language. The book was intended to modify the current teaching methods. *Cadmus*, printed in 1793 with over 100 pages, represented an effort to improve the elements of written and spoken language. The ultimate purpose of Thornton's *Cadmus* was to create an American language that was as distinct as our government, a language "*free from all the follies of un-philosophical fashion.*" The author refers briefly to others who worked in the area of language, including particularly Benjamin Franklin and Noah Webster. The immediate purpose of *Cadmus* was to offer a universal alphabet in which a single distinct mark or character would be available for every sound possible for the human voice to utter. Another purpose of *Cadmus* was to assure that visitors

to various nations who heard different pronunciations and different languages could later convey to any stranger exactly what they had heard. Current writing was not adequate. Thornton considered the Roman alphabet to be incomplete since in the Roman alphabet the same sound can be represented by two, or even by three, different combination of letters, and a single character may represent two or more sounds. As one illustration of this he chose the “ough” sound. “*Though the tough cough hiccough plough me through, O’er life’s dark lough my course I still pursue.*” Thornton suggested in *Cadmus* that for academicians it was more rational to study English for twice as long rather than to study a second language, in hopes that one could eventually understand the basics of English. It was English that must be learned, and English that must be taught. He wished to accommodate, even to change, accepted orthography, or writing, in English, such that written words more closely matched the verbal language, even though orthography had never fully accommodated language as it was spoken daily. With *Cadmus* Thornton felt he had finally made it possible for travelers to record perfect pronunciation for any language they heard, and for the first time foreigners could learn a language even if they were totally shut off from its basic source. His suggestions have never really been tested. *Cadmus* has not been used. But it was a serious effort to solve a real problem. So what exactly did Thornton propose?

Using the dictionary of Thomas Sheridan (1719-1788) as his primary source Thornton stated that a vowel and a consonant are distinguished by the fact that a vowel can be uttered or pronounced in isolation by itself, but a consonant cannot. Sheridan had suggested there were only 28 simple sounds found in our language, six of which are “mutes.” Thornton suggested that /k/, /p/, and /t/ should also be omitted as letters because they are only marks of aspiration as are /r/, /f/, /o/, and /s/ although these are more forcefully made than others. Thornton suggested that to claim the /h/ as mute is not correct, most people can hear the difference between “*heating*” a cake and “*eating*” a cake. Thornton also reported that Sheridan suggested the use of /a/ as a non-vowel but pointed out that there doesn’t seem any true difference between the sound of the second /a/” as in “*hate*,” and the sound of the first /a/ as in “*bet*.” The difference is not in the sound, only in the length of the sound. Thornton stated if you prolong the sound of “*bet*” it became “*beet*,” and Thornton noted there is

even a third /e/ as in “*beer*” which seemed to be similar to the first /i/ as in “*fit*.” Lengthening of the second /i/ in “*fit*” made it sound like “*feet*.” Thornton noted that the Scotch language of his time placed before every consonant a common vowel, in contrast to the English who sometimes put a vowel before, but also sometimes after, the consonant. As can be seen above, all in all the reasoning of Thornton in *Cadmus* is hard for any layman to follow, and it may be no surprise that *Cadmus* was not an educational success.

The distinctions made by Thornton are difficult to comprehend. What else did he suggest in this work? Thornton insisted that it made no logical sense to divide the alphabet into vowels, consonants, mutes, semi-vowels, and similar subdivisions, and he chose to combine all known characters into only two: vowels or aspirates. By his definition a vowel is the name for the sound that is sounded by the voice; an aspirate sounded by the breath. To illustrate, Thornton claimed there are 21 vowels in the English language, and nine aspirates to make a total of 30 potential letters. The purpose of *Cadmus* was, in a sense, to have the reader reject all prior conventions regarding the names of the letters and only consider the basic sounds. For a word like “*saw*” or “*raw*” the author would have the letter /s/ followed by two other symbols that convey the sound /aw/. For each letter and each aspirate the author proceeded to describe how the tongue should be used, how the teeth must be brought together, and precisely how the tips of the upper lip are to be raised. The overall purpose is to allow a reader to pronounce each “*letter*” and thereby become able to pronounce each word. The sounds and symbols he chose were, per Thornton, the true universal sounds. On the 94<sup>th</sup> page of his very serious treatise, Thornton talked of “*teaching the surd or deaf and consequently dumb to speak*.” He suggested exposing the unfortunate deaf people to many different sounds, assuring that they see the sounds produced by certain tongue or throat positions, and then one must reinforce them with rewards whenever they are successful in producing the right sound.

How valuable was *Cadmus*? Not much, it would appear, perhaps simply because it was never used much. Nevertheless, Thornton was awarded the annual Magellanic gold medal from the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, and through the years he sent copies of *Cadmus* to colleagues, some of who did admire it. There is no data to suggest Thornton actually spent

time of his own in educating the deaf, nor did he ever seriously return to the work of *Cadmus*. Thomas Gallaudet (1787-1851), who later founded early educational programs for the deaf students, became a friend who continued to visit Mrs. Thornton long after her William had died. What did critical colleagues of the time say about *Cadmus*?

One friend, Mr. Turner from Philadelphia, on June 2-6, 1799, wrote a letter to Thornton regarding *Cadmus* and quoted verbatim a critique of *Cadmus* that appeared in the *Monthly Review of 1795*. *“This diffuse composition displays some learning and ingenuity, strongly tinctured with enthusiasm. It contains several judicious observations, but few which claim the merit of originality or importance. The author directs his whole attention to the analysis of human articulation, and describes at great length the manner in which each elementary sound is formed. He is displeased with the ordinary distinction of words into vowels and consonants, for which he would substitute the division into vocals and aspirates. He proposes by the alteration of some characters and the addition of others, to enlarge the alphabet to 30 letters, by help of which he undertakes to write any language with such precision that a person of common talent might, from the bare inspection, pronounce it like a native. He entertains the most sanguine ideas of the advantages that are likely to result from the adoption of this plan. Dialects, he imagines, would utterly disappear; a correct orthography would universally prevail; and languages, which at present consume years of labor, would be acquired by the application of a few weeks. The proposal totally to change the orthography has been repeatedly discussed by authors of the first eminence and they have justly concluded that it would be attended, on the whole, with great disadvantages. Pronunciation is mutable and capricious, nor is it profitable to delineate its endless delicate inflections; nor to reduce it, like music, to a universal standard.”*

*“The subjoined essay (teaching the dumb) on a subject so important, appears to contain nothing of any material consequence.”*

*Cadmus* was mentioned in Thornton’s letters off and on for the rest of his life, and occasionally he saved a letter of praise he received regarding this effort that he so cherished. There is, however, no evidence that he ever offered lectures about education, or deafness, or that he himself ever served in any professional or tutorial role. If indeed he stammered, that may help account for this lack of



“follow through”, even account for his initial interest in languages. Most likely it was his inveterate tendency to begin, to dabble creatively, but not ever to focus on one project, which caused him to both begin and then to drop this effort. An interesting coincidence, one that Thornton must have enjoyed, since he once visited and later corresponded with this last surviving important general of the American Revolution, was that Marquis de Lafayette arrived for his final tour of America in 1824 on a packet boat called *Cadmus*. It was Thornton’s old neighbor, President John Quincy Adams, who as President welcomed the French Hero.

In addition to *Cadmus*, numerous essays, and scientific observations, Thornton’s writings include many light verses. One example is an imaginary exchange with his friend Bayard:

*“Bayard: Pray Doctor, why so fond of horses?  
I think them all so many curses.  
As you have money, and are able,  
Why don’t you make your wealth more stable?  
Thornton: Stable? my friend, look at those bloods,  
What can more stable be than studs?  
Or stallions as the English call,  
Those noble Lions of the Stall?  
They cover all expenses too-  
And bring a standing revenue!”*

Perhaps we can also include a few lines of one of several poems that praise “drink”, all sorts of alcohol:

*“Oh Punch, Thou art my Darling, I love thee night and morning. Cold or hot, it matters not. Good if cool- but hot –how charming...etc.”* (this poem appears for many lines on page 2432 of the tapes)

He wrote, presumably thinking of Anna Maria, and certainly saved by her: *“If nineteen years of marriage ties, Can make me love so strong, Pray tell how high the flame will rise, When nourish’d twice as long. For nourishment like what you give, So sweet, so wholesome too, Will bid the torch forever live, And live alone for you. To judge the future by the past, Must surely thus be wise, ‘Twill blaze as along as life shall last, And light us to the skies.”*

Thornton saved one poem that praised writing. That poem is “Cadmus,” name of the legendary founder of Thebes who was said to have brought the alphabet, and whose name was the title of Thornton’s publication on speech: *“Blest be his shade, in endless realms of light, Who bade the alphabet dispel our night; Those wondrous symbols that can still retain The phantom forms that pass along the brain; O’er unsubstantial thought, hold strong control, And fix the essence of the immortal soul. Man, unreluctant meets the general doom, His mind, embalmed, defies the o’er whelming tomb; Lives in fresh vigor thro succeeding years nor yields its powers while nature guides the spheres.”* This was Thornton’s dream, a hope that his writings, at least, would survive, embalmed in print, during succeeding years.

CHAPTER 3

## Tortola, Slavery, and Thornton

**Slavery was present in Tortola from before Thornton's birth until after his death. Quaker concepts forbade slavery, but the Quakers in Tortola owned slaves. Thornton wrote eloquently and repeatedly condemning slavery, but always owned slaves. When he arrived in America Thornton tried to organize a group of freed slaves to return to Africa, and proposed to accompany them.**

**Thornton was an initial manager of the African Colonization Society that was established in 1816. Thornton also proposed sending freed blacks to Haiti, to parts of Louisiana, or to Puerto Rico.**

**The British settlement in Africa that Thornton encouraged was not a great success, due to disease, leadership failure, and lack of financial support.**

**Among the reasons for lack of full success in sending Blacks from America to Africa was the fact that most Blacks simply did not want to leave America.**

**The efforts of Wilberforce and others in England, plus devastating hurricanes in Tortola in the 1820's and in 1831, requiring English support for rebuilding, led in 1834 to the abolition of slavery in all the Indies held by England.**

Permanent settlement of the West Indies and of Tortola was by the second and third sons of British aristocrats, even though initial holdings on the islands by Dutch and Portuguese sailors contributed to a later complex ethnic mix. By the mid-1650s to 1700 the entire group of islands was firmly under the control of the British. Most of the controlling settlers, the primary landowners, originated from a society that back home in England was beginning to develop

free yeomen, independent small landowners, and craftsmen; a society that in England (not in the West Indies) was becoming less feudal as the western world slowly became aware that free men made better soldiers, created more wealth, and, in fact, were even more likely to be loyal to the state. Tortola and Barbados would have to wait generations for such insights.

It has been said that in Europe in the 1600s, the race of a person, per se, was not crucial since after all everyone was either white or black; and so what? If there was ever truly such an apparent freedom of thought, combined with lack of organized prejudice, that enlightened attitude changed, or at least it certainly changed for those that lived in the Indies. Throughout its heyday most of the leaders in the West Indies were white and many were slave owners. The majority of the aristocrats retained psychological ties to the old aristocracy of England, not to the yeomanry. Leading families had come to the Indies primarily to make a fortune. Materialism, the more the better, seemed paramount; and very soon slavery was considered integral to a white man's financial success. In contrast to the less developed New England colonies of 1650, the gentry of the West Indies usually did not intend to stay in the Indies, and the economy never did become truly self-sufficient. Landowners never planned, or desired, to become personal farmers, nor did they have unlimited land which could beckon their children westward. In this island environment a single crop, sugar cane, soon became paramount. The major source of energy to harvest that crop was slave labor.

Within a few decades it was apparent in the Indies that the initial attempted use of indentured white servants, the "*Christians*," even when the pool of such indentured servants was augmented by those who were kidnapped (or "*barbadosed*" as it was called), was simply never going to supply enough help. Some may have felt that "*Christians*" were not tough enough to cultivate the rugged slopes of the islands. According to early writers, life for the original indentured white servants was at least as harsh as was that later for the slaves, but the indentured servants were not officially slaves. As a rule, indentured servants served only for a decade or so, but slaves were valuable property for their entire lifetime - and beyond that if they produced children. Both tobacco, the earliest but largely unsuccessful crop, and then the later preeminent crop of sugar cane which along with its secondary yield of rum and molasses made up

95% of the value of exports from the Indies in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, required lots of hands and backbreaking labor. Soon the slaves, who eventually outnumbered the whites by ten to one on the islands, represented the predominant labor force. Slaves could be an additional staple for profit since there could be re-exportation of excess slaves to another area that need more laborers. As workers, as well as tokens of power and prestige, slaves represented the prime measure of wealth and property. Over 380,000 slaves were imported to Barbados, largely from West Africa, and possibly a comparable number to Tortola, between 1651 and 1807, the last year of the organized British slave trade. It is probably true that the necessity to import so many slaves into the Indies reflected death from fevers, an initial scarcity of reproducing females, and an infant mortality rate that exceeded 50% by age 5. Endemic tropical diseases were rendered more lethal by the almost universally poor nutrition of both children and adults.

In comparison to Barbados, the exact number of slaves brought into Tortola is not clear, but the status of the slaves was entirely similar. As few as three or four out of ten adult black males, “*seawater blacks*,” could be successfully “*seasoned*.” Some adult males brought to the Islands in chains just never did seem able to adjust. The children in the Indies that were born of slaves were called “*Creoles*”, and these were found to be more tractable and therefore ultimately more valuable. Slave society in the Indies never became completely homogeneous, of course. From the beginning, numerous tribes were represented among the slaves; nor was the ruling white society ever purely British. Language and manners, religion and superstition, ignorance and education all remained mixed and complex among the islanders. Surely so too did the genes also soon become intermixed. Within a short time after the introduction of slavery in 1651, however, a major and overriding concern of all the plantation owners of the Indies had become not only how to obtain and keep strong workers, and how to make a profit from their effort, but also how to prevent insolence and insurrection even though the largest insurrection didn’t actually occur until 1816. It seems likely that the national and persistent racial attitudes in North America, as well as the culture of the Indies, were shaped in large measure by the establishment and style of slavery in the Islands. Many slaves were brought first to the Indies and then moved to the rest of North

America. No matter what was once true, color of skin soon mattered a great deal throughout all of North America.

Despite deliberate legal repression of the slaves in the Indies, however, almost from the beginning of organized slavery there were clusters of religious leaders and other idealistic humanitarians who resisted slavery in all its forms. The Quakers were leaders in this, and for Thornton, Tortola was symbolic of the Quakers' culture. Quakers were among the earliest anti-slavery groups on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, yet it was from Quakers in Tortola that Thornton participated in the personal benefits of slavery, and Tortola was for decades the place he called his home.

Thornton was by no means the only owner torn by conflicted loyalties about their "*servants*." Jefferson and Clay are both mentioned again in this regard because the two of them were perhaps the most skillful writers that ever addressed the topic. But beautiful words were not enough, slavery wasn't just about the potential to use slave labor, it was also about family, wealth, and philosophy. Washington, for example, freed his slaves at his death, but wrestled with the complex family ties that were a part of slavery. Some of his slaves were married to slaves belonging to Martha, who had brought the slaves into her marriage with the General, and who seemed more content with her role as master than did the elderly Washington.

Quaker concepts, and the influence of Quakerism, cannot be ignored in any work that discusses slavery, certainly not one that discusses Tortola, and especially not when we review the life of William Thornton. He was a Quaker once, reared in that faith, and perhaps was always a Quaker in his heart. Undoubtedly the largest part of the education of Thornton in the Quaker doctrines occurred after he left Tortola and while he lived in England with Quakers, but the story of Thornton's ancestors and particularly of Quakerism in Tortola is part of his legacy. The history of that settlement has been sympathetically told by Charles Jenkins, who wrote: "*A period of forty-five years covers the birth, the activity, the decline, and the death of this obscure and interesting episode in our Quaker history.*"

Tortola had been owned by the Dutch in 1648, then successively by English, French, Dutch, and at last held firmly by England by 1672. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century the hidden bays and lagoons of the islands were well known and

regularly visited by pirates and buccaneers. The Friends, Quakers, reached Barbados as early as 1655, but in 1744 only a few Quakers still remained. In 1734 a total of only 100 white men actually lived full time in Tortola, and perhaps this was too small a number to preserve any one religion for very long. In 1741 the Quaker leader, John Pickering, was Governor of the Island of Tortola, and he reported that 30 persons were meeting twice a week for typical Quaker programs, meetings held largely in silence.

Several courageous and much-beloved Quaker missionaries arrived to educate these faithful souls but the missionaries died with fever. It wasn't easy to be a Christian on that island, and it wasn't easy to survive. John Pickering himself wrote that he found it difficult to be the Governor while remaining a Christian in Tortola; but apparently he did remain true to his religion. Quakers were not supposed to employ offensive weapons, but in the Indies for many years there was danger of attacks from Spaniards, and within a few years legitimate concern arose regarding potential attacks from insurgent slaves. Because of Pickering's Quaker-based pacifism during this time of potential outside, and real inside, threats to the peace of the islands, and because he loathed offensive weapons, but probably even more because of his liberal views on slavery, he was no longer allowed to continue as governor. James Birkett (1743) wrote: "*They have taken the government of that island out of the hands of John Pickering, a man of great worth, and given it to a very severe man. . .*" The name of Pickering in his descendants and in his former slaves, plus the memory of his good reputation, remained present for generations afterwards.

Within a few years after the first visit by Quaker clergy to Tortola, two additional missionaries arrived, and one of these died within two weeks. Those attending the funeral were caught in a shower and then the second missionary also "*took ill*" and soon died. John Pickering stated: "*He had his Health very well until the Death of his dear Companion, but going to his Burial, we were caught in a Shower of Rain which we, and he, believe was the Occasion of his Illness. However, he was mightily favored with the Divine Presence, which enabled him to answer the Service of that Day; and the next, being the first Day of the Week, we had a blessed Meeting, the Lord's presence accompanying us . . . was dead on the third day.*"

Two additional, and this time female, Quaker missionaries arrived in 1750 and were able to survive for the entire month they were present, but after the quick death of yet one additional missionary six years passed before any new formal clergy arrived. Minutes of the monthly meetings at Tortola are available in some of William Thornton's personal papers and include reports of the disowning of some of the Friends because of activity such as "*that odious exercise of dancing.*" Times change, people change, and Thornton was reported to have helped establish a dancing academy in Washington years later. The women's monthly meetings on Tortola continued strong for over 20 years, but gradually the minutes of both the men's and women's meetings disappeared, and by July 25, 1762, the very last formal entry reads: "*Few Friends attend this meeting, it being occasioned by sickness.*"

J. C. Lettsom, the most famous native to originate from the Quaker complex in Tortola, was born into the Quaker faith November 22, 1744. He, like Thornton, went as a child to Lancaster, England, and became the ward of a famous Quaker, Samuel Fothergill. The Fothergill brothers, Samuel and Dr. John, were mentors for Lettsom, who in turn became a mentor for Thornton. Lettsom assumed the medical practice of John Fothergill after his death. One writer stated that the transfer of patients to Lettsom led to "*a great accession . . . to the medical practice.*" It was stated that Lettsom did not possess any "*peculiar skill in his profession,*" but he soon had a large and lucrative practice and possessed unique skills in managing medical and scientific groups. His writings confirm that he was in addition a remarkably able physician scientist. That favorable reputation did not prevent some critics in his time from repeating the ditty:

*"I, John Lettsom,  
Blisters, bleeds, and sweats 'em.  
If, after that, they please to die,  
I, John Lettsom."*

Dr. John and Samuel Fothergill were both children of yet another famous Dr. John Fothergill, who, as his children were to do later, traveled to the Quaker settlement in Philadelphia and became a hero to the Quaker families of Pennsylvania. Both the medical men, and particularly the second Dr. John who became the professional mentor for Lettsom, were innovative scientific examples



for Quakers on both sides of the Atlantic. Philadelphia always served as home of the mother church for the Quakers of America, and Thornton's choice of Philadelphia as his first American home may have reflected both the Quaker and the medical connections.

As Jenkins points out, minutes of the Quaker meetings in Tortola rarely specifically mention anything at all about slaves, nor is there complaint about their ill treatment. Lettsom on the other hand reported that during the time he returned to serve as a doctor in Tortola he was sent for by a particularly rigorous master with a request to saw off the leg of a slave who had run away and then been recaptured.

In contrast to this type of brutality, it was reported that Governor John Pickering's slaves were treated kindly, and that they all mourned profoundly at his death. Governor Pickering's career documents one type of enlightened slave owner, not a common type, - the man who paid a wage, freed his slaves, and supplied land for most of them. Despite what we see as his virtues, however, the enlightened Pickering was unsuccessful in assuring survival for the small Quaker colony, and by 1780 even the informal quarterly meetings were no longer being held. There must have been a long lasting memory of Quaker morality, of course, since about the time the formal meetings died a certain Thomas Humphreys brought an introductory letter back to England signed by one of the residual Friends who remained on the island. This Quaker recommendation said Humphreys had done well, "*considering his youth and the many temptations such are incident to and the many bad examples they are surrounded with in this country, where pride and vanity almost universally prevails.*" In England it was the Quakers and the Methodists who led the religious push for total abolition of slavery, but although they tried, neither group was destined to be successful in freeing the slaves of Tortola.

So there was actually a small group of people, a remnant of Quaker pioneer colonists in Tortola in the midst of slave owning planters, and just how was Thornton tied in with them? At first he was connected through his parents and relatives, William, Dorcas, and the Pickering and Birkett families. Thornton was sent by Quakers to England to live with Quakers. Also reflecting the plantation background acquired in Tortola he once purchased a farm, a racetrack, and slaves. He readily paid John C. Calhoun 200 dollars for two

slaves. Tortola was also linked to Thornton because the island was a source for money, the production of the family estate. Even if he once planned to give his slaves freedom at the time of his demise, he did not do it. When he died in 1828 his estate amounted to slightly over \$69,000, a half-interest in the sugar plantation in Tortola, and his half share of 120 slaves. So Thornton was inseparably tied all his life to Tortola, and to the Tortola estate called Pleasant Valley. Its location is marked now only by rubble and tropical overgrowth.

What actually caused the demise of the Quakers in Tortola? The bottom line, as suggested above, may simply be that the Quakers of Tortola always lacked sufficient numbers to survive, never enough for a meaningful remnant. The absolute and overwhelming presence of slavery on the islands was no help in the survival of orthodox Quakerism either. According to Jenkins, in 1802 there were still as many as 155 ships plying their trade in slaves, and these ships were capable of carrying 40,000 black slaves per year, of which four-fifths still went to the British West Indies. There is no way Quakers could ever become the major group in the Indies, both because of their antislavery philosophy and because of the small number of members that remained firmly loyal to their stringent faith.

The British Parliament decreed liberation of all slaves in the West Indies in 1833, to take final effect on August 1, 1834. What happened to the population thereafter? By 1921 only 35 whites still remained in Tortola, and by then there were 3,952 Blacks on the island. All that was left of the Quakers were a few overgrown gravestones and many Blacks named Pickering. Tortola now has become a tourist site, but the island population is still largely African in descent, Caucasian in wealthy tourists.

The fundamental philosophy of the Quakers was always diametrically opposed to slavery, yet in colonial Tortola no one could escape its impact. The pleas of Mrs. Thornton's mother in Philadelphia for the return of her daughter along with her new husband, William Thornton, Jr., probably contributed to the young couple's desire to return to the USA, but after two years the newlyweds may also have become uneasy because of the potentially unstable and culturally limited slave environment of Tortola. There were extensively publicized insurrections on other islands. It is hard now for us to imagine there was a day, before the soil was depleted, that the Indies were considered more important to

England than all of England's more northern colonies combined. Thornton was born after that golden age of wealth in the Indies, certainly never golden for all of the inhabitants, had passed away forever.

In contrast to the West Indies with its almost total reliance on slave labor, slavery was slower to become widely established in the British colonies along the eastern seaboard of the United States, and not just slower in Quaker Philadelphia. By 1776, ninety percent of Blacks in the future United States lived in Virginia, Georgia, Maryland, or in the Carolinas, and although a few of these were officially free, ninety-five percent of the Blacks in these colonies were slaves. A freed former slave never achieved full equality with the Whites. It was the freed Blacks that Thornton most often wrote about, this was the most worrisome group for many Whites. Up until the 1840's even a black man who was free in the nation's capital was allowed to do little more than drive a carriage or perform menial labor. He could not legally organize or attend evening meetings, nor could he own an inn, nor could he found an industry. A few freed Blacks and many poor Whites, usually seeking land, wealth, and greater freedom, gradually moved farther and farther inland, and this sustained slow migration not only offered a safety valve for the ambitious, it also tended to leave the coastal areas of the southern United States predominantly black. Probably all Whites, whether located near coastal areas, inland, or in the islands, shared in the fear of a generalized Black revolt, and surely most Whites cooperated to resist insurrection and to maintain the status quo.

The unsettled times around the revolution of 1776 tempted the British to play the race card against the restless colonists of North America, beginning even before the edict of Lord Dunmore, Governor of Virginia in 1775, who promised freedom to any slave who would bear arms against the rebels. George Washington stated: *"Lord Dunmore should be instantly crushed, if it takes the force of the whole army to do it; otherwise, like a snowball in rolling, his army will get size, some through fear, some through promises, and some through inclinations, joining his standard: but which renders the measure indispensably necessary is the Negroes; for if he gets formidable, numbers of them will be tempted to join who will be afraid to do it otherwise."* Governor Dunmore, actually John Murray, the Earl of Dunmore, had dissolved the Virginia House of Burgesses in 1775 because they denounced the British closure of Boston

following the Boston Tea Party. Dunmore's next step was to impose martial law. By November of 1775 slaves had begun slipping away from the coastal plantations to join Dunmore's Ethiopia Corps. Three hundred of Dunmore's black men wearing shirts that proclaimed "*Liberty to Slaves*" defeated North Carolinian Whites marching north to join the new colonial militia of Virginia. The saga of the Blacks who decided to join the British was long and complicated, and became totally tragic for many. By the end of the prolonged British efforts to subdue the colonies, 10,000 Blacks still remained under the protection of the British. Citizens of the new country wanted indemnification for their losses, or else they surely wanted their slave property back to work the fields. The freed slaves who had cast their lot for the wrong side were usually still living with the British, and were rarely willing to return to their former masters. The issue of compensation or return of this unique property was discussed for decades. Thornton, well before he became a citizen in America, was keenly interested in the fate of such freed Blacks.

After the time of the American Revolution, Thornton was involved in pleas for African colonization by Blacks. Following the American Revolution at least three thousand freed Blacks under British protection were unloaded in Nova Scotia. The settlement there included an unstable mix of freed Blacks and former slaves, of the indolent and the industrious, of semi-skilled and non-skilled; and all had been placed on an inhospitable, rocky, and cold shore. In the colonies that eventually became the United States, as in the Indies, there had always been a hierarchy of slaves that included craftsmen, house servants, and laboring crews, all held in a paternalistic and severely restrictive society. By the time 1791 arrived, most of the now freed Blacks living in Nova Scotia had learned to call themselves farmers, but even so they were at best second-class citizens in this new land, and many welcomed a chance to migrate to Africa. The African land in Sierra Leone had been declared fertile, the climate was said to be comfortable, and the prospects were claimed to be unlimited for trade and progress. The intense desire of Blacks for freedom was often matched by their desire for a small personal farm, a farm of their own. Fear of eventual re-enslavement in America, awareness that true independence was impossible in a hostile White or southern environment, plus desire for new land and a better future, all ensured that many of the Blacks in Nova Scotia were ready for a move

to Africa. There were, we can see in retrospect, a series of developments during the middle and late 1700's that could well have ameliorated the blight of slavery. They did not. But it seemed hopeful for a time. A new country founded on the premise that all were equal, the British setback in the colonies, religious agitation about the slave trade, and a "*back to Africa*" movement on both sides of the Atlantic, all offered promise of a new world, a new freedom for all. In addition slave labor was, ultimately, to be discovered not commercially desirable.

What happened to the freed slaves who did "*return*" to Africa? That, after all, was what Thornton intended they do. Mary Clifford's book *From Slavery to Freetown* recounts the story of individual slaves who during the American Revolution sided with the British and Loyalists, black men and women who were destined to be unloaded first in Nova Scotia and then in Sierra Leone at the very area Thornton and others had always favored for their settlement. It was difficult with the climate and soil of Nova Scotia for anyone to thrive, but individual Blacks in the Canadian settlement managed to prosper, and, in retrospect, for many rocky and cold Nova Scotia turned out to have been actually kinder than humid and dangerous Freetown in Africa. The little colony in Sierra Leone at Freetown was beset with insects and disease, and particularly with malaria. Colonists were at risk of attack by the native Africans. Black pioneers in Africa suffered through six months of monsoon rains that rotted their food and ruined their tents. By the early 1800's, despite the death of many of the key leaders and even despite fiery dissent generated within the group by the Anglicans, Methodists, and Baptists, the colony finally did seem secure, even if always a bit shaky. One of the most poignant aspects in the planning for the colony of free Blacks in Africa is that it was deliberately placed close to a port where much of the slave trade occurred, and the frequent passage of slave trade ships with their misery, cries, and foul smells seemed ubiquitous to the new settlers.

The African colonization program, the plan to send Blacks to Africa, was originally encouraged by Henry Smeathman. He had met and written to Thornton, but Smeathman died before he could see the stuttering fruition of his idealistic project. Granville Sharp, a particularly determined abolitionist, but one who remained safely back in England, joined with Smeathman to launch the Sierra Leone Company as a philanthropic enterprise.

The planners always had a concurrent dream of potential profits from crops. They hoped for development of the African land and resultant trade in something other than human flesh. Farming was hard for the new pioneers, however. Some of the Blacks who landed in Sierra Leone became totally disheartened while they waited weeks to disembark, and all of them became at least intermittently discouraged in the strange and forbidding land of their ancestors. Blacks in the new colony believed they could adequately govern themselves, if they were only allowed to do so, whereas the English felt they themselves should, of course, run the company. Some wished to run it primarily as a successful business. Both groups had their separate dreams thwarted by rampant illness, poor leadership, and a fiercely hostile environment. Soon the British Parliament felt necessity to wade in, and this assured absolute control by the English proprietors rather than by the newly freed Blacks. How was Thornton involved in all the varied “*back to Africa*” movements?

Thornton was keenly aware of all these possibilities for slaves, and he corresponded extensively about them. He knew that Blacks from Nova Scotia had appeared in England to argue personally for development of a free society in Africa. A new free colony in Africa would serve as an example placed in the middle of the very area where slaves were being seized and would, or so Thornton suggested, strengthen the cause of freedom for all Blacks. Perhaps such a colony could also dampen the increasingly vociferous and socially disruptive abolitionists present in both England and America. The thrust for freedom for individual slaves, the presence of significant numbers of freed Blacks who were unwanted but who still lived in Philadelphia and Washington, British discussion of a total cessation of the slave trade, the rising demand generated from Quakers and Methodists for emancipation for all slaves, was going on at the same time Thornton was developing his personal attitudes about slavery.

As we have reviewed, Thornton left home as a privileged gentleman from a slave society, albeit a Quaker one. The economic success of Tortola, and his own economic survival, depended on slaves. In going to Quaker Philadelphia he had sought to join “*the land of the free.*” A major issue among many of the cultivated citizens he associated with was the move for African Colonization, for already freed slaves. There were multiple reasons Whites wanted freed Blacks to

go somewhere else. For one thing there was the problem of educational needs of the Blacks. Perhaps there was a feeling of “*let us have them anywhere but here.*” This dream of African colonization by Blacks sent from America, repatriation, wasn’t destined to die until after the Civil War. Even Lincoln was supportive. At the same time increasing numbers of citizens were suggesting total freedom as a possibility, a necessity. Just as fundamental attitudes about Blacks in both religion and in society were beginning to change, reports about the settlements in Africa were different than Thornton had hoped, as Thornton discovered from his correspondence.

Granville Sharp wrote Thornton in October 1791: “*Dr. Lettsom having informed me yesterday that in your last letter to him you expressed a desire to receive from me some accounts respecting the new settlement on the coast of Africa, for the sake of the poor free Blacks in America, it is necessary that I should acquaint you (as my apology for not answering your letter to myself) that I had long ago, on your first requisition, wrote out for you a very full account of the settlement, which probably never reached your hands: and having afterwards received similar applications from John Jay Esqr. in behalf of the poor Blacks at New York, and from the Revd. Mr. Hopkins in behalf of those at Rhode Island, I sent to both these gentlemen copies of the account which I had wrote for you, and several copies also of the printed regulations: so that the free-blacks of America have not wanted information on the subject; but I suppose the accounts they have since heard of the many disadvantages that the poor settlers have laboured under for want of pecuniary assistance, and all their subsequent misfortunes (having had the settlement burnt by the natives in retaliation for 2 towns of the natives which were burnt and plundered at the instigation of a slave dealer, by the marines and crew of an English man of war) may have probably prevented any further application from these gentlemen: and the inducements to go there are still further curtailed (at least I apprehend they will be deemed so in your esteem as a zealous lover of liberty) by the new act of Parliament in favour of the Sierra Leone Company; because the community of settlers, tho’ they are now again restored to their actual possessions in the settlement, are no longer proprietors of the whole district as before; because the land has been granted (since they were driven out) to the Sierra Leone Company; so that the settlers can no longer enjoy the privilege of*

*granting land by the free vote of their own common council; nor the benefits of their former agrarian law, nor the choice of their own governor and other officers, nor any other circumstances of perfect freedom proposed in the regulations which I drew up for them: for all these privileges are not submitted to the appointment and control of the company; and no settler can trade independently of the company."*

Why had Thornton reached out and then received this largely negative report from the one man who was most responsible for the struggling colony of free Blacks? Where did Thornton come from in his own dreams about freedom, and how far did he go with his repeatedly stated ambition to free all Blacks? This particular chimera, freedom for all, was first of all a lifetime dream of Thornton. After all, Lettsom, the mentor so admired by Thornton, had freed his own slaves even while living in Tortola. Since the late 1780's Thornton had maintained extensive correspondence with Lettsom and others regarding the feasibility of transferring all freed Blacks to Africa, as well as about potential contributions he himself might make to their welfare. Thornton felt he could "*raise some thousands of free good industrious people who were desirous of going.*" He apparently envisioned starting a new type of agriculture in Africa, and expected that "*in a very few years it would be superior to any West Indian state.*" Naturally, he fantasized a bit about profits for all the merchants involved, and for himself, as he discussed some of the same projects John Fothergill had mentioned decades earlier. It was in fact John Fothergill, the leading Quaker physician of his own time, who had first campaigned for the establishment of a free black society in Africa. Fothergill may also have been the first to suggest that such a settlement would help destroy the basis for slave trade in Africa through the example of successful black farmers, right there on the scene. Thornton knew of Fothergill, of course, but Fothergill's ideas were mostly honed and transmitted to Thornton through Lettsom. The letters from England were at times unrealistic, perhaps, but were deeply idealistic, as idealistic as were most of the Quakers of the time. Thornton went even further than others when he hypothesized that there was a large fertile region in Africa that was not being cultivated adequately, that it could be, and that it soon would be. He argued that the ultimate goal for the Africans was a truly free and independent settlement, rather than merely a harsh and unending struggle for



existence as one more colony subservient to England. Freetown does remain, even today, of course, and retains the same hopeful name. The original settlers were ancestors of some of the current upper class in Freetown but unfortunately conflict, privation, and poverty also still predominate in Sierra Leone.

Thornton, repeatedly, said that he himself would volunteer to stay in Africa “*for a few years*”, and pointed out that he already knew about tropical diseases because of medical experience on his home island of Tortola. Above all, the African settlement, as envisioned by Thornton, was to be designed for the good of all Africans, plus “*giving encouragement to the Blacks of this country.*” Thornton commented that it was well known that many of the Blacks in North America were at least as well acquainted with arts and manufacturing as was true of the Whites whom they served, and that these skills could serve the new pioneers well if they were successfully transferred to a truly free economy. Thornton also pointed out that most free Blacks, even the ones who lived in New England, had never been allowed to possess land, even though they were demonstrably capable of working the land. Many of the free Blacks in New England had stepped into freedom after having served as privileged house servants, and they had little opportunity in America as freed persons to do anything but just become lowly servants once again. Thornton, in one of the side comments that appear in almost every one of his letters, mentions his knowledge of unique botanical specimens for potential use in Africa, and in one letter he claimed to have located a special type of cotton that would be ideal for Africa. He stated that he could supply this and other plants that would surely flourish in Africa. Surely be productive. Surely make money. Wrong.

Thornton’s suggestion, offered very early on, was to place the black settlement right in Sierra Leone, just as was actually done by the other and more directly involved leaders. On July 26, 1788, in one of his many letters to Lettson, Thornton discussed the overall slave traffic. Typically, Thornton still would not allow himself to focus on any one subject. In the same letter he talks of a potential treaty with the Indians on the Muskingum in Ohio, of his desire to visit the newly opened mid-west in order to study its rich natural history, of his desire to see the romantic views of the wilderness, etc., etc. Despite such desires, so far as we know he neither visited the Africa that he wrote so eloquently about, nor did he ever visit the much-closer Ohio territory. Lettson

stated in a return letter of personal counsel to Thornton that it was indeed true that he himself had freed his own slaves in Tortola, but that his personal ideas had since changed. Lettsom was now less sure that immediate and total freedom was ideal. Lettsom suggested Thornton suspend any immediate decision to free his own slaves in Tortola, and opined *“freedom is not happiness, I doubt not whether absolute freedom would not be absolute misery.”* He noted that some of the West Indian Negroes who *“had been admitted to independence”* had become both indolent and impoverished. Admitted? In one note Lettsom implies that there is an inconstancy in Thornton’s own personality, and he doubts that Thornton could have sustained his interest or survived if he had actually been on the ground in Africa. Lettsom knew Thornton well. It was probably Lettsom, and perhaps also his Quaker friends, plus Smeathman, who had informed the youthful Thornton initially of the program to send Blacks to Guinea or to Sierra Leone. It was certainly Lettsom who clearly stated that one reason for the new emigration from London was that the local Blacks of London had been ordered to go. It was by no means entirely voluntary. The London streets must be cleared. Several hundred of the freed Blacks who were shipped to Africa did rapidly fall back into the hands of the slavers, and after re-capture were returned to what was probably an even more abject and hopeless slavery.

Thornton continued torn by his personal experiences in Tortola, with ownership of slaves on his own land, with awareness that others had successfully freed their slaves, and above all with the fundamental contrast between slavery and freedom. Thornton stated, *“When I was in England I thought the sugar sweet, but saw not the bitter tears that moisten the ground on which it grew; but when I had been awhile in my native country, and viewed the situation of Blacks, I regretted often that I was born a slave keeper.”* He stated that his desire to organize Blacks to go to Africa was in fact a God-given duty, and that nothing had the power to shake him from his desire to do so. Time did, of course. He did often mention, a bit more realistically perhaps, his concern for the finances of his family if the slaves were sent away, a family utterly dependent on slaves, and a family with whom his relationships were not always ideal.

One of the interesting sub-areas of the slavery story at the time was the consistent role of the Quakers in the march toward freedom for all Blacks, not just assistance for the Blacks who had already been freed. By 1790 many of the

Quaker congregations had specifically forbidden membership to anyone involved, in any way whatsoever, with either the slave trade or with slave ownership. Abolition of both the trade and of slavery itself, two separate issues at the time, was strongly supported by the Quaker establishment. Nevertheless, in order to produce sugar, Quakers utilized slaves not only on Thornton's plantation but elsewhere throughout the Indies. Sugar cane was the crop, and it was the business. Despite beginning and ending many letters with statements praising the Almighty, and making promises to follow what he perceived as God's wishes, Thornton was not consistently involved with the activities of his own church. He himself later stated, quite directly in fact, that he had turned from his earlier "*Quakerish*" ways. His early letters use "*thou*", but never the later ones.

Thornton was fond of elegant dress and manners, of aristocratic conversation and racehorses, and did not live at all in the style of the practicing Quakers. He was a gentleman of the age, albeit one with a troubled soul. Did he turn from the Quakers on the issue of slavery? Could it have been the fact that the more established Protestantism, the Church of England, was associated with the aristocracy he cultivated? Or was it a changing and more personal concept of divinity that eroded his loyalty to the church? His later papers do include many pages of discussion about divinity, God, and morality. Thornton cared a lot, and wrote a lot, about his concern regarding Heaven and the Almighty. Nevertheless, he himself did own slaves in Tortola and in Washington, and therefore was he - as was Jefferson - considered by some of his colleagues to be a hypocrite? John Quincy Adams, Thornton's neighbor next door, in particular, must have been uncomfortable in the presence of slaves and slave owners. Nevertheless it is known that Adams and his wife Louisa dined more than once with their friends, the Thorntons. Louisa often visited with Mrs. Thornton after the Doctor's death. For our time, and for most people, it is hard to imagine an elegant meal, with the abolitionist Adams couple as guests, while dinner was served by Thornton's slaves. There were multiple factors Thornton had to consider, including the attitude of others. But no matter how much or how long he considered, he was unable to make a complete break with his past in Tortola. Nor did he ever see his way clear to break with slavery in his own home in Washington.

Thornton's mother, along with her third husband and her other relatives and friends in Tortola, clearly did not wish to have their own, personally owned, slaves released by Thornton, nor released by anyone else. Of the slaves on the family plantation in Tortola at least 70 were officially the property of William, Jr., but the plantation still functioned as a single unit. Despite years of such discussion and pledges, through letters, pamphlets and memorials, then numerous meetings with free Blacks, as well as preparation of lists of prospective African settlers, there is absolutely no evidence that Thornton ever freed even a single one of his own slaves. The obviously conflicted portions of his spirit, which included the Quaker admonition for abolition, were never resolved. The possessions in Tortola, including the slaves, always remained the major continuous source of his income, and when his slaves were finally freed in 1834 by British law Thornton's widow received the official government cash settlement.

How really malevolent was the pattern of slavery in the Indies during the time of Thornton, how necessary was slavery for planting, and why was it so difficult to see that someday it would surely have to cease? One reason was money, the success of the crops tilled by slaves. The main exports of sugar, rum, and molasses were so successful that Barbados and the Indies were called "*that fair jewel of your Majesty's crown*" in 1666, and historical summaries for the 17<sup>th</sup> century state that the value of exports from Barbados alone was greater than that of any other British Caribbean territory – and for many years exports from the West Indies as a whole was unequivocally of more value than the total productivity of Massachusetts and New York. That began to change even before the American Revolution, and dramatically after the Revolution. As late as the American Revolution, France and England still maneuvered their ships in a fashion that documents that both governments still perceived the islands of the Indies as precious jewels to be held onto, or, even better, to obtain from another country.

The total economy of the Indies at the time of Thornton rested squarely on the backs of the slaves, but did include a hierarchy of slave tradesmen who could perform carpentry or masonry work and ranged down to slaves who worked only during the extended crop season. Even among the domestic servants there was a hierarchy of classes including some who dabbled in trade, medicine, or

witchcraft. In general, all the slaves were free from work on Sunday, and by 1826, about the time they were granted total freedom, they were also free from Saturday night to early Monday morning by British law. Some planters were “*enlightened*,” but the overriding concern was always to make a profit. Misbehavior, particularly petty theft, on behalf of slaves by slaves was rarely considered more than just a nuisance, in fact petty theft was almost expected.

Conspiracy, revolt, and insurrection were much deeper fears. During several hundred years of slavery in the Indies the owners were occasionally surprised to discover that it was the most skillful and privileged domestic slaves who were the most likely to lead a conspiracy. There is no question about what black slavery meant for the future for the population, at least from the ethnic point of view. By the 1960’s the entire West Indian population included less than 2% Whites. Even by the late 1600’s, the total of indentured white servants had decreased to 11% of the total white population and the few who had completed service to become small farmers were also soon squeezed out by the handful of powerful plantation owners. By the early 1700’s less than 100 men, all white of course, owned almost all of the land in the Indies and those same few also owned three quarters of the slaves.

Paternalism, human ties, and acts of kindness towards the slaves existed, but there are also plenty of examples of extreme cruelty to slaves. Such examples include the details in the report of the trial of Arthur Hodge, Esq., published as late as June of 1811 from Tortola, and presented by Richard Heatherington who was then the President of the Virgin Islands. The trial lasted from April 25<sup>th</sup> to the 29<sup>th</sup> and was triggered by the murder of a slave named Prosper. Testimony at that time reported beatings of slaves that had occurred until there was no black skin left across the back or down the legs of the beaten. Hodge punished black children under his care by pouring boiling water down their throats so that they became unable to swallow, and thus they died painfully. He hung children down under water until they became stiff and unresponsive. Hodge was notorious for administering what were called “*cart whippings*,” and was said over the years to have caused 60 men, women, and children to be flogged to death while strapped out on a cart in public. There was an emotionally charged atmosphere during the trial, and prosecutors were in fear of being assassinated by those who wished to protect Mr. Hodge. Hodge was

eventually executed by hanging, despite rioting by his white friends. William Dickson related similar stories, and offers the interesting Quaker argument that Blacks are morally superior to Whites because they have had to suffer more and that, in addition, they have suffered with so little provocation. Thornton's family was surely among those always fearful of revolts, and justifiably so.

Hilary Beckles reported that minor rebellions proliferated throughout the West Indies between 1790 and 1831, despite steady improvement in the condition of slaves as whippings were limited, murder forbidden, and a few efforts at education began. The Legislature of Barbados, in its report of the major rebellion of 1816, one that was possibly triggered by frustrated expectations of freedom, said 400 slaves had been killed. Nevertheless, in some respects the culture was indeed becoming more benign. By 1817, 77% of the Blacks in the Indies were not African-born, the majority of them were indigenous Creoles, many of mixed racial origin, and most had developed a sense of shared island culture. During these times there was clearly a move toward more humane treatment of Blacks by the Whites, and more Blacks surely received comfort from the island culture. In fact it was becoming a culture in which they clearly predominated.

Both the conflicted attitude of the Whites about slavery and the role of the organized church in the Indies are difficult to define, but the two are related. There was conviction by some Whites that Blacks simply could never learn "*The Christian Vision*," and it was also felt by many that Christians should never be made slaves. Thus education for the slaves was carefully limited during the 1600s and 1700s. Random killing of slaves always made one liable for a modest financial fine, but if a slave happened to die while being punished it was different, and for years there was no fine at all. Escaped slaves were not able to hide for long on the islands, the territory was simply too small. Some of the later slave insurrections in the islands were initiated by awareness among the slaves of the writings and Parliamentary efforts of William Wilberforce (1759-1833), for whom Wilberforce College in Ohio is named. For over a decade Wilberforce persuasively attempted to block illegal slave trading, and he was the leader in Parliament for gradual emancipation, a concept that was followed finally by his push for absolute and complete emancipation of all slaves. And do

it now. If the Quakers were the ones who so strenuously opposed slavery, then who supported it?

The Anglicans or Episcopalians, at least as represented in Tortola, tended to be the most accepting of slavery. They were the upper class, the true Englishmen, and they represented the establishment. The attitude of Quakers and Methodists, and then soon also the Baptists, became prickly for members of the upper class levels. Certainly the opinions of the Quakers and Methodists often differed from the views of the Church of England. As early as 1671 a founder of the Quaker sect, George Fox, had come to Barbados in person to plead for increased leniency toward Negroes. He recommended that owners let slaves go free after some years, or at least to free them if they had served faithfully. This perceived religious agitation prompted the white population of the Indies to change their laws regarding the Quakers, and they began to fine the Quakers if they did not attend militia drills, even if their religion ordered them to be avowed pacifists.

One early governor ordered the furnishings of the Quaker Meeting House to be thrown out, but the Indies were so far removed from England, so distant in overall philosophy from that of Wilberforce or Fox, that most of the Whites in the Indies felt they could ignore the largely ineffective local anti-slavery agitators. Many of the island's aristocrats felt that any Christian religious exposure, or partial freedom, was sure to be emotionally unsettling for Blacks, but at the same time numerous sects in Britain, in addition to the Wesleyans, now called Methodists, and the Quakers, sincerely wished to convert and free the slaves. The two most vociferous abolitionist groups, the Methodists and Quakers, went ahead and provided religious training for Blacks in the Indies, and so did a handful of Moravians. The founder of Methodism, John Wesley, felt his new "*method*" approach was actually a part of the true Anglican Church. According to Claude Levy, the Wesleyan tenet that all men were equal before God became particularly unsettling in the islands, and this wild Methodist and Quaker concept was one of the reasons that members of the more comfortable, classical, official, Anglican Church usually received more favorable treatment in the Indies than was true of the local Quakers.

Some changes in the laws of England encouraged the slaves. William Wilberforce, as late as 1815, finally managed to get a bill through the British

Parliament to require that each slave's name and description be recorded in a registry. The bill was intended to limit the sudden disappearance and random slaughter of slaves. Soon after this other laws were rapidly passed forbidding the use of whips on female slaves, and the legal system began to require a record of all punishments that were being administered. In retrospect, it may not be surprising that a slave revolt actually followed such liberalization, a rebellion not prevented by partial lifting of the chains nor softened by anticipation of eventual but far distant freedom. But the power structure could not take liberty lightly. In 1823 indignant slave owners demolished one Methodist Chapel because the new minister criticized continued overt abuse of slaves by the planters.

When particularly violent hurricanes swept through the Indies in the 1820s and again in 1831, and as money became desperately needed from England for repairs, the Imperial Government assumed total responsibility for the colonies. Following this the successful formal move to abolish slavery in the Indies became inevitable. Possibly slavery would eventually have been recognized as a less productive source of labor in agriculture than the work of free landholders, particularly as the single crop of sugar became less lucrative to cultivate and harder to sell to the United States than it had been to the Colonies. Nevertheless, the ultimate force that led to emancipation of the Blacks was lodged in the legislature.

Things were never so simple as just slave and master, or White and Black, or just two major political classes, however. There were others. In the frontispiece to his book entitled *The Unappropriated People* Jerome Handler quotes Governor Seaforth from a letter on June 6, 1802: *"There is, however, a third description of people from whom I am more suspicious of evil than of either whites or slaves: these are the Black and Coloured people who are not slaves, and yet whom I can not bring myself to call free. I think unappropriated people would be a more proper denomination for them, for though not the property of other individuals they do not enjoy the shadow of any civil right."* Gradations in phenotypic appearances existed on the islands ranging between Negroid and Caucasoid, somewhat similar to classifications used in New Orleans and other North American areas where for decades quadroons, octoroons, etc., were carefully defined. In general in the West Indies no one with any known



Negro ancestry, no matter how remote, could be considered White with regard to social and legal status. One of the common reasons manumissions, the awarding of freedom, did occur, however, was as a late favor to a slave mistress. It is probable that linkage with white men was one of the few ways a slave woman could achieve her own freedom and then perhaps even for her children, although such freedom was far from automatically assured. Another reason for manumission was to allow a planter to release a slave who had become non-productive.

It was into this complex and troubled world of Black, White, and Colored, that young gentleman William Thornton, Jr., was born. Despite any moral injunctions of his native Quakerism, as a member of the upper classes he was accustomed to nice things and to receive plenty of help. Nevertheless he did share the anguish of other articulate slave owners including Clay, Jefferson, and Madison. He was torn, as his adopted country was to be torn, over the best resolution of the peculiar problem of the age. It turned out that Thornton was naive about the resettlement in Africa, as were the other American leaders of the resettlement program, and all its original sponsors in England. All were also wrong even about the fabled fertility of the soil in Sierra Leone. In 2000 Sierra Leone was declared by the United Nations as the most impoverished nation in the world. The land was never likely to make a lot of money. Granville Sharpe eventually admitted that the once healthy mountains of Sierra Leone, an area largely depopulated by the slave trade, had soil that had become too depleted to farm.

Sharpe was also discouraged since he knew what had happened to the group of Blacks that had been planted back in Africa on May 9, 1787. By September 17, 1787 only 268 out of 441 remained. 122 had died of fever and 51 others had drifted away (Shyllon). Perhaps realistically after such reports, Sharp offered to Thornton a personal approach to achieve freedom for the slaves. In our view, admittedly over two hundred years later, this approach seems entirely reasonable. Sharp noted that there were free Blacks in the Dominican Republic, indeed in large measure free because they had achieved freedom through their own initiative, through shedding their blood. He suggested that it would be similarly useful for Thornton and others to help slaves succeed right where they were, rather than to remove them to a new and inevitably difficult settlement in

Africa. Perhaps the Blacks in Tortola, those Thornton so frequently said he wished were free, could be allowed to work as a group on one of the larger sugar estates and then divide the profits for themselves.

This suggestion is a bit reminiscent of what actually did happen in the Barbados when the Society for the Propagation of Christianity established a school, with an endowment, and proceeded within the school to educate a handful of slaves. This Christian school to educate slaves, despite any apparent inconsistency, continued to own a group of slaves until the law finally forbade it. Some individual slaves, usually ones considered very special to a planter, managed to inherit small plots of land as well as their personal freedom. Theoretically, at least, it does seem that Thornton could have struggled to promote the employment of all the free men in Tortola, right where they were. The handful of free Blacks in Tortola and elsewhere that had no real role in society was severely limited in opportunities for employment and education. Sharp pointed out to Thornton that the East Indian mode of cultivating sugar estates by free laborers had become more economical, actually more productive, than was true when slaves were used for labor. With a planned growth of freedom for all in Tortola there could be gradual enfranchisement of the entire island, and ultimately free men would do the work on the sugar estates. In the Indies, including in Thornton's own birthplace, this change would eventually occur but the great change really came suddenly through the English laws of the 1820's and 1830's, not through efforts by Thornton nor because of the enlightenment of any one of the dozens of planters.

Sharp's letters offered a real and practical challenge to Thornton, to bloom where he was planted and to help his slaves to do likewise, but this was probably not perceived as an adequately heroic, nor even a practical, solution at the time. Certainly it was not so perceived by young gentleman Thornton.

Even though he did not free his own slaves, Thornton's spirit was never fully at rest about what to do with them and as late as 1810 he was busy once again advocating a free state for Blacks – this time carved out of some part of the United States, or, how about placed in Puerto Rico? He suggested this in long pamphlets that reviewed the entire issue, pamphlets which have been reprinted by Gailliard Hunt. In Thornton's records there is a strongly negative reply to him in 1786 from J. Doty (Hunt), a representative of the House of Assembly in

Tortola in 1786: *“It is not extraordinary that a plan, which has for its object, the establishing a Colony of free Blacks, in a tropical climate, for the purpose of Cultivating the usual articles which are the produce of the West Indies, and promoting the Interests of Freedom among those people, should not be a very popular one in this Country. And some of the members of the Assembly seem to be of opinion that such an establishment should it be carried into effect and be successful, will eventually be highly injurious to the Interests of the West India Islands, and therefore ought not to be countenanced by them. . . I can conceive that the establishment of a Colony of free people of colour in Africa, may not only not be injurious to the Interests of the West India Islands, but may even be rendered beneficial to them, for if to the free Blacks who it is intended shall be removed from North America to Africa, the plan is so extended as that the free people of colour in the Islands may be added, the community without an Act of injustice might be disencumbered of a class of people, who it is universally acknowledged are highly injurious to its Interests... In this Island their legal right to hold property within it is a more liberal one than in most others, but even here they cannot possess more than eight Acres of Land nor more than fifteen Slaves. . . They are not eligible to the holding any publick office of trust, or profit, in many of the Islands, nor have they a Vote in the election of any publick officer, and in some of the Islands (particularly in the foreign) they are prohibited from following any but certain Trades and employments.”*

Such a letter did not prevent Thornton from proposing a series of policies regarding trade, land, holidays, a new law code, etc., for several prospective new territories. He did this, even with overall city plans, for areas in South America and Africa. Thornton was always crammed full of ideas that bubbled up about how something could be done. As an example, we can note Thornton’s presentation to the potential colonists from Pennsylvania to whom he offered a formal statement and plan: *“To the Black Inhabitants of Pennsylvania, assembled at one of their stated Meetings in Philadelphia. It is in Contemplation by the English to make a free Settlement of Blacks on the Coast of Africa, which they have already begun, and have purchased a Tract of Land twenty Miles square at Sierra Leone for the intended Settlers. They are desirous of knowing if any of the Blacks of this Country be willing to return to that Region which their fathers originally possessed, and finding many in Boston,*

*Providence and Rhode Island very desirous of embarking for Africa, wish also to be informed if any of the Blacks in Pennsylvania are inclined to settle there. They would on landing be entitled to Estates, or certain Tracts of Land, and possess them forever.*

*The Place intended for this Settlement is at the mouth of the River of Sierra Leone, which is navigable back 240 miles. It is situated in about 10 Degrees East Long: of Tenerif, and 8 Deg: North Lat: Sir George Young of the British Navy who visited this Place gives the following account of it. ‘St. George’s Bay, in which the first Township is formed, is, without exception, as fine a Harbour as any in the World; that the mountains abound with Brooks of fresh Water; and are covered with the most noble Forests of all kinds of Timber, and with perpetual verduer; that when he ascended those Mountains, and looked about him he had never been so agreeably struck before with beautiful Landscapes of Wood and Water; and that he found the Air so cool upon the Mountain that he could have borne his great Coat with pleasure.*

*The Blacks who form this Settlement should be a free and independent People, governed by their own Laws, and by Officers of their own election. Their Ports would be open to trade with the whole World, whereby they would have the Advantage of procuring every thing at the cheapest Rate, which would not be the Case were the Settlement monopolized as a dependent Colony, by any power either of Europe or America; but it is imagined the Slave Trade will be soon abolished, and that the Europeans and Americans will co-operate in the establishment of this laudable Undertaking.*

*It is requested that those who may be disposed to embark for Africa will sign their Names, Ages, Trades and Families, &c., in the following, or a similar manner.*

<i>Names</i>	<i>Ages</i>	<i>Trades</i>	<i>Families</i>
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*The immediate Exports from Africa to Europe would be Gold Dust, Ivory, Cotton, Dying Woods, Gums, Drugs, Spices, Fruits and Preserves, Wood for Cabinets, &c. Oil of Palms &c, Indigo, Tobacco, Rice and Wax; to America the same, except the four last Articles, but with the Addition of Cocoa, Coffee, Sugar & its products &c, as the Americans have no Colonies with which such productions would interfere. “*

Thornton, in a letter written in 1788, (Hunt) to Étienne Clavière, President de la Societe des Amis des Noirs stated: “...no difficulties ought to overcome the Minds of Men engaged in the Cause of Virtue. Liberty is now alive: Let her not die till she visit another Quarter of the Earth—You are not immortal, and know not who shall succeed you. The Sun shineth today—tomorrow may never come.—No political objection can be urged against the Plan.” Thornton quoted a letter sent to him in James Madison’s own handwriting, a man described by Thornton as: “— a Gentleman who does honor not to American only, but to Human Nature.” Madison, who owned slaves in Virginia said: “Without inquiring into the practicability or the most proper means of establishing a settlement of freed backs on the Coast of Africa, it may be remarked as one motive to the benevolent experiment that if such an asylum was provided, it might prove a great encouragement to manumission in the Southern parts of the U.S. and even afford the best hope yet presented of putting an end to the slavery in which not less than 600,000 unhappy Negroes are now involved.

*“In all the Southern States of N. America, the laws permit masters, under certain precautions to manumit their slaves. But the continuance of such a permission in some of the States is rendered precarious by the ill effects suffered from freedmen who retain the vices and habits of slaves. The same consideration becomes an objection with many humane masters ag<sup>st</sup>. an exertion of their legal right of freeing their slaves. It is found in fact that neither the good of the Society, nor the happiness of the individuals restored to freedom is promoted by such a change in their condition.*

*In order to render this design eligible as well to the Society as to the Slaves, it would be necessary that a compleat incorporation of the latter into the former should result from the act of manumission. This is rendered impossible by the prejudice of the whites, prejudices which proceeding principally from the difference of colour must be considered as permanent and insuperable.”*

By 1802 Thornton was suggesting that Spain be induced to sell the United States land for resettlement, speculating that “it would not . . . be difficult,” to cede Puerto Rico to the USA, and Thornton also proposes to allot land: “in the Settlement of our Western Limits of Louisiana” or else to offer a cash settlement to help free Blacks. He felt, or at least hoped, that free Blacks, including those

from the Indies, could do better in Puerto Rico than they had in Africa. In 1816 Thornton stated: *“Whatever is praiseworthy in Massa, is certainly praiseworthy in his Slave! ‘The Eye of Heaven is not blinded with Gold-Dust, and the Day of reckoning is drawing near.’”* This letter from Thornton to Henry Clay, Chairman of the Assembly for Promotion of the Establishment of the African Colony, who along with Thornton was a slave owner and also a founder of the Colonization Society, ends in a prescient last sentence about the United States: *“The East Indies will become independent of Great Britain—New Holland will become independent—The Cape of Good Hope will become independent, but all these speaking the English Language will give such advantages to our Commerce as to render us in a few years the most potent Nation in the World.”*

There was always the problem of how to pay for the freedom of those who were slaves, and how to assimilate them, leaving out the issue of the morality of slavery. Thornton had, of course, a few ideas on that subject as well. Thornton published *Political Economy Founded in Justice* in 1804, printed by his friend Samuel Smith. The writing is addressed as if to a dear friend. As always, he talks of more than simply how to pay for colonization, of course. He suggested that the national legislature should pass a law to require that every person who liberates a slave supply sufficient security to pay £10 per year for the maintenance of the liberated person, in case they happen to become a burden to society. He noted that the United States was doubling in numbers every 24 years and that by 100 years might have as many as 100,000,000 people. Thornton included an argument that public roads, bridges, canals and ferries basically all belong to the public, and he suggested that such ownership is a natural right for our citizens.

Washington, in the last month of his life, wrote to Thornton, and agreed with at least part of Thornton’s political philosophy and probably also about slavery. It is true that Washington freed his own slaves after his death. After mentioning Washington, Thornton finished this particular section of his letter by saying: *“We have all but a short time to live, and must always remember that we cannot return to correct our works, nor finish what we leave unfinished. The mind that is conscious has been penetrated by the piercing eye of divinity and awakens to a new existence. The soul that is pervaded by the divine essence is a soul burning with a fervency of divine affections; and happy, unexpressedly*

*happy are they who feel, who acknowledge, and who extend this influence to the world.”* He argued in this treatise that it would be a great reflection and model for all virtuous governments if, under the wings of the American eagle, nations of white, red and black men could live together in peace, fraternity, and in happiness. *“The climate is so variable that any constitution can find a place where they would be comfortable.”* Nevertheless, Thornton again suggested that a special asylum area should be prepared for the freed Blacks, a place they could live. He argued that if they remained among the Whites they could never forget that they had been slaves and they might: *“occasionally be vainly fond of asserting all the rights of acquired liberty. . . The whites, who had been accustomed to implicit obedience, might occasionally forget that it was no longer due.”*

What is the real record of the African settlement that had so attracted the attention of Thornton? This was the settlement begun before initiatives from the United States ever established Liberia, and most of such later initiatives came after the death of Thornton. Mary Louise Clifford’s writing brought back to memory individual black leaders that we can still admire, but she also recounted disaster after disaster that befell them in their little colony at Sierra Leone. Hordes of insects, stifling heat, and incessant rain turned out to be no less fearsome than attacks by the African neighbors who went far beyond being just unfriendly to the new black settlers. Indigenous natives continued to sell their less fortunate neighbors to the slavers who could occasionally be seen from the free settlement as they herded their produce onto ships and out of the nearby harbor. The sick of the colony, and almost all did become sick, received little useful medical care. The original settlement program included indolent Blacks taken from the streets of London, beggars in fact, as well as tough farmers from Nova Scotia. There were people with all types of health and social problems, and the total group of ex-slaves clearly represented a clumsy hodgepodge of those motivated to advance, mixed with those who were simply dragged off the streets into the forbidding wilderness. How could such a place truly be expected to succeed? And it didn’t.

Dissent between the black settlers of Freetown and their largely white leaders further complicated affairs in the colony, a colony born out of unrealistic idealism and through abolitionist sentiments. The few doctors available had had

no previous experience with local diseases, or the doctors themselves rapidly became alcoholic and succumbed to drink, or else they also fell ill with the other so prevalent diseases. This entire struggling group of ex-slaves and white leaders was basically the same colony Thornton had earlier discussed so glowingly in his letters. He may well have offered to go as a physician, but the non-practicing Dr. Thornton never made any firm move in that direction, and it is doubtful he could have helped.

His efforts would never have been profitable to him from an economic view, even if he could have lived long enough to be of any true service. Clifford's book quotes letters from Granville Sharp, the man whose idealism helped initiate the project, and there are letters by Thornton regarding Smeathman who had also frequently offered to conduct free Blacks to Sierra Leone and to run their colony – for a fee. It was Smeathman who had particularly pushed the concept that Freetown was in a balmy climate, a place where it was possible to obtain an easy livelihood from fertile soil. Smeathman himself died before he made any substantial contribution to the settlement, except that he had aroused the people of London about the possibility of support for such a colony. There were, at the time, hundreds of freed Blacks on the streets of London. Some had come as servants for British officers, others had gone to London with hopes of freedom, and a few had become simply beggars. The ship to Sierra Leone left at the same time that convicts were being similarly sent to Australia, and being sent for much the same reason, to clear London of a people no longer welcome. William Thornton's soul, so full of personal anguish about slavery, did encourage the fervor of others to create a special place to send Blacks. He was not alone in his anguish, many in Britain also devoutly wished for the success of the settlement. But then there were surely also many others who simply wanted the Blacks gone, out of sight, out of England.

Thornton was never alone in his dreams about colonization, and the pressures for change were increasing everywhere. If he was born in 1759, and if, as reported by him in a letter to Henry Clay, he met with free Blacks in Rhode Island as early as 1786 to encourage their colonization in Africa, then Thornton agonized all of his adult life in America about how to solve the slavery issue. His solution rested entirely on his hope for colonization, movement of the Blacks to some other place. Already by 1773 the Rev. Dr. Samuel Hopkins of Rhode



Island, prompted by his intense missionary zeal, was discussing the issue of colonization and Thornton is known to have met personally with Hopkins. Rhode Island can claim the first legal protest against permanent forced service, since in 1652 the General Court of Commissioners for Rhode Island declared all indentured servants, white or black, were free after 10 years of service. The first religious anti-slavery protest in America occurred as early as 1688, led by the Quakers of Germantown, Pennsylvania, and in 1713 Quakers formally suggested the freeing of slaves and returning them to their “*homeland.*” By 1775 numerous church resolutions had declared that no Quaker could hold slaves and still remain in good standing within the church fellowship.

Several states made similar moves toward freedom, or toward a reverse colonization. Many national leaders, including particularly Jefferson, Madison, and Clay, were always eloquent spokesmen for freedom. Many of these, including Madison, whose will awarded two thousand dollars to the Colonization Society, regarded colonization and Negro resettlement as a steadily increasing and desirable enterprise. (Anthony) Jefferson’s shifting views of color, colonization, and even his views regarding a putative intrinsic inferiority of the Negro, have been discussed by many biographers. Jefferson, while he was president, was effective in reducing the slave trade; but his position most consistently was for future emancipation with rapid expatriation of the freed Blacks. It may be that it was when Thornton, as young adult, fully realized he had actually inherited slaves in the West Indies that he first consulted with Reverend Hopkins, and Hopkins may have encouraged Thornton to think beyond expatriation for the already freed West Indian Blacks and plan to include all Blacks living in Tortola. Thornton, according to Brissot and Standenmaus, felt sure, however, that Blacks would never have a permanent place in American society: “*This ardent friend of the Blacks is persuaded that we cannot hope to see sincere union between them and the Whites.*” During these discussions Thornton did not persuade the Massachusetts legislators to appropriate money for his planned colony, nor was he successful in efforts to obtain support from the French or British. But he continued to try to build support in America. He never succeeded.

Although less famous than several others among the organizers, Thornton was one of the original charter members of the American Colonization Society,

formed in 1816, and Thornton remained one of its “*managers*” until his death. Henry Clay presided at the early meetings and Clay made sure that only freed Blacks, not current slaves, were the major group to be considered for emigration. Many prominent figures, F. S. Key and John Randolph, for example, were among the other founding members of the Colonization Society. Bushrod Washington, heir to the General, was a significant early presence in the movement that always pushed for colonization for freed Blacks, not for slaves. After a relatively few years motivations and potentials for the society seemed more and more uncertain and the political problems and ambivalence of the group produced a gradual decline. Did the early slave owning members of the Colonization Society really only want a troublesome element, the freed Blacks, to be removed? Was all of this only a plot to raise the overall value of slaves? Why would a freed Black be better off if he was sent away from the land of his birth? Did slavery seem inevitable, with justifications offered readily by the owners? Even if President Monroe could obtain a slight amount of federal support, and he once did, would an African colony made up of American Blacks ever be truly viable? Senator Thomas Hart Benton later said, “*the drunkards died the first year, the sober ones died the second or third,*” and could anyone at all withstand the fevers?

The story of the nation of Liberia, destined to declare its independence in 1847, reflected more than just the efforts of the American Colonization Society, and its history was played out well after Thornton’s life. Even up until the time of President Lincoln tentative plans to move thousands of newly freed Blacks somewhere else, in Lincoln’s time it was to Haiti, remained a topic for serious governmental discussion. Thornton deserves credit, lots of it, for his early and consistent insight, his writings, and his articulate effort to enhance national awareness of the magnitude of the problem. Nevertheless, neither he, nor anyone else, could have guessed what one of the major difficulties in “*colonization*” would turn out to be. Negroes, freed or slave, were simply not willing to leave America for an uncertain African colony. Why should they be willing? The diehard abolitionists did not necessarily want them to leave, what they wanted was for all Negroes to achieve full equality, and the abolitionist views soon became a force to be reckoned with. Missionary zeal, and the zealots, if you will, gradually shifted from a push for colonization for a few, to

one of total emancipation for all. White support, white dollars, were more limited than expected, and sustained congressional financial help was required if an African American colony was to be successful. Such support was never forthcoming. Fierce religious enthusiasm and the insistence on complete abstinence from alcohol was not, it would appear, sufficient comfort when a person was isolated and in such a remarkably hostile environment.

The American Colonization Society withered after 1840, and then died after 1865. One of its more articulate later presidents had a last name Thornton would have remembered well, J. H. B. Latrobe, the lawyer son of the man who once sued Thornton; and Latrobe in 1862 (Wickstrom, page 46) said: *“But it does not appear that any of them [early advocates of African colonization] even among the statesmen we have named [Jefferson, Madison, Randolph, Harper, Mercer, Clay] appreciated the great truth on which in fact, the whole scheme depended upon for success,”* and which was, that *“two free races, between whom amalgamation, by intermarriage, was impossible, could never occupy the same land in peace, on terms of social and political equality. This, which may be regarded as a fixed and absolute law of races, has been gradually and slowly developing itself in this country, and in this connexion, during the last forty years. There was little or nothing in 1816 to suggest it.”*

The younger son of the Latrobe that Thornton knew was in error. Perhaps the real reason he was wrong, and that any major role for the Colonization Society was destined to fail is that there is a continual revolution in America, a continual new growth of freedom in America. In the midst of failures and setbacks there is ample evidence in America that the two races can, and now do, live together. Even intermarriage is by no means impossible and is no longer uncommon in America. It is no more impossible than the poorly hidden intermixture always was. Perhaps the Quakers were perceptive, even correct, and the peculiar suffering of Blacks assured them a right to both greater virtue and greater reward at some future time. Perhaps the Blacks had more moral right to the land they helped build than did any other group. At any rate they did choose, when free to do so, to stay and to belong in full. They chose to be free and equal under the law. After all, Jefferson once said, *“I tremble for my country, when I reflect, that God is just; that his justice cannot sleep forever.”*

We can credit Thornton with eloquence and sustained effort in stating the problem, a problem left for others and for time to solve, and we are aware of the absolutely astounding changes as we look back. Surely we will see equally remarkable, and unpredictable, progress as we move forward.

## CHAPTER 4

# City of Washington and Thornton

**The “Federal City” was placed where it is by means of a compromise between the North and the South.**

**Philadelphia was, for some, a more logical location and it served as capital until 1800.**

**Land was acquired through negotiation and purchase, with Washington himself actively involved.**

**The original official size of Washington City, 10 miles square, reflects the expansive vision of the first President.**

**L’Enfant is properly credited with broad avenues and beautiful vistas, but he was troublesome and finally dismissed.**

**For decades the City was barely a country town, and marshes and underbrush predominated.**

**Rampant speculation in land and lots led to bankruptcies for many.**

**Thornton was appointed Commissioner in 1794, and with that appointment began his life in public service in Washington.**

Slavery in all its nefarious ramifications was a lifetime concern for Thornton, but his real life’s work was in a different subject than slavery, and in a different place than Tortola. The place was Washington, and he was interested in the town from the initiation of what was first called the “Federal City”.

Thornton cared, and probably cared a lot, how, where, and when the Federal City would be established. There were numerous major decisions, but one of the first was simply: **Where should the capital be?** Thornton was not involved in that decision, but he did care about most of the other issues as the capital began to arise from the near wilderness. Only from the historical point of view was it logical for the Federal City to be placed on the East Coast. The land beyond the

Allegheny Mountains was difficult to settle, the Indians were fierce and determined, and Eastern settlements were slower to develop than was true of settlements a century later on both sides of the Rockies. In 1790, only the securely settled fringe east of the Alleghenies could possibly have housed the new capital. In November of 1779, Dr. Benjamin Rush, the prominent physician and famous patriot who lived in Philadelphia, stated that members of Congress were talking of purchasing a few square miles of territory near the Village of Princeton, N.J., where they planned to erect public offices and buildings as the permanent home for the government. Nevertheless the name of our largest city, Philadelphia, still appeared more often than that of the far less accessible Princeton as the logical site for a capital city.

Other sites vied for attention. Kingston in New York, as well as New York City itself, was suggested. William Floyd and Alexander Hamilton sponsored, in May of 1783, an offer for Annapolis, Maryland, to become the national capital. This offer had been "*unanimously approved*" by the citizens in that town, or at least approved by the citizens who were consulted. It was claimed that Annapolis was more central than any other city or town in the federal states. The legislators of New Jersey got on board the recommendation train on the 19<sup>th</sup> of June, 1783, adding that they: "*Will invest them with such jurisdiction, authority and power over the district of 20 square miles as may be required of Congress, and as is necessary for the honor, dignity, convenience and safety of that august body.*" This group also offered hard cash. People of Nottingham, at the head of navigation of the Delaware River, felt that their location was surely the ideal one. Citizens of Virginia, in June 1783, suggested Williamsburg to Congress and offered: "*To present the Palace, the Capitol, and all the public buildings and 300 acres of land adjoining the said city, together with a sum of money not exceeding £100,000 from this state's currency, to be expended in erecting 13 hotels for the use of delegates in Congress.*" The state legislature of Virginia also suggested the use of any location, and surely it must be one that was somewhere in Virginia, along the Potomac River. It was clear that the ultimate decision had to be made on the basis of the northern versus the southern states, and it is not surprising now that the line of demarcation was eventually drawn almost exactly where the Civil War boundary became obvious 100 years later.

So, what places appealed most to the decision makers? Washington himself noted that it would be difficult for meetings to occur at Princeton since Congress could hardly find adequate space in Nassau Hall at Princeton College. The temporary plan for two capitals, one at Georgetown and the other below the falls of the Delaware, offered no advantage to anyone. Another factor that played a role as the debate sharpened was whether the Susquehanna or the Potomac was the major body of water near which our capital should be placed, which river was best for canals, and which area was best for an eventual arrangement to get around the falls and rapids. At the time, the Potomac Company for canal construction was far ahead of any similar efforts on the Susquehanna River. And, although he would probably have denied any relevance, George Washington was part of the Potomac Company. A compromise of some sort was needed.

Philip Brooks has written eloquently regarding the compromise that did occur in 1790, a compromise that assured our capital city was placed right where it is today.

Brooks also explains the failure of all later efforts to move the capital. There was the matter of the Potomac fever of George Washington, but also strong support for the same area by all the Virginians, including, of course, Madison and Jefferson. We can see, over and over again, George Washington's incessant attention to details during the development of the capital site from before July 1790 even up until his death in 1799. He always cared, and surely cared from the start, just where it was to be located. The city became, in fact, his most felicitous monument. And ultimately it was placed right where Washington wanted it. The future location of the capital had been observed by him (*World's Work*, page 191): “. . . when as a youth he camped with Braddock on the hill where the Naval Observatory now stands.”

Jefferson engineered the compromise that located the capital city on the Potomac, or at least some have so claimed, in June of 1790. Jefferson's own account, as recorded by Hunt on page 277, confirms the story. Jefferson himself supplied more than one version of the episode (Yazawa, in Kennon). Alexander Hamilton, Secretary of the Treasury and the leading proponent of a strong central government, recognized the tremendous pressure at the time to solve the issue of states' debts, and he sought Jefferson's and Madison's help in getting

southern support for the federal government to assume the debt of all the states. Madison met with the Massachusetts delegation and promised them the Southerners would no longer block assumption by the federal government of prior debts still hanging over from the Revolutionary War. The debt issue affected the northern states the most, since the Southerners had already paid off their debts from the War. Pressure for a central government, for an over-arching federal system, was more apparent in the North than in the traditionally more autonomous and more rural states of the republican South. The compromise engineered by Madison and Hamilton, apparently devised when they met at dinner with Jefferson, was that Madison would guarantee the necessary southern votes in exchange for approval of national assumption of the debts of all the states. At the same time, in payback, Madison wanted assurance that the capital would be placed on the Potomac. Each individual powerful senator was contacted, and insofar as possible a snippet of personal benefit was offered to each. The most prominent southern leaders in Congress were clustered in origin from around the area of the future Washington City. The ultimate compromise that was hammered out, with great difficulty, was ten years of temporary residence of a capital based in Philadelphia, with eventual move to an area near the Potomac River. This doesn't sound like a big issue in retrospect, but at the time there were enough potential areas of conflict over the issue to disassemble the fragile Union. As documented in his diary, John Adams was one who understood that a location on the Potomac, one near the homes of the powerful Virginia contingent, would best preserve the infant union and would tend to bind the North to the South, and bind the East to the West. Hazelton (page13) in 1897 wrote: *"By the building of the capital of the states upon its banks, the Potowmack has fulfilled the Indian prophecy in its name: 'The river of the meeting of the tribes.'"*

The inhabitants of Pennsylvania, including of course Benjamin Rush, in the first decade of our Union, continued to argue for a permanent capital in Philadelphia, but after the Capitol and President's House were burned in 1814, citizens felt that to move the capital following such British depredation would compound the disgrace. Probably nothing solidified America's commitment to the City of Washington as completely as did its destruction by the British. This was not, of course, what British generals would have anticipated.



When the Civil War finally broke out, the City of Washington was close to the South, close enough to be relatively tolerant of slavery. Proximity to Virginia meant the United States had to repossess control over ports near the District of Columbia, many of which had been returned to Virginia during discussions of the preceding decades. The United States then went out of its way early in the war to seize the property that belonged to Confederate General Robert E. Lee and the daughter of George Washington Parke Custis, and established the Arlington National Cemetery on the site.

With selection of the capital location, and its official title, the name of Washington was permanently enshrined in the history of our capital. Washington City might well be called, as it was at its beginning, the “*the hobby-horse of, perhaps, the most illustrious man that ever lived,*” but it was only after the Civil War that Washington’s beloved city assumed the appearance and importance dreamed of by the early leaders. Those leaders included not just Washington, but also Jefferson, Madison and, of course, the designer L’Enfant. And the canals, what became of them? In fact, by the time of the Civil War the Great Falls of the Potomac still remained largely untrammelled by the canals Washington planned (Achenbach), and the overall economic growth of the District of Columbia had accelerated primarily in response to the needs of the government, not those of commerce. Finally, at least, there was no longer any question that Washington was indeed the permanent capital of the United States.

James Madison, in particular, had always wanted the capital to be “*centrally*” located and cited the examples of the states of Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina, all of which had gone through great effort to reposition the location of their initial capitals in order that each could eventually be placed more centrally. In addition to problems with Yankee pressure to have the national center north of the southern states, there was also the issue and the uncertainty as to whether or not the future western states might eventually choose to have a totally separate union, in which case the South might well decide to join them. Individuals as prominent as Noah Webster and Thomas Jefferson more than once discussed the idea of disunion, a concept not to be settled for decades, and then by blood. For years some felt a city on the Potomac River would always be too far down South to serve as a true capital for the



Map of proposed location for a national capitol. (McNeil)

northern states. Not placed too far eastward, but clearly too far south. But ultimately it worked.

So the location gradually became clear, but other problems were far from solved, including: **Who has the land, and how do you get it from them?** General Washington was careful to involve local leaders in planning for the new city. These included Colonel Williams Deakins, and Benjamin Stoddert, both residents of George Town who held strong opinions about exactly what the limits of the city might ideally be, as well as about what sort of agreements were to be made with the existing property holders. There was major concern about the collection and dispersal of revenues that might derive from the sale of what was still considered private property. As reviewed by W. B. Bryan, Washington wanted to avoid undue conflict, and his effort is documented in several of his letters. Washington stated that he was asking in particular for wide publicity regarding an absolutely public sale of lots “to prevent any kind of speculation.”

Several of the private land holdings were indeed quite large, including those of prominent families such as the Carrolls and the Notleys, both of which continued to be forces to be reckoned with. Families in the area had been linked for years by extended blood and marital ties. Most of the towns along the Potomac River had had their beginning generations earlier, primarily for the shipping of tobacco, the staple for trade at the time. Tobacco even served as a direct medium of exchange throughout the district. Some of the roads in the area were developed primarily to roll the barrel shaped hogsheads of tobacco, and these pathways were sometimes called “*rolling roads*.” The main road through the district at the time was still the one known as the George Town-Bladensburg Road. Bladensburg was destined in 1814 to be the location for the defeat of our national militia at the hands of the British as they marched down that very road to burn Washington.

General Washington knew the area, and was personally acquainted with many of its inhabitants. From 1770 to 1772, and again in 1774, Washington had ridden horses over all the wooded area, and made a particular study of the country lying west of the navigable portions of the river. Through marriage, surveying, and entrepreneurship, Washington owned 60,000 acres by 1789. (Di Giaomantonis) Mount Vernon was south of the area proposed for the capital but Washington had acquired extensive land holdings out to the west, and had been interested in the entire region since his time as a surveyor and later during his service in the Virginia Militia. Washington recorded his personal dream that the Potomac become the major: “*channel of commerce between Great Britain and that immense territory*.” After all, his home was on the Potomac. Following several false starts, the Potomac Canal Company began, with Washington as its President in 1785. When he became President of the nation he gave up his responsibility for the canal, and soon also committed himself to surrender his personal shares in the enterprise. The Potomac Company did successfully build canals around Little Falls, Great Falls, Seneca Falls, and also around Shenandoah and House Falls. The biggest problem, particularly above the Georgetown area, was that there was simply not enough water for predictable commerce on the river, excepting during certain times of the year. Bladensburg was located at the head of navigation at the eastern branch of the Potomac, but

this port was on the lesser branch of the river, even if location of the river branch at Bladenburg did offer the most direct access to the district by land.

Washington avoided, so far as we know, offering overt or written pressure for one or another precise site for the capital but he clearly was strongly in favor of its eventual Potomac site, and as soon as it was chosen, he began actively arranging with the landowners to anchor the capital city of the new republic. He met personally with most of the people involved in the effort to convert private property into public possessions. This was not easily done, and acquiescence was far from automatic.

The virginal establishment of a federal city was a totally new undertaking for a democracy. St. Petersburg in Russia had been established through the will of a single strong hereditary ruler. The American leader, an elected official with only eight years to serve, had to deal with national and sectional feelings, as well as conflicting ambitions within the citizenry, and there were markedly divergent goals and interests of the inhabitants already lying within the limits of the town. Washington seems as much as anyone to have visualized the potential size needed for the capital and he insisted on at least the ten miles square. He stated on May 7, 1791: "*Philadelphia stood upon an area of three by two miles, and if the metropolis of one state occupied so much ground what ought that of the United States to occupy?*"

What were the major private land holdings that were present in the area, and who owned them? One was certainly the site of the current Tudor Place, on property that was purchased by Francis Loundes in 1794 from Thomas Beall, who was part of the large and financially successful Beall family that dealt in tobacco. Mr. Loundes in turn sold the property in 1805 to Thomas Peter of George Town and his wife, a relative of Martha Custis, and she decided to use the money left to her by General Washington to build a stately mansion, seeking the services of Dr. William Thornton as architect. The Thorntons became intimate friends of the Peter family, and on the terrible day when the British soldiers set fire to the Capitol in August of 1814, Mrs. Thornton and Mrs. Peter were watching from the dining room between the main building and the western wing while their beloved and still new Capitol building went up in flames.

There were many successful "*people of property*" in nearby George Town, and the property lines overlapped those of Washington. Before all of the

excitement of construction of the federal city was well underway, George Town was already an established city. George Town, spelled early as either one word or two, began on the location of the Indian village of Tahoga, visited in 1608 by Captain John Smith. Most of the major landowners lived in either George Town or in Alexandria.

Possibly the first truly major owner of land in the early Colonial era was Colonel Ninear Beall, who had been Commander in Chief of the provincial forces of Maryland. Beall patented, or claimed, at least 795 acres that he called Dumbarton, perhaps thinking of the Rock of Dumbarton near Glasgow. Some of the first settlers were indeed Scots and for a while the area was called the New Scotland Hundred. In 1751 the area of the Rock of Dumbarton, by then owned by a son of the original settler who had also acquired surrounding lands, was accepted as the nucleus for what was to be called George Town. Early nineteenth-century George Town, which could initially have claimed much of the land of the entire federal district, had a resident population of over 5000 whereas colonial Williamsburg at the same time had a population of only 3000. By 1789 Georgetown College, with the city name now often presented as a single word, had been founded by Bishop John Carroll. Most of the visiting leaders who had to spend a night in the area of the capital wisely chose to spend it in cultured Georgetown rather than in what seemed to most still just an unkempt wilderness off toward the east. This near wilderness became the city called Washington.

Yes, numerous owners already had farms in the area, but much of the land did remain undeveloped. It is hard to turn back the clock and imagine trees, animals, and brush where there are now broad avenues and classical public buildings. Even if you could persuade landowners to part with their farms, which developed areas and which undeveloped lands were to be the major ones acquired? For everyone, and even for Washington, it was uncertain at first exactly where the center of the district should be placed. As late as February 3, 1791, Washington stated: *“The competition for the location of the town now rests between the mouth of the eastern branch and the lands on the river below and adjacent to Georgetown. In favor of the former, Nature has furnished powerful advantages. In favor of the latter is its vicinity to Georgetown – these advantages have been so poised in my mind as to give it different tendencies at*

*different times.*” Some portions of the land had by then already been committed to public use, but the land of David Burnes and even portions of Daniel Carroll’s land were not at all easy to acquire as official public lands. The Commissioners, Washington, and the other official planners, were also limited to the use of only funds that had been appropriated by Virginia and Maryland. A fixed rate to pay landowners, a rate that was largely adhered to with the exception of a few individuals who successfully demanded a bit more, was set at \$67 per acre or £25 British money. Indeed much of the land was sold for less than that and when possible, as could be done under Maryland law, some of the land including one parcel of as much as 130 acres was just taken over by traditional eminent domain. This process could be done, legally, with a fixed price awarded to the owners. This was surely a busy time for General Washington and his three Commissioners. Others were busy trying to launch real estate enterprises in the new city, and during this time Andrew Ellicott (1754-1820) was appointed to survey the district and Charles Pierre L’Enfant (1754-1825) was employed to prepare the original plan for the city.

Spofford, in his review prepared as part of the Celebration of the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Founding of Washington, reports regarding the purchase of lots: *“Robert Morris, with Nicholson and Greenleaf, bought up all that could be had, either from the Commissioners or from private owners; that the Morris syndicate ( to use a term not then invented ) purchased 6,000 lots from the Commissioners, and nearly as many more from individuals, the whole purchase being nearly \$1,000,000; that the bargain was made in 1793, on seven years time, one seventh to be paid annually; that they were bound to erect 120 brick houses of two stories, within the seven years, but were not to sell any lots before 1796, without a like condition of building on them....Thomas Law bought from Morris 445 lots paying nearly \$300 a lot.”* Land fever and speculation soon ran high, and Law, classed by some as the wealthiest man in the District, eventually lost much of his wealth, and Robert Morris – at least for a time – even lost his freedom when he was sent to jail for his debts. Spofford documents the failure to sell lots, and the slow growth of the settlement. As of 1796 there was not a single house on Pennsylvania Avenue between the Capitol and the President’s House.

Burnes may have embodied the type of conflict that continued to affect planning in the city for decades. What is public, what is private, and who decides? Burnes owned much of the land that now lies between the President's house and the Capitol and apparently he wanted all major public buildings located right on his property. He also wanted to keep the rest of the land for himself. Those who owned land closer to Georgetown as well as those near the eastern branch, located in what was then called Carrollsburg, also wanted the primary center of the city to be right in their area. It was often Washington himself who had to work one-on-one with the individual property owners before any formal agreement could be reached. Jefferson, who was willing to make do with a city one-fourth of the size George Washington planned, actually did make a rough sketch of a diagram for a city area adapted to adjoin the Georgetown area. Jefferson's plan included a rectangular system for the streets, in contrast to the open spaces and rounded lines that L'Enfant chose, the plan that now characterizes the city. Jefferson, as much as any of our leaders, did encourage a national network of a grid of squares that is apparent in the western states as one flies overhead, but his grid concept did not prevail in Washington. Jefferson's plan for the capital suggested an area, reflecting one that later became known as the Mall, to connect the President's House and the Capitol. We have to remember that when the original plans were underway, much of the land we now call the Mall was boggy and totally unsuitable for buildings. By the 7<sup>th</sup> of April 1791, when President Washington began a tour of the southern states, and following his numerous visits to Georgetown and Alexandria and the General's personal visits to the majority of the landowners, the outlines of the city did finally become clear. Washington wrote Jefferson that all the principal landowners had agreed: *"And it is not doubted, that the few who were not present will readily concur in the measure, even the obstinate Mr. Burnes."*

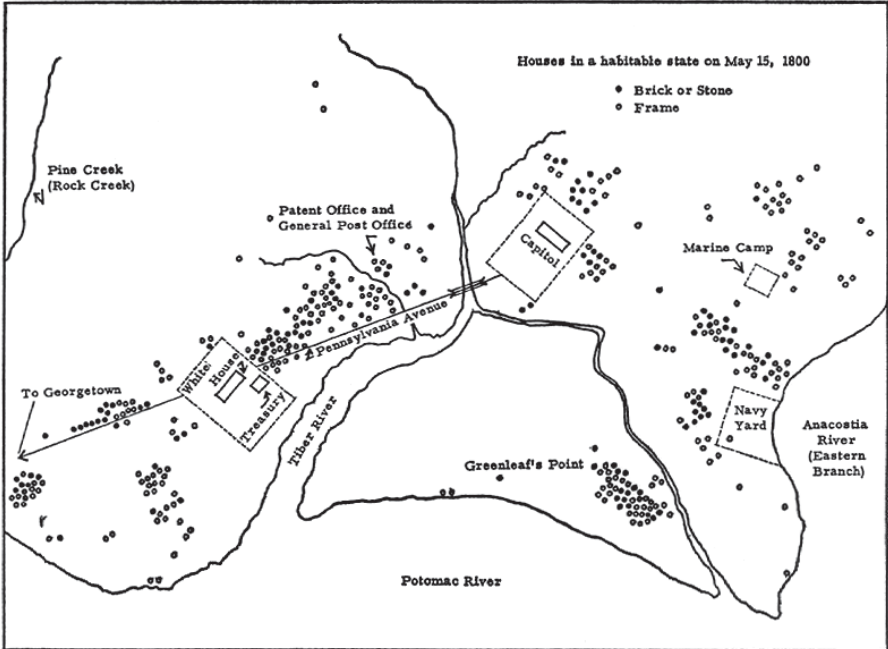
The recalcitrant David Burnes, who lived in a very modest cottage, one that stood until almost 1900, not only did not initially care to see the seat of government close by, he also did not think the money offered was a sufficient substitute for his land. Tradition states (World's Work, page 192) that Burnes said to Washington, as the General himself tried once again to persuade Burnes to sell his land: *"I suppose you think people here are going to take every grist that comes from you as pure grain; but what would you have been if you had not*

*married the widow Custis?*”. The land of Burnes was crucial, so near Capitol Hill, and it extended down to the river. Finally Burnes did agree to transfer his 600 acres, grieving that a good farm would become a poor capital. He ultimately accepted the same terms as did the other owners, which was that the government would have, and pay for, one lot and the original owner would have a second lot alternately. The original owners were to be paid about the \$60 per acre for the land that was ultimately used for public purposes. Several major land owners, including Samuel Davidson and the vigorous and capable David Carroll, were destined to become active in affairs of the city, including particularly Carroll who was one of the three original Commissioners selected by Washington to supervise surveying of land and construction of public buildings.

The reluctance of the Burnes family to give up their land is understandable. The Burnes estate was managed by David II, who had been a lieutenant in the Revolutionary War and who after the War returned to cultivate his 527 acres of tobacco and supervise his 12 slaves. Some of the family land had been held since 1721 by the dynasty founded by David Burnes I. At one time the area the family claimed included land from H Street North to Constitution Avenue, as well as much of the land between what is now between Third and Eighteenth Streets Northwest. Burnes was a continuous source of trouble for Washington and for the commissioners as he complained about damage to his grounds, or about the amount he was paid, and it is reported that he persisted in planting his tobacco crop out into the streets even up until 1799. His spinster daughter Marsha was said to have been the wealthiest woman in Washington after the death of her father, and her new home, designed by Benjamin H. Latrobe, became famous in the 1800’s as the Van Ness Mansion.

In writing back to Jefferson on April 10, 1791 Washington exclaimed: *“The acquisition of ground is really noble, considering that only £25 an acre is to be paid for any grounds taken for the public, and the streets not to be counted, which will in fact reduce it to about £19 per acre. I think very liberal reserves should be made for the public.”* It was apparently L’Enfant who originally called attention to what was then known as Jenkin’s Hill, now known as Capitol Hill, the area which L’Enfant thought the most desirable position for public buildings. L’Enfant is reported to have said regarding Jenkin’s Hill that it was: *“A pedestal waiting for a monument.”*





Early settlement in the area that became Washington.

Even if location for the major buildings, and acquiescence of most landowners was assured, all was not milk and honey, for at least five of the property owners continued to refuse to sign the deeds. They maintained that more land had been confiscated than they had expected to lose, and a few landowners who had hoped to profit handsomely were actually left out completely. Washington attempted to solve these problems by stating that even the proprietors in Georgetown who wanted to be “*comprehended*” within the limits of the Federal City could do so, so long as they were willing to take the same amount of money for their developed property as others took for the more forested lands. Few wished to sell at such a loss. Even while traveling out of the district area Washington was able to write back and suggest threateningly that it was still possible to return the capital to Philadelphia if the landowners could not cooperate once and for all. Washington was still meeting with several of the individual property holders as late as June of 1791, but finally he was able to get all the leading landowners on board, including John and Robert Peter, the later

owners of Tudor House. Thornton was probably not involved with any of these negotiations.

About the same time speculation in land, the process so dreaded by President George Washington, had begun in earnest. For years such speculation was to plague the city, the landowners, and the later Commissioners, even including Thornton. A writer in the *Maryland Journal and Baltimore Advertiser* on July 5, 1791, stated: *“But the moment he (Washington) appeared all difficulties vanished. Instead of Washington’s plans being thwarted as had been anticipated, the landowners resigning all near considerations cheerfully entered into the necessary business of making the proper conveyances, which being completed to the utmost wishes of the President, he then submitted to the inspection of the proprietors, and a large number of gentlemen attending the plan of the city, which had for several weeks occupied the attention and talents of Colonel L’Enfant, assisted by the Baron deGraff, and which with some small alterations he had determined to adopt.”* The article mentions that buildings for the legislature are to be placed on Jenkin’s Hill and that the houses of the President and other governmental departments are to be on rising ground within one mile of Georgetown and within one and one-quarter mile of the houses of legislation. It was L’Enfant who used the words *“Presidential Palace,”* a phrase that appears so often in much of the early correspondence. He alludes to its being placed on the ridge *“which attracted your attention at the first inspection of the ground”*, apparently referring to Washington’s initial visit as well as earlier reviews by horseback of the area. It is interesting that L’Enfant originally planned for a cascade constructed from the water of the now underground Tiber Creek to enhance the public walks and avenues. He even suggested a proposed location for a future equestrian statue of Washington. The Continental Congress approved such a commemorative statue in 1783, but it was never built. This statue was to have been placed about where the Washington Monument now stands.

The Commissioners also involved themselves with proposals to build surrounding canals and connecting roads, but both they and L’Enfant expected public buildings to be completed before all the roads were in place. Resolution of such multiple needs at a time of intense pressure for money, for space, and for construction was almost impossible in the new country. The independent nation

was just beginning, and it was peopled with men who were spending their energy chopping down trees rather than building dream castles in the air, even if the primary castle was to be a new capital city. In addition potentially conflicting aspirations of the cities, states, and federal government were beginning to appear. There was inevitable conflict between the imagination and artistic mind of L'Enfant and the practicality of George Washington about a city suitable for a potentially large and vigorous country – albeit a country and city based on very limited financing. Washington wanted all previously private property to be placed on the market as soon as possible with all the proceeds used to fuel public construction. The streets were laid out on paper soon after the original borders of the district were surveyed, but the names for the avenues don't appear on the original map, although they do appear on subsequent maps. With the exception of Georgia Avenue, the original names then, and still now, consisted of the various autonomous states that had cooperated to establish the union.

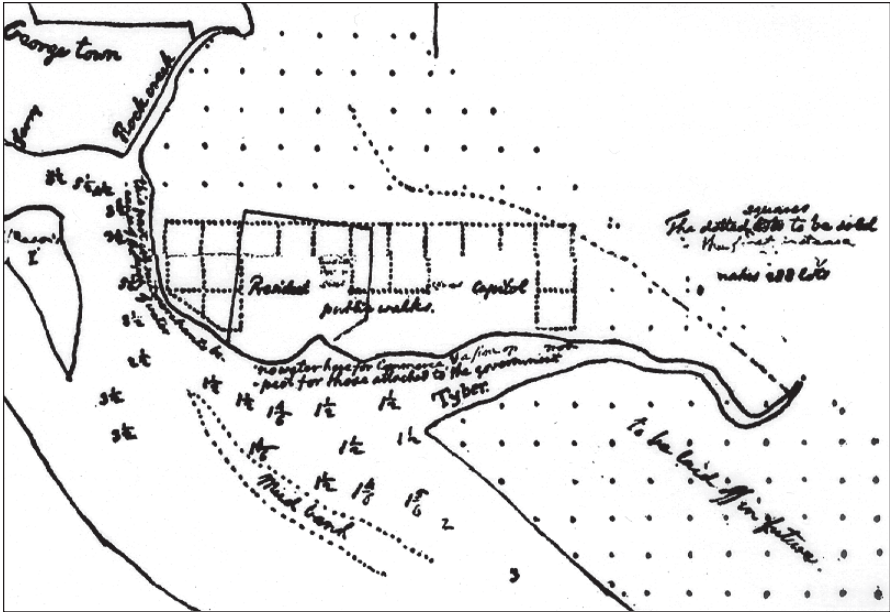
**How large was the newly acquired property, how was it to be administered, and who would prepare the plans?** The bill to locate a district of territory “*not exceeding ten miles square, between the mouths of the eastern branch and the Conogochague*” did finally pass the Senate, and then the House of Representatives on the 9<sup>th</sup> of July 1790. President Washington and Secretary of State Jefferson signed it on the 16<sup>th</sup> of July 1790. Four amendments were suggested, all were rejected. These varied plans substituted the Delaware River instead of the Potomac, the state of Pennsylvania, including land at Germantown, rather than Virginia and Maryland, or placement between the Susquehanna and the Potomac. There was one suggestion for the capital to be placed in the state of Maryland, including specifically at Baltimore.

The final act stated, at length and with details, “*that a district of territory not exceeding ten miles square, to be located as hereafter directed, on the River Potomac, at some space between the mouths of the eastern branch and Conogochague, be, and the same is hereby accepted for the permanency of the government of the United States: Provided nevertheless, that the operation of the laws of the state within such district shall not be affected by this acceptance until the time fixed for the removal of the government thereto, and until Congress shall otherwise by law provide.*” This act went ahead to state that the

President was authorized to appoint three commissioners. Any two could arrange for the surveying of the bounds and limits of the territory, and they also had power to purchase and accept such quantity of land *“as the President shall deem proper.”* It was this act that stated exactly what date the Congress was to move from Philadelphia down the coast to what was to become the city of Washington and: *“the seat of the government of the U. States, shall be removed to, and until the said first Monday in December, in the year one thousand eight hundred, shall remain at the city of Philadelphia, in the state of Pennsylvania, at which place the session of Congress next ensuing the present shall be held.”* *“In the year one thousand eight hundred, the seat of the government of the United States, shall, by virtue of this act be transferred to the district in place aforesaid.”* After President Washington signed this act, a proclamation followed, outlining exactly where the *“four lines of experiment”* were to run, where the corners of the territory were to be. This proclamation was completed on the 24<sup>th</sup> of January 1791, also signed by George Washington and Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson.

The capital was not to exceed ten miles square and was indeed located at the Potomac River only a bit upstream from Washington’s beloved Mt. Vernon. Even if the major population centers were west or south of the District, the area was not totally unsettled. The holdings included the large estates of several prominent families, including the Carrolls and the Notleys, property lines solidified by generations of ownership and extended family ties. The main road through the district at the time was known as the George Town-Bladensburg Road, the main land access for Washington to the East, as travel through George Town was for trips to the west.

As the City of Washington, always called by George Washington the *“Federal City,”* finally began to take shape, and, as mentioned, the less expansive Jefferson suggested that 1500 acres would be entirely sufficient. General Washington wanted four times that much space. The expansive size of what was considered necessary *“pleasure grounds and lawns,”* the area which now represents much of the Mall and the spacious setting for the White House and the Capitol building, springs from the mind of Washington more than from that of any other single person. By the end of January 1791, the location and size of the federal district had been settled, and then a new Presidential



*Jefferson's plan for the Mall.*

Proclamation, in a message to Congress, directed the Commissioners to: “survey and limit a part of the territory of the ten mile square on both sides of the River Potomac so as to comprehend Georgetown in Maryland and extend to the eastern branch.” Thornton was eventually to be one of these commissioners. Washington was eager to include the eastern branch of the Potomac in the district, and on March 3, 1791, the federal district was extended south of the eastern branch on the Maryland side, and also south on the Virginia side as far as Hunting Creek below Alexandria. Even before the issuance of the first proclamation, the President appointed the initial three Commissioners to organize the details of the District.

The first Commissioners were Thomas Johnson, Daniel Carroll, and Dr. David Stewart. Thomas Johnson, of Frederick, Maryland was one of the most distinguished public men of his day. Johnson was one of several who had proposed Washington in 1775 for Commander in Chief of the Revolutionary Army. At the time he became commissioner, Johnson was in his 60<sup>th</sup> year. Since his home was 52 miles away in Frederick, Maryland, he missed many of the meetings of the Board of Commissioners. Washington later, in August of 1792,

also named this respected friend as a Justice of the United States Supreme Court. Johnson served as a Commissioner only until August of 1794, having been offered at that time the position of Secretary of State by George Washington, but Johnson declined that position. In addition to being highly respected he apparently could also be testy, and argued vigorously with the other Commissioners after his retirement, most particularly regarding his own lots on Rock Creek.

Another Commissioner, Daniel Carroll of Rock Creek, was 61 years old, living with his mother near what is now Forest Glen, Maryland. He was a member of the prominent Carroll family from Maryland, and had served in the United States Congress. He owned land in the northern portion of the district, and was a relative of Daniel Carroll of Duddington, the largest individual owner of land within the limits of the new city. *“Because there were at least six Daniel Carrolls living in the eighteenth century (all from two prominent Maryland families), each added the title of his estate to his name in an attempt to prevent confusion.”* (Goode) In those days there was no obvious disqualification to being a public servant while simultaneously administering one’s personal lands, even those lands located in the midst of government property. At the same time an official might make decisions for both public and personal lands throughout the country at large. This was neither the first nor the last time in Washington that men were at least as interested in their own families’ property as they were in their duty to manage the city.

The third commissioner was Dr. David Stuart of Hope Parke, owner of a 2000 acres farm near Fairfax Court House, Virginia. He had married the widow of John Parke Custis, the son of Mrs. Washington. Dr. Stuart was a practicing physician. The overall favorable public impression of these three prominent citizens helped the management of the district get off to a good start and limited the number of hostile and jealous critics.

Unfortunately L’Enfant wished first to achieve, then to maintain, supremacy in all affairs of the city, especially in its planning, and what he finally achieved was irreconcilable conflict with the Commissioners, followed by an enforced retirement. He suggested to Washington that all the Commissioners be fired; but soon it was not they, but he, who found that he no longer had formal connection at all with long-term planning. Difficulty obtaining a general map,



*L'Enfant's map of Washington.*

even the preparation of a suitable tentative or original one, probably led to the final break in the relationship between L'Enfant and the Commissioners, even if not initially with Washington. Washington, who always tried to be supportive of L'Enfant, a man who had once been his military engineer, said he did not expect to meet “*with such perverseness*”, but on the other hand he was not surprised that L'Enfant would be so “*tenacious of his plans as to conceive they would be marred if they underwent any change or alteration, but I did not suppose he would interfere further in the mode of selling lots than by giving his opinion with his reasons in support of it.*” Washington even tried to persuade L'Enfant directly (Reiff) in a letter on December 2, 1791: “*I wished you to be employed in the arrangements of the federal City. I still wish it: but only on condition that you conduct yourself in subordination to the authority of the Commissioners, to whom by law the business is entrusted, and who stand between you and the President...*”

This letter from Washington reflected his concern about another misjudgment of L'Enfant. After most of the issues regarding private property had been officially settled, Daniel Carroll of Duddington began a new home that extended seven feet into one of the avenues, and L'Enfant had the new construction abruptly torn down. The location of the new house that was to be constructed for Daniel Carroll of Duddington, in August of 1791, was at New Jersey Avenue near First Street Southeast. The Commissioners wrote Washington on November 25, 1791: "*We (Carroll, Johnson and Stuart) are sorry to be under the disagreeable necessity of mentioning an Occurance which must wound your feelings. On our meeting here today, we were to our great astonishment informed that, Major L'Enfant, without any Authority from us and without even having submitted the matter to our consideration proceeded to demolish Mr. Carroll's house.*" (Geiger) The Carroll family was not one to offend lightly.

Most of the original Carrolls were proudly related to the prominent and very wealthy Virginia and Maryland Catholic families. Duddington itself had come to Daniel Carroll's grandfather through marriage, as did so much property in those days, and the estate expansively embraced Capitol Hill and extended down to the land held by his father Charles Carroll of Carrollsburg. Charles Carroll had established, shortly before 1790, a small town near the Anacostia River, also called the Eastern Branch of the Potomac, near Greenleaf Point. Neither father nor son was very successful in later real estate ventures in the district, perhaps because they were so certain that the capital city would rapidly spread east of the Capitol building that they miscalculated where to buy lots. Carroll held 1400 acres as the capital was established, and his land included part of the site of the Capitol. (McNeil) Eventually the Commissioners of the District of Columbia, after complaints by Carroll both to President Washington and to the Commissioners, reprimanded L'Enfant for his destruction of Carroll's personal property. The Commissioners eventually paid Carroll an indemnity. When Carroll finally was able to complete his new home, a year later, he was the largest single landowner in the District of Columbia. As a person Carroll was respected enough that he was picked to serve as first President of the Bank of Washington. Despite his ability in several areas of his life he soon became heavily indebted, largely due to the taxes on his land, and eventually he lost



most of his property. His unmarried daughters continued to stay in the new home for decades after their father's death.

L'Enfant was weakened as a significant force in the new town after the episode with the Carroll house, and the turmoil with members of the powerful Carroll family. Washington himself was the one who arranged the truce in the conflict and assured Daniel Carroll was paid \$4500 for his losses. January 1792 L'Enfant, who seemed to never learn, gave orders to begin digging the foundation for the Capitol, but once again he had acted in a preemptory fashion. The Commissioners had never been consulted about the exact location. Another failure was his failure to supply a map of the District. It was necessary for Washington and the Commissioners to have engraved city plans to work with if they were ever to sell the public lots, but such plans were delayed month after month as they waited for L'Enfant to produce his promised complete map. Washington wrote L'Enfant on February 28, 1792: *“Every mode has been tried to accommodate your wishes on this principle, except changing the Commissioners (for Commissioners there must be).”* He stated that under their direction the public building *“must be carried on or the law will be violated.”* Jefferson stated in a letter to a George Walker on March 1, 1792 regarding L'Enfant, and L'Enfant's rebuttal suggestion to have the commissioners fired: *“The latter being impossible under law and the former too arrogant to be answered, he was notified that his services were at an end. Measures will be taken to procure plans for the public buildings for which business five months have been lost.”* Although L'Enfant was often able to accomplish a great deal on his own initiative and at his own pace, in fact this same internally driven quality doomed his efforts. His loss of employment was clearly due to what Washington referred to as *“his untoward disposition.”* In retrospect it seems that part of the problem was uncertainty about exactly who was actually in charge. As was the case many times during this phase of early American history it seems that Washington was certainly the indispensable man. As a peace offering when he was fired L'Enfant received a payment of \$600, in addition to expenses, and he was offered additional money, plus his choice of a lot. He turned down the offer of land. By 1800 L'Enfant had come back asking for additional compensation, and he ended up with a grand total of approximately \$2000 for his design for the plan for all of Washington.

Apparently by nature L'Enfant routinely procrastinated to everyone's disadvantage, including most particularly his own. Robert Morris complained after three years spent in the construction of a house in Philadelphia, a house that had been designed by L'Enfant, that there was still no roof on the house. Indeed the house never was completely finished. About this house, Isaac Weld, an English traveler in 1795, reported (Clark): "*The most spacious and most remarkable one amongst them stands in Chestnut street, but it is not yet quite finished. At present it appears a huge mass of red brick and pale blue marble, which bids defiance to simplicity and elegance. This superb mansion, according to report, has already cost upwards of fifty thousand guineas, and stands as a monument of the increasing luxury of the city of Philadelphia.*" And in 1795 Robert Morris wrote in a letter to L'Enfant: "*I have just now at 2 o'clock received your note dated yesterday. My sole motive for being urgent proceeds from an anxiety to get a roof over the West Wing of the House. I am now paying above £1000 p ann Rent, and having sold the House I live in, the owner may want it, before I have a place to go into. . . You gave me assurance six weeks ago that the House should be covered this Fall. I have not the command of my time to look after it myself and therefore depended upon your assurances, consequently when I came yesterday and found both by my own observation & by the answers Obtained to questions which I put to Mr. Wallace that there was no chance of getting the whole building covered, I desired to know from you "to my satisfaction" whether the West Wing could be covered in the time proposed or not, declaring my intention to have it run up with Brick should delay in waiting for marble be likely to prevent the covering of it. . . I certainly have a right to enquire, to examine and to be satisfied and if you do not think I am entitled to receive satisfaction from you, it is high time to part, my declaration that I would run Brick Walls rather than not have the Building covered is not new.—I told you the same thing at the time you assured me it should be covered this Fall, therefore it could be no surprize upon you now. . . I am therefore determined to have the Roof put on the West Wing as early this Fall as possible, and altho it was not my intention or desire to have the marble you have introduced into this building, yet an inclination to indulge your genius, induced me to permit so much of it (before I knew the extent to which you meant to carry it) as seemed to call for the remainder. Had you executed my intentions instead*

*of your own, my family would now have inhabited the House instead of being liable to be turned out of Doors.—After all, I prefer that the West Wing & of course the whole building should go on under your directions but with this proviso, that you will positively have it covered this Fall. If not I would rather abandon all the marble & finish with Brick, therefore if you agree, follow it up & get the thing done, if you do not agree my orders to the builders must be obeyed.—I am with sincerity yours &c ROBT MORRIS.”*

And finally in a letter dated August 15, 1796, Robert Morris again wrote to L’Enfant: *“It is with astonishment I see the work of last fall now pulling down in order to put up more marble on my House, on which there is already vastly too much.—The delay and accumulation of Expence becomes intolerable.—The difficulty & Cost of getting Money is vastly greater than you can conceive, and if you persist in exposing yourself to Censure & me to ridicule by alterations and additions, you will force me to abandon all Expectations of getting into the House & to stop the Work, which I am unwilling to do if it can be avoided & which can only be prevented by Oeconomy and Dispatch. I am Sir Yrs ROBT. MORRIS.”* The incomplete house was sometimes called *“Morris’ Folly”*.

L’Enfant once again came out of his retreat in the countryside to help his adoptive country following the destruction of its public buildings by the British in 1814. It was he who was then placed in charge of developing a new *“Fort Washington,”* to be located between Washington and the mouth of the Potomac. Even in this project he became too extravagant with his planning and he never was able to complete this job either. He finally died a dependent of the Digges family in Maryland. At the time of his death his total estate was worth \$45. His body was disinterred from its quiet rest on the beautiful Digges grounds on April 27, 1901, and placed at Arlington at the expense of Congress. From his tomb at the top of the hill one can easily see the glory of his expansive initial vision for our capital city. Thornton knew the famous designer, and the lesson of intransigence offered by L’Enfant should have cautioned Thornton, but it didn’t.

The City of Washington may have been established to direct history, but in its own development it also reflected history. As the city was conceived there were flashes of inspiration, even what seems in retrospect to have been divine guidance, but there was also ample petty wrangling. Sectional disputes were severe long before 1860, and some of the problems began well before the

planning of the city. Some of the disputes simply reflected the independent style of the people and of the founding fathers themselves.

The surveying of the city and district in the 1790's was a process that seemed to become steadily more complex, confusing, and unsatisfactory. After L'Enfant had failed to complete the work, Andrew Ellicott with his free black assistant, Benjamin Banneker, next took on the job. They did establish the four major boundary lines, but only after official prodding through a firm letter from the Commissioners who wrote to express dismay at the slow progress in the surveying of outlines for the district. In fact on March 12, 1793, the Commissioners discharged Ellicott and all his assistants. Other surveyors were employed. Washington, who so often bridged the gap between contending forces, then had a conversation with Ellicott as well as with the Commissioners, and on April 3, 1793, Ellicott and his assistants returned once again as official surveyors, despite complaints that Ellicott did not display respect and would not always follow orders. What a country, and what a bunch of individualists!

The brothers Andrew and Benjamin Ellicott finally succeeded in surveying much of the wild new city, and it was their work that helped lead to the official engraving of L'Enfant's previously incomplete drawings. By March of 1792, the overall, but still future, outlines of the Federal City had become clear, and as Bryan points out, even in the earliest plans one can see a good representation of the eventual city, plus the location for the Capitol building itself. Numbers for lots or squares already appeared on the map, a plan modified several times to include more specific details regarding the Potomac River and its Eastern Branch. By October of 1792, official sale of lots in the district became possible. The plots of land for buildings and homes were already intermingled with small parks and open spaces.

L'Enfant had originally proposed particular spaces for fountains, plus areas for a national church, for educational institutions, and for buildings to be erected by each state. The final plan included only two definitely reserved areas. These were the locations for the President's Palace and for the Capitol. Nevertheless, the visions of L'Enfant for a spacious city with wide thoroughfares soon became integrated into the expectations of others, and not only as locations for the President's House and the Capitol, but also for the judiciary and various markets. These began to be discussed just as if they already existed. By 1792

the term “*Mall*” was being used regularly for the walk area between the proposed Capitol and the President’s House. Jefferson’s original small mall area had seemed both too modest and too close to Georgetown. His ideas of simple but classical beauty for the buildings did take hold, however, and his dream of openness for the City of Liberty became markedly expanded and reinforced by most of the other planners. Washington never lost his own dreamy idealism as he rode all about the district. He had already stated on March 8, 1792, “*that the public buildings in size, form and elegance should look beyond the present day.*”

The role Thornton played in all these affairs is unknown, but he certainly was never identified as being either diplomatic or able to compromise. He possibly already had his eye on a job as Commissioner, a job with obvious problems but also a position that offered a modest salary. He always needed money.

Regarding Ellicott, and remembering the L’Enfant problem, Washington wondered as he wrote to the current Commissioners: “*Whether an accommodation under all circumstances is not to be preferred to an open breach and a newspaper justification which will inevitably follow.*” Within a week after Ellicott was restored to his job in the District, he was appointed by the Governor of Pennsylvania to survey roads in the western area of that state. He proceeded to spend the next two years doing just exactly that. At times no one person seems to have been clearly in charge of all the surveying for the District, and apparently individual surveyors were almost randomly apportioned various pieces of work. The Commissioners wrote to Washington on December 23, 1793: “*Major Ellicott after his absence a great part of the summer and all of the fall as we hear in other service, has returned to us in the winter. We do not accept his further services; the business, we believe, was going on full as well without him.*”

Things may have finally settled down in the surveying department, but during these times both Commissioners Johnson and Stewart asked Washington to relieve them of their own positions. Washington stated in August 29, 1793, that Mr. Johnson was leaving for business opportunities, “*for he thinks that he cannot act for the public and himself.*” Johnson had purchased some lots in the city and his resignation seems to have been an unusual example, for the times, of

scrupulously ethical behavior. He did not feel that he should be purchasing lots and negotiating for property at the same time he was Commissioner, and therefore an overseer of the same areas. Even before two of the Commissioners felt they had to resign, Washington may have been looking favorably at Thornton. Washington seemed natural as father image for clever young men such as Hamilton and Lafayette, and then for Thornton. Washington wrote about Thornton to the extremely wealthy Tobias Lear on August 28, 1794 (Di Giamantonis): *“The Doctor is indefatigable, I am told, in the execution of whatever he engages, to which may be added his taste for architecture, but being little known doubts arise on that head.”* It is true that Thornton probably did suffer from the fact that he did not participate in the Revolution, was not well known, was not a native, and probably even had an accent that did not sound comfortably provincial to American ears. Nevertheless the General liked Thornton, admired his many skills, and was one who considered Thornton the Architect of the District.

By April 15, 1791, boundary stones began to be placed. The first in place was at Jones’ Point on the Virginia side of the Potomac River, an area returned to be part of Virginia, by the act of recession in 1846. This region, the county of Alexandria, is not now in the District. In 1792 the Territory of Columbia, the initial title for the district, had been established and the city began to be called the City of Washington, apparently without any urging or prior knowledge of the President. In retrospect L’Enfant, the difficult planner, actually was more realist than dreamer. He expected that within a thousand years the republic would have 50 states and as many as 500,000,000 people. He was not accurate in expecting it to take a thousand years.

Maryland and Virginia voted \$122,000 to assist with erection of the public buildings in the district, and the Commissioners in March of 1792 began to advertise for designs for the President’s house and for the Capitol building. James Hoban of Charleston, South Carolina, influenced by the design of the palace of the Duke of Leinster in Dublin, received the award for the house, and was hired to superintend construction of the President’s Mansion, or *“Palace,”* or, as it was called some years later, particularly after it had been whitewashed to hide the burns of 1814, the White House. Washington probably had seen some of Hoban’s work in Charleston on his tour, and all of Hoban’s public plans do

possess a simple elegance which seemed suitable for the time and which was also possible for the builders to complete.

Dreams of Washington City as a great potential commercial center would continue until after the Civil War, but in fact for decades all really profitable business in the District of Columbia, outside of government activities, remained minimal. European observers quickly noted the lack of significant commerce or industry in the city of Washington. Later the railroad did establish ties out toward the West, and it was the railroads, river canals, and commerce on the Great Lakes that ultimately connected the valleys of the East with the broad plains of what is now the Midwest. It was during these early decades that Thornton served as one of the Commissioners, as de facto Mayor, Captain of Militia, and as a friend of the decision makers.

**How did the district look?** As homes began to appear beside the muddy streets of the infant capital, the elegance of the Tudor and Octagon houses, both designed by Thornton, was far from the rule. Roads and forest trails remained unimproved. Abigail Adams recorded in her diary that she became lost in what seemed to her a wilderness. Writer Charles Janson visited the United States as a clearly biased observer from England, arriving with an interest in speculation and business, but also with interest in the chances for survival of what he considered just an American experiment in transitory independence. He wrote, (Spofford, and Janson) regarding the roads in the Federal City, *“the entrance, or avenues, as they are pompously called, which lead to the American seat of government, are the worse roads I passed in the country; and I appeal to every citizen who has been unlucky enough to travel the stages north and south leading to the city, for the truth of the assertion. I particularly allude to the mail stage road from Bladensburg to Washington, and from thence to Alexandria. In the winter season, during the sitting of Congress, every turn of your wagon wheel (for I must again observe, that there is no such thing in the country as what we call a stage coach, or a post-chaise,) is for many miles attended with danger. The roads are never repaired; deep ruts, rocks, and stumps of trees every minute impede your progress, and often threaten your limbs with dislocation. In some parts purchasers have cleared the wood from their grounds, and erected temporary wooden buildings; others have fenced in their lots, and attempted to cultivate them; but the sterility of the land laid out*

*for the city is such that this plan has also failed. The country adjoining consists of woods in a state of nature, and in some places of mere swamps, which give the scene a curious patch-work appearance. The view of the noble river Potomac, which the eye can trace till it terminates at Alexandria, is very fine."*

Author James Sterling Young, quoting Margaret B. Smith, stated that a group of Congressmen returning from a dinner party near Hanes Point got lost and spent the night in their carriage, which was at the time actually only a mile away from Capitol Hill. At a time when most of the letters addressed to William Thornton could simply state as an address *Federal City* or *George Town*, it is not surprising a man could give his address as: "*near the President's house*," and as late as 1817 a cabinet officer gave his address as "*the high ground north of Pennsylvania Avenue*." Apparently wagons could mire up to their axletrees in mud on Pennsylvania Avenue, and cows and wildlife overran much of the area.

Anthony Trollope, as quoted by Young, offers one of several dozen examples of the primitive environs and stated it was a place: "*where a man may lose himself . . . not as one loses oneself in London between Shoreditch and Russell Square, but as one does so in the deserts of the Holy Land, between Emmaus and Erythia. In the first place no one knows where the places are, or is unsure of their existence, and then between their presumed localities the country is wild, trackless, unbridged, uninhabited, and desolate . . . tucking your trousers up to your knees, you will wade through bogs, you will lose yourself among rude hillocks, you will be out of the reach of humanity.*" There were numerous similar reminiscences in letters published as the City of Washington approached its Centennial Year in 1900.

In 1799, the last year of Washington's life, the city that bore his name was still almost empty of streets, had an unfinished Capitol, an unfinished President's House, and a small population which grew only slowly over the next several decades. As late as 1840 De Bacourt, the French minister in Washington, could state that the city was "*neither a city, nor a village, nor the country, but a building yard placed in a desolate spot, wherein living is unbearable.*" It was the Civil War, the conflict that led to resolution of slavery and the path to ultimate healing of the sectional disputes, which made Washington a true metropolis. The war produced a large influx of people into Washington and the greatest reshaping of our capital in any five years since the



cornerstones were first put in place. By the end of that conflict, a war that was both our second revolution and our mythical rebirth, the North was stronger than at the beginning of the conflict, Washington was a City, and the South had to rediscover itself.

However, in 1800 first lady Abigail Adams wrote in her diary that “*woods are all you see from Baltimore until you reach the city, which is only so in name.*” At the time she arrived there were perhaps 3000 residents, and one-fifth of these residents were slaves. Sycamore roots still tripped up people who searched for turtles’ nests along Tiber Creek, and the wide Pennsylvania Avenue that was intended to connect the unfinished Capitol with the unfinished President’s House was only “*a deep morass covered with alder bushes.*” Oliver Wolcott, the Secretary of the Treasury after Hamilton, wrote: “*there is one good tavern about 220 yards from the Capitol and several other houses are built and erecting; but I do not perceive how the members of Congress can possibly secure lodgings, unless they will consent to live like scholars in a college, or monks in a monastery, crowded ten or twenty in one house, and utterly secluded from society. The only resource for such as wish to live comfortably will, I think, be found in George Town three miles distant.*”

Even if many of the most prominent speculators lost money when they guessed wrong, and invested outside of George Town, the average townspeople didn’t lose. Most were average farmers and outdoorsmen, and very proud of themselves and of the new country. A chance to work, and a simple life, was the rule. Augustus John Foster, the British Minister’s Secretary, was a witness at the reception for Minister Anthony Merry given by President Thomas Jefferson, a man who affected simplicity. (Parr) Foster wrote that Jefferson looked like a very plain farmer, and wore his slippers down at the heels. *Only think what must have been poor toujours gai’s (Ambassador Anthony Merry’s) embarrassment when at his first audience he went all bespeckled with the spangles of our gaudiest court dress. The doors open suddenly to (Jefferson) thrust out his hand to me as he does to everybody and desired me to sit down. Luckily for me I’ve been in Turkey, and am quite at home in this primeval simplicity of manners.*” This note by the Secretary for the British Legation went on to describe the arrival of a Tunisian diplomat who arrived with “*the most splendid dress on I*

*ever saw, and the President receives him in yarn stockings and torn slippers, as he does us all."*

The common folk were simple, the town was primitive, the President was one of the people, but the prospects were glorious. The graciousness of Dolly Madison (1768-1849) was the closest any of the early prominent citizens came to display a new air of friendly sophistication. She was often gorgeously dressed in ostrich-plumed turbans; and she was buxom, plump, and warm hearted.

As late as the first decade of the 1800s as the government officials arrived, Attorney General Rush still described Washington as: "*a meagre village, a place with a few bad houses and extensive swamps.*" But the area was less truly swampy than it was full of bogs and rushes. After Madison had been President for four years, in 1814 there still were only 8208 residents, 5904 of whom were white, 867 free Blacks, and 1437 slaves. Already, however, it was becoming apparent that Washington would eventually eclipse Georgetown in size, and someday perhaps in Dolly Madison - type sophistication as well. Thornton glimpsed this future, and a cabinet official stated (Young): "*Mr. Thornton, one of the Commissioners, spoke of a population of 160,000 as a matter of course in a few years.*"

**There were many who wished to make money, of course, and did the early Washington city also attract scoundrels?** There simply was not enough money to do all that was needed, and it was decided to float government sponsored loans, and to supplement the loans by receipts from selling the lots to the public. Some of the loans were entrusted to a man who for several years seems to have been almost ubiquitous. He was, for a time, a close friend of Thornton. That man was Samuel Blodgett, Jr. (1757-1814) Blodgett was involved with the engraving of the city maps, with the lottery, and then with plans for a grand hotel. During all this time there was still continued discussion, of course, as to whether or not the capital should be placed in the district at all. If Philadelphia had pursued more vigorously the issue of supplying adequate accommodations for the Congress, she might have displaced the dreams of General Washington himself. Gradually it was very clear, however, that Washington City was to be our capital and planners and speculators such as Blodgett began to take charge as the Potomac location finally prevailed.

Who was this man, Blodgett, anyway? Blodgett's father had been prominent in New Hampshire, and Samuel Blodgett, Jr., had himself been successful enough himself to be commissioned as a Captain in the New Hampshire Militia, at age 19. Blodgett was part of the first Board of Directors for the first joint stock company of the United States, "*The Insurance Company of North America.*" He married well, choosing Rebecca Smith, daughter of the Provost of the University of Pennsylvania. Blodgett was one of the people who, along with Thornton, pushed early and hard for the establishment within the Federal City of a National University, and one can wonder if his eventual murky involvement in financial affairs was part of the reason our National University never really materialized. In January of 1792 he received a deed of sale for a tract of land called Jamaica, land that consisted of 494 acres extending northeast from the present DuPont Circle across almost the entire city. He apparently paid just over \$39,000 in Mexican silver dollars for this property.

There were many decisions to be made about all of the land, not just about the use of Blodgett's possessions. Some property owners had been paid one amount, others were paid a different amount. Ellicott, one official surveyor, actually employed even before L'Enfant, thought that the basic design of the entire city should be totally changed, but Washington was reluctant to do so. Washington wished to respond to whatever the Commissioners of the district did suggest, but he had appointed the Commissioners, and they primarily wanted to please him. In addition, they had time for only brief fly-by supervision. In May of 1792 the Commissioners did decide, at the very least, to begin to hold regular monthly meetings. In order to have more direct supervision over the development of the city, the Commissioners placed the same ubiquitous Samuel Blodgett in the potentially key position as Superintendent of the District. The President was apparently uneasy enough to make inquiries asking if Blodgett "*is a man of industry, arrangement, and integrity.*" In fact Blodgett was not. The plan of using a superintendent was eventually to be abandoned, probably because of Blodgett's failure.

**Where does Thornton come into this picture?** While these discussions about the administration of the district continued, a significant advertisement was placed in March, 1792, inviting formal designs for the two major public buildings, the President's House and the Capitol. Ultimately Thornton was to be

involved, and with financial loss because of his association with Blodgett, but Thornton was not involved from the first. Blodgett was among those that submitted an early plan. A more successful candidate for the jobs was James Hoban. Hoban had been living in Charlestown, South Carolina and came to Washington in June in an effort to achieve broader recognition, and to obtain government work. He was born and educated in Ireland, and after coming to America Hoban had done some innovative, as well as some clearly derivative, architectural work. While living in Charlestown he had designed the statehouse there. Washington, on July 17, 1792, accepted the decision of the jury that the design for the President's House would be that which had been offered by Hoban. Hoban was also to superintend the work on the house, but Jefferson, the Secretary of State, on July 11, 1792, had already mentioned plans for "*a President's House by Mr. Hallet.*" For the President's House Hoban originally planned for a building with wings, but that was never accomplished. After arriving in Washington, Hoban was surely successful thereafter in one respect; he was to remain an employee of the government of the city until as late as 1832.

There were other plans offered for the Capitol and for the President's House. The alternative plans included one by John Collins, who was actually awarded \$150 for his efforts. The design by Steve Hallet, "*a French artist,*" as the Commissioners called him, was considered the most attractive one submitted for the Capitol, but since George Washington was also pleased with the plans prepared by a Judge Turner from Pennsylvania, and since the always present Blodgett's own plan was still being considered, those who submitted the best plans were given an opportunity to try once again. This complex decision process is recorded in the Commissioners letter book of July 1792.

The Commissioners were disappointed in August of 1792 as the second competition once again revealed no clear winner for the design of the Capitol. Nevertheless Mr. Hallet was engaged to go ahead, once and for all, and he was ordered to prepare a formal plan. Six weeks after this decision, a letter from Thornton, written from Tortola in the early fall of 1792, arrived and requested permission to submit drawings, late, and indeed after the decision had seemed final. The Commissioners agreed, and Thornton could give it a try. By this time they had already fully approved the plans for the President's house but Thornton was told he could still submit his competing plan for the Capitol. Thornton was

eventually awarded the job. He therefore returned, perhaps with relief, from Tortola to Philadelphia, the same city that housed Hallet.

By January of 1793, Hallet's new plan was ready and Thornton had also submitted his full design for the Capitol, a plan that met with the approval of Washington. The "*grandeur, simplicity, and convenience*" pleased Washington. Jefferson wrote: "*Thornton's plan had captivated the eyes and judgment of all.*" For two years prior to this Thornton had been living in Tortola with his new wife but he had already been a citizen of the United States for four years. In fact even before he was a citizen Thornton had been involved in Philadelphia with Fitch in the efforts to construct a steamboat.

Thornton had had only limited architectural experience, but had observed and sketched buildings in Europe, and he was always fond of reviewing varied architectural plans as they became available on both sides of the Atlantic. He was emboldened by his architectural success well before competition for the Capitol. On July 9, 1789 the *Philadelphia Packet* advertised: "*The Directors of the Library Company of Philadelphia being solicitous to render the building proposed to be erected as elegant as the unavoidable frugality of the plan will admit, request ingenious artists and friends of the institution to favor them with designs and elevations for the purpose.*" In addition, a share in the Company was to be awarded when the plans for the elevation were adopted. Only eleven days were allowed to submit the plans. Thornton competed for that commission, as, in fact, had Jefferson, and the judges awarded Thornton a share of stock in the company worth 40 pounds since his plan was considered the best design for the proposed library. There is a plate in one of the library collections that is similar to Thornton's submission, although most of the records are now gone. This library was the predecessor of the Library of Congress, and it was considered very attractive by all, including Franklin who probably cared the most. Jenkins reported: "*In the old engraving of the Library by Birch, there is a lightness and elegance to the scheme which belies any monumental character, yet the general appearance is of formal dignity. The tall pilasters of white marble had a simple understated character with modified Ionic capitals. Thornton confessed in one of his later discussions with Jefferson that this was his favorite order, one he used at the Octagon and the University of Virginia Pavilion Seven.*" Dr. Franklin, in his last public appearance, was there at the

library on August 31<sup>st</sup> when the cornerstone was laid in place, and as in the process he helped launch Thornton as an amateur designer.

Thornton was fond of drawing, and had shown interest in mechanics and inventions even before he met Fitch and had become enamored, enamored actually for his entire lifetime, in engineering prospects that might produce a steamboat. In addition to his interest in buildings and steamboats Thornton wanted a job, and he needed more income. A few months after the Capitol competition Thornton applied to General Washington for formal appointment as his private secretary and received this reply on December 3, 1793: *“I have been duly favored with your letter of 29<sup>th</sup> and thank you for your obliging offer to supply the office lately occupied by Mr. Lear. I am persuaded it would have been ably filled with your abilities, but previous to the departure of that gentleman, my arrangements were made in favor of Mr. Dandridge, who is now in the exercise of the office of private secretary.”*

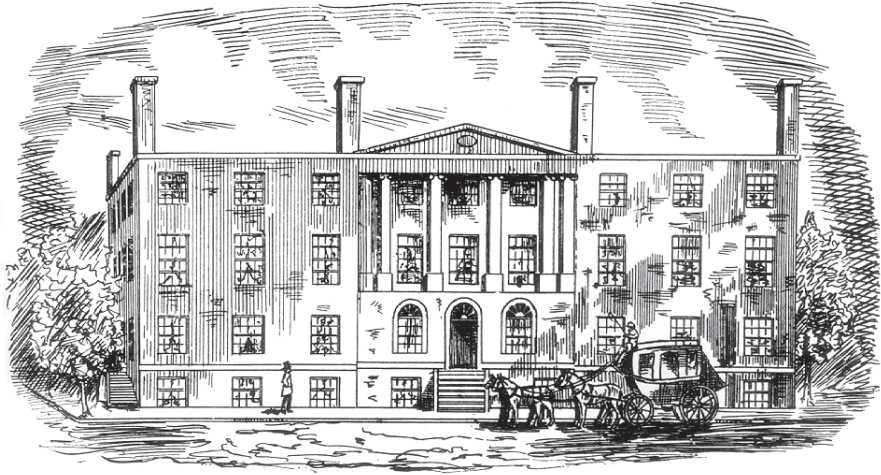
By the end of 1793 Thornton, along with his wife and his mother-in-law, had moved to George Town from Philadelphia. Clearly hoping to be a force in the new capital, he nevertheless declined an offer to be the Superintendent for the construction of the Capitol building itself. Why he declined is not clear. Perhaps he knew that sustained interest in that position would not mesh well with his larger ambitions. So far as is known, Dr. Thornton, the gentleman, at the time had no particular plans for any certain business or occupation, although for a time he was referred to as the Architect of the Federal City. This was at a time in history when men who were aristocrats, at least in England and among some of the wealthy Virginians, were not expected to “work,” and Thornton was receiving money from his estate in Tortola. So at first he readily accepted Hallet, not himself, as the main supervisor of the work for the Capitol.

After Thornton came to the city with formal introduction from the President to the Commissioners, dated March 3, 1793, the Commissioners officially approved Thornton’s plan for the Capitol and gave him the prize of \$500 plus a city lot. They stated: *“As Mr. Hallet ranks next, and because he had applied himself to the competition by particular request, they have given him the same reward.”* As requested, Thornton prepared another design that now led Jefferson to conclude: *“The one adopted is Dr. Thornton’s plan rendered into a practicable form.”* But Washington, as was his style, and apparently

foreseeing future conflicts over details, suggested a conference or commission to assure that all the work would be done correctly. The commission was to include Hoban, Hallet, and Thornton, as well as a Mr. Carstairs and a Mr. Williamson, both of whom were what we would now call contractors. On 13<sup>th</sup> October of 1792 the cornerstone for the President's Palace was laid, and the sale of lots in the district began. Business, buildings, the city, and our government, were all underway.

Samuel Blodgett became officially connected with the city as its Superintendent on January 5, 1793, another job Thornton had apparently refused, and Blodgett soon proposed his ill-fated lottery. This was the lottery that eventually contributed to his bankruptcy. The Commissioners approved of the lottery in hopes of accelerating the growth and financing of public buildings, one of which was to be Blodgett's Hotel. The lottery and plans for the hotel were major events at the time, although both have been long since forgotten by most Washingtonians. Financing the purchase of lands and road improvements required a great deal of money, and the concept was for the lottery to supply money through the sale of the lots that the government had obtained from prior landowners. The national anniversary, July 4, in 1793 was chosen as the time to lay the cornerstone of Blodgett's hotel and: *"fifteen hundred people were present and walked from thence in procession, preceded by a lodge of free masons, to a dinner, the principal dish of which consisted of an ox roasted whole. A number of toasts were drunk on the occasion, and the day concluded with much harmony."* Blodgett's Hotel was to be on the ridge at F Street, two stories high, and with a front of 120 feet. That was quite a large structure for the day. Difficulties arose, no surprise, in the payment of prizes from the lottery, and the Commissioners were soon careful to see that Blodgett, not they, was held responsible. Blodgett's subsequent financial collapse eventually cost Thornton, and cost him dearly.

The new appointments as Commissioners to fill the vacancies were Gustavus Scott of Maryland and Dr. William Thornton. Scott was officially appointed on August 23, 1794, and Thornton on September 12, 1794. Mr. Scott had been linked closely with the Potomac Canal Company, the project so dear to Washington's heart during his entire life. Thornton lived next to the District and that was attractive to Washington, but Scott lodged in Baltimore at the time.



*Blodgett's Hotel.*

Washington continued to urge that all who were involved in major public administration become residents of the district. Scott had formerly lived in Virginia, nine miles from Georgetown, and for a time he occupied the land sometimes known at the time as Rock Hill. That property was later possessed by the interesting poet and diplomat Joel Barlow, who died and was buried in Poland at the time of Napoleon's retreat from Russia. More recently the general area has been known as Kalorama, the name Barlow chose for his elegant and expanded mansion.

Many changes occurred as the city of Washington moved from wilderness to national capital. As Commissioner, Thornton participated in the changes, not always happily. Thornton wrote, apparently speaking his own views, in one of his novels, *"I never wander over the beautiful environs of our infant metropolis and mark the changes which its extension and improvement occasion without feelings of poignant regret. These horrid improvements, as some romantic tourist calls them, are fast sweeping away the natural and picturesque beauties of the scene, no spot in our widely extended country is secure from the intrusion of business and all its turmoil and disorder. Majestic and solitary forests are leveled . . . rugged rocks and roaring cataracts robbed of all their beauty . . . The capital hills were covered with majestic and venerable forest trees which, had they been preserved, would have made a more beautiful park than any city in Europe can boast."* Washington was beginning, and Thornton was a part of it.



CHAPTER 5

## The Capitol Building

**1792 March 24, Advertisement for Capitol design.**

**1792 July 15, No single one of the designs is adequate.**

**1792 July-December, French- born Stephen Hallet submits several designs.**

**1793 January, Hallet's fourth plan, and Thornton's design, are shown to Washington.**

**1793 February, Jefferson reports to Commissioners that he and Washington prefer Thornton's design that is: "simple, noble, beautiful, excellently distributed, and moderate in size."**

**1793 March 11, Thornton gets first prize, Hallet second.**

**1793 July 15, Meeting called to consider criticisms of Thornton's design, outcome is that Thornton's exterior is to be used along with Hallet's interior design. Hallet is made supervising architect.**

**1794 June 26, Hallet is reprimanded for altering Thornton's design.**

**1794 November 15, Hallet is dismissed.**

**1795 October 15, George Hadfield appointed architect for the Capitol.**

**1798 May 28, Hadfield dismissed, James Hoban appointed architect.**

**1800 January 2, in a letter to John Marshall, Thornton recommends a tomb for Washington in the Capitol building.**

**1804 Benjamin Latrobe appointed Architect of the Capitol. There is continuation of influence by Jefferson.**

**1814 August 24, Capitol burned by British army. Latrobe returns to oversee repairs.**

**1817 November 20, Latrobe feels he must resign.**

**1818 President James Monroe appoints Boston architect Charles Bulfinch as Capitol Architect.**

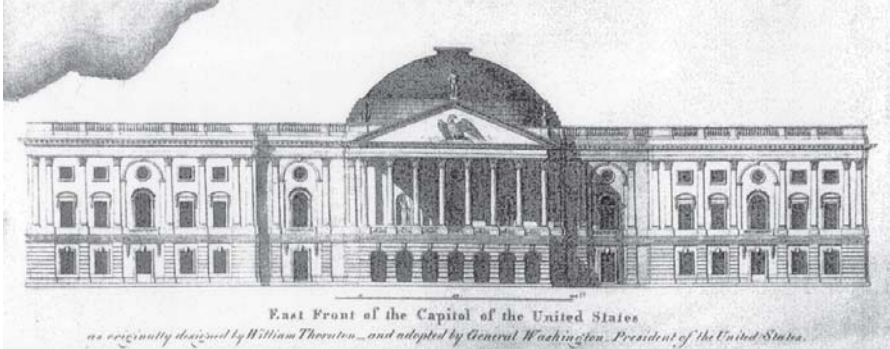
**1825 May 6, 36 separate designs are submitted for an East Pediment sculpture.**

**1825 May, a jury consisting of Thornton, painter Charles Bird King, and Colonel George Bomford select a composite design that combines elements.**

**1828 Thornton dies. He had spent three decades of involvement in construction, plans, and modification of the Capitol.**

William Allen authored a beautifully illustrated and remarkably detailed history of the U. S. Capitol, one printed by the Government Printing Office in 2001. Perhaps the easiest summary of the complex history is that of Washington as quoted in Allen (page 32); *“the present plan is nobody’s, but a compound of everybody’s.”* Thornton’s initial plan, which he had feverishly prepared in Tortola, was modified in Philadelphia by Thornton after consultation with Judge George Turner, a man who was well aware of perceived defects in the earlier plans. It was the second design by Thornton that received the lavish praise from Washington and Jefferson. Jefferson termed it (Allen page 19); *“simple, noble, beautiful, excellently distributed, and moderate in size.”*

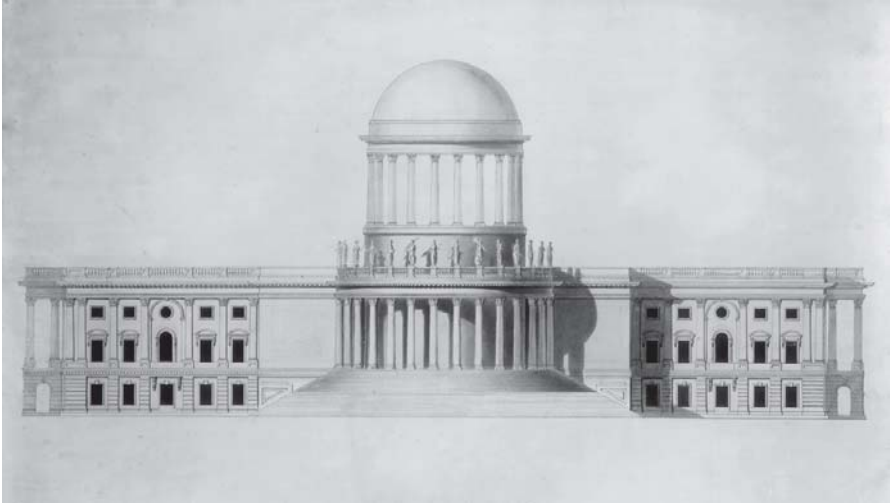
Allen’s description of Thornton’s design is probably the clearest and most concise in all the extensive literature about the noble structure. *“Thornton’s design was partly an essay in the emerging neoclassical style and partly an orthodox, high-style Georgian building. Its centerpiece was a domed rotunda fronted by a Corinthian portico. The portico, with twelve Corinthian columns standing on a one-story arcade, provided a sheltered carriage way and a balcony similar to those at Federal hall but larger and grander. The dome and portico were both reminiscent of the great Roman temple known as the Pantheon built in the second century A. D. by the Emperor Hadrian. Thornton’s adaptation of the Pantheon for his United States Capitol linked the new republic to its ideas of civic virtue and self-government. (It did not matter that the Pantheon was built during the Roman Empire rather than during the Republic.) Two wings flanking the central section were designed in a conventional Georgian manner with a rusticated ground story supporting Corinthian pilasters and a full entablature. Curving pediments top the principle floor windows. Considering its scale, the elaborateness of the Corinthian order, the rich window*



*East front of the Capitol. Eagle design, an early one, also by Thornton.*

*treatment, and its dome, no standing structure in America could compare with Thornton's proposed Capitol."*

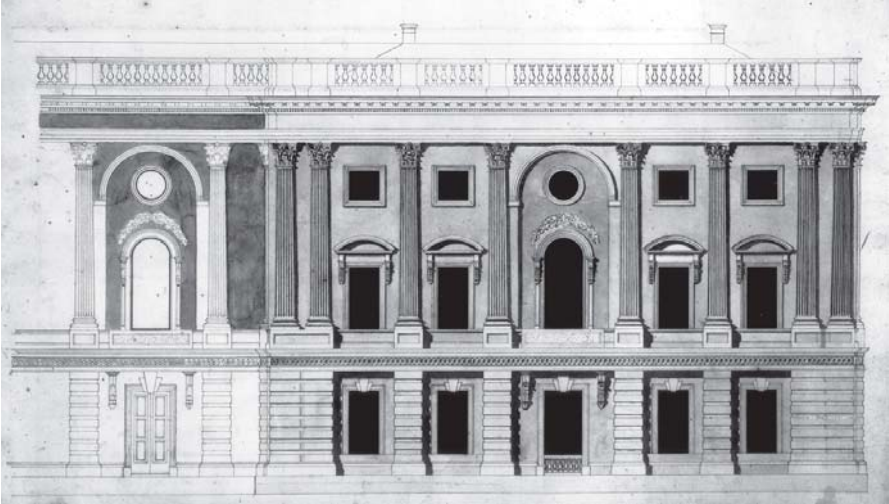
Hallet, whose design probably would have been the one chosen, if it had not been for the entry of Thornton, submitted another proposal. It was perhaps not a good idea that the Commissioners asked Hallet to evaluate Thornton's design, and gave Hallet an award that was less than Thornton's. Hallet offered major criticism of Thornton's work, Thornton rebutted, and both the President and Secretary of State had to intrude between them to reach a settlement. By July, 1793, Jefferson was able to respond to Washington's injunction to get on with the project with a formal report of the meeting he had arranged with Thornton and Hallet. Jefferson had included Hoban, who designed the President's House, two builders from Philadelphia, and then Washington himself. The plan for the east front was to be preserved as Thornton had wished, but regarding Hallet's objections Washington (Hazelton) wrote: "*After a candid discussion, it was found that the objections stated, were considered as valid both by the persons chosen by Doctor Thornton as practical Architects and competent judges of things of this kind.*" A bit of a rebuff for Thornton, and although he seems (Hazelton) to have gotten along well with Hoban, thereafter he never cared much for Hallet. Washington had the rotunda he favored and for a time Jefferson had a dome similar to one he had admired in Paris. Hallet's floor plans were to fit inside Thornton's overall scheme. Hallet was to oversee construction, Hoban was to oversee Hallet, and the cornerstone celebration could finally be held on September 18, 1793. Everyone seemed involved, even the



*West front of the Capitol, Thornton's early design. (Library of Congress)*

Commissioners ultimately, and they were the ones who approved the use of stone for facing, rather than the cheaper and more usual brick. Washington was not the last President to take a deep personal interest in the construction of the Capitol. All of the early Presidents became deeply involved, and no one of them more than Jefferson, of course.

The episode, the triumph, when Thornton applied late to compete for the design of the Capitol, and yet had his plan chosen, seems clean and simple compared to the events of the next several decades. Modifications were offered, resisted, lamented, and then overtly condemned by Thornton. The succeeding events reveal a great deal about Thornton, and perhaps even more about the complexities of decision making by groups, or by a succession of strong willed architectural experts. Experts who could, and did, act like prima donnas. If Thornton had been able to be in charge, or had really wanted to run the show rather than to comment from the sidelines, perhaps trouble would have been avoided. But he chose not to be the Superintendent. Hallet, not Thornton, became the first Superintendent for construction of the Capitol, serving particularly in 1793 and 1794, but James Hoban was also present on the scene during this time, and for a brief period all three men were replaced by George Hadfield, an Englishman who had been suggested by John Trumbull, the painter. James Hoban is now more particularly identified with construction of the White



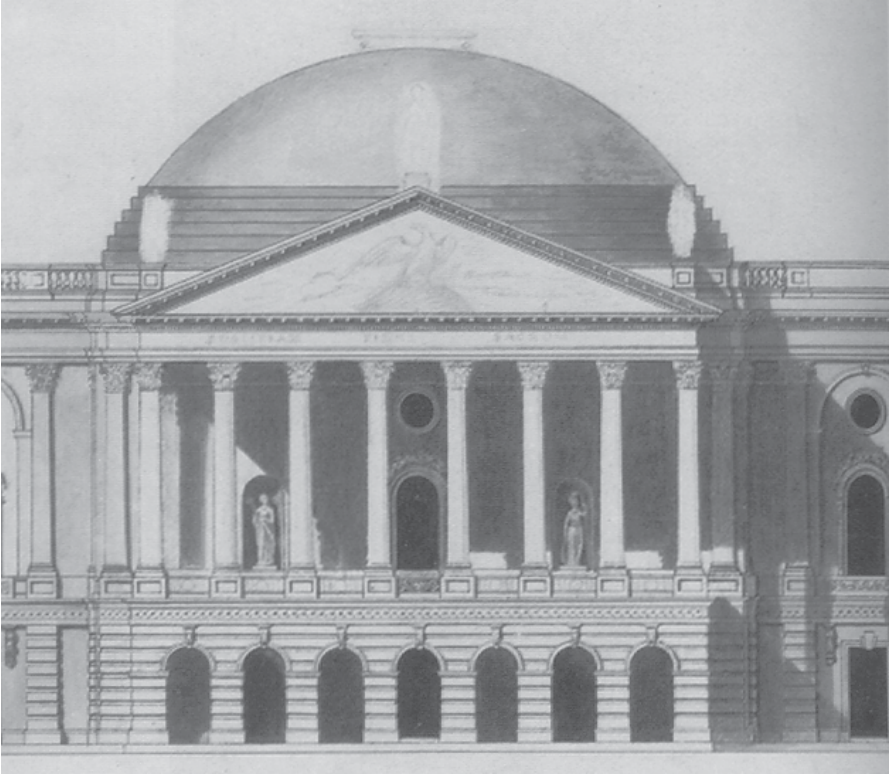
*North wing of the Capitol. (Library of Congress)*

House. In a letter to the House of Representatives of the 8<sup>th</sup> United States Congress on January 1, 1805, Thornton pointed out carefully, but in a characteristically undiplomatic fashion, his strong views regarding Hallet's failures and then Hallet's resignation, and Thornton complained that Hallet had been rehired. Thornton was sure Hallet had made unwarranted changes in Thornton's original plan. In Thornton's plea he admitted that both Hallet and Latrobe, by then also on the scene, were "*men of genius, who I acknowledge with pleasure.*" But Thornton followed with his own detailed summary of how the roof should be constructed and how the balustrade should be shaped, and he offered specific suggestions regarding the basement that had become controversial. He also explained why he was among those who had finally been convinced major changes were truly needed. On the other hand, Thornton seemed loath to supply detailed drawings as the varied floor plans and compromises were contemplated. Many people at the time were offering opinions, and not all the suggestions were sensible or practical. Some criticisms of the building came from the previous owners of the land, or from their agents, and Thornton was quick to consider these and indeed to term any proposed changes to his own plan as meddling. He felt previous property owners should stay out of the decision making about the Capitol. Thornton offered as part of his particular arguments a quote from a letter from General Washington

who stated: *“If proprietors give up land for public use, they would be reimbursed.”* Thornton emphasized that if the property is used for the public the former proprietors, having been paid, have no right to take it upon themselves to decide what should be done with that property.

This, and many other arguments, reflected an issue that existed for years: just who was to make decisions about construction in Washington, and who was to choose the decision makers? Did the former owners of the land still have any say at all? And what about the conflicting plans of Hoban or Hallet, or of the engineer and architect Latrobe, and how about Thornton himself, who was the proud original designer of the Capitol? The issues of who was in overall control at a time of divisive opinions, how to remedy what appeared to be overt defects in the building, even concerns regarding the eventual size of the Capitol building itself, were up for grabs on more than one occasion. Thornton believed it was necessary to stir the pot more than once, and as he did so he remained fiercely concerned about what would be done with the building. In the process he alienated others who also cared a great deal, and his efforts may have alienated him from some of the major decision makers. Fortunately he apparently never lost favor with Washington himself.

The District Commissioners, finally, did officially discharge Hallet as architect and supervisor in 1798, but then they rehired Hoban until 1802. Thornton himself had, of course, declined the position of Superintendent of Construction of the Capitol way back in 1793, but surely he continued to exert as much influence as he could while he served as one of the three Commissioners of the Federal City from 1794 to 1802. It has been suggested that Hallet was jealous of Thornton, since Thornton’s plan had superseded his own. On the other hand, Thornton continued stubbornly for over a decade to dispute any of the major, even the needed, improvements made by Hallet or Latrobe, and he finally disagreed even with some changes planned by the smooth Charles Bulfinch from Boston. Thornton objected regularly as each, even as any, improvement or amendment was proposed. Around 1810 Latrobe finally became the primary force for change in the building, and his skill, followed later by the tact and common sense of Charles Bulfinch, assured completion. To this day there is an office, often a very busy one, for the designated Architect of the U.S. Capitol. It can be a source of pride that despite so many opinionated designers,



*Detail of east front of the Capitol.*

almost construction by committee, the Capitol is nevertheless the most widely recognized symbol of our government.

Latrobe, on April 5, 1811, addressed a letter to Thomas Jefferson to explain the difficulties he still perceived with the north wing of the Capitol. He stated that there had been an opinion offered that he had removed the Senate chamber and offices not just without Jefferson's knowledge, but even contrary to Jefferson's expressed wishes. Latrobe stated this opinion had been originally published in an anonymous piece in the *Washington Federalist* in 1807, and that in 1808 Thornton had published in the same paper identical charges without any modification. However, by 1816 Latrobe had concluded that Thornton was not the main culprit: "*This blackguard piece was written by J. P. Vanness,*" and according to Latrobe's biographer Van Horn, Thornton did not actually make any charges against Latrobe, at least specifically not in his letter in the

Washington *Federalist*, but he did mention several changes planned by Latrobe, changes that no one else had ever contemplated. Apparently speaking about the same issue, and then of the ultimate legal suit of Latrobe against Thornton, on June 27, 1813, Latrobe wrote to his son: “*On Thursday last the old cause of Thornton came on to be tried. My counsel did not press damages however I got a verdict with costs. This plague is therefore off the list of those which have for some time beset me.*” For some time before and after the suit Thornton and Latrobe vigorously disagreed and yet, despite this, they both had, at times, also cooperated.

In a letter to Thomas Jefferson on April 14, 1811, Latrobe stated that Thornton approved of the proposed changes to the basement and columns, and he stated that he, Latrobe, wished to leave the original form and design by Thornton intact. Latrobe wrote Abner Laycock on September 24, 1814, that he was called back to Washington to repair the devastation resulting from the burning in August 1814 by the British. Latrobe had been contracted to attempt to repair what was really only a shell of the former building, and there were still structural defects. He now felt that the colonnades must come down “*a plan (the plan first submitted to Mr. Jefferson, and which would, I believe, have been executed but for the interference of Dr. Thornton).*” About July of 1815 Jefferson heard again from Thornton in an undated letter that begins, “*Mr. Latrobe has arrived and I heard this morning he is preparing to alter the representative chamber entirely.*” Thornton suggested that his original elliptical plan was superior to the new Latrobe plan, which was for a hemicycle. Thornton felt his personal plan would help with the acoustics: “*As ellipses contain no part of a circle there is no repercussion of sound from it, and the voice can be distinctly heard everywhere.*” He also said that the elliptical chamber he had planned was: “*without any of those little breaks that destroy the unity, grandeur, and dignity of architecture.*” Thornton also attempted to go through Jefferson to launch an indirect appeal to President Madison. At the same time Thornton suggested that the Executive Office Building area be doubled in length and that the colonnades on the side of the President’s House end with a domed “*temple.*” Not one of these suggestions came to pass.

When the eminently practical and very American Charles Bulfinch was next appointed to oversee revisions of the Capitol on January 8, 1818, he



discovered that basic changes in the structure were still required. This skillful and politic man was keenly aware of previous dissensions, arguments, and mixed directions. Overall Bulfinch was clearly sympathetic to the neo-classicism of Thornton's original elevations, probably more sympathetic than was ever true of Latrobe.

The relationship of Thornton with Jefferson was also complex, but was fruitful overall, despite any potential political differences. Thornton and his wife visited Monticello several times. Jefferson, on May 9, 1817, solicited the advice of Thornton regarding designs for the University of Virginia, and on the 12<sup>th</sup> of June he wrote an almost identical letter to Latrobe. Both Thornton's and Latrobe's suggestions were utilized by Jefferson, but it was the suggestions and drawings of Thornton that led to the innovative arcade under a second story portico which fronted pavilion #7, the first such arcade to be erected at Jefferson's beloved University. Even if Thornton designed the graceful first arch, the sweeping over-all plan was more that of Latrobe.

Thornton and Latrobe were linked again when both were consulted by members of the North Carolina delegation to the U.S. Senate regarding who was best suited to carve a statue of Washington for the new State House in Raleigh, North Carolina. Both agreed that Carrara marble would be the best material, and that Antonio Canova of Italy would be the best sculptor to do the work. The earlier statue of Franklin, prepared for the Philadelphia Library, is draped in a Roman toga, the fashion of the time. Nevertheless, the one sculpted by Canova to represent General Washington, sitting near nude and draped in a toga, seems anachronistic to a modern eye. At any rate, though the statue was completed, and even praised, it was destroyed when the State House in North Carolina burned. It is probable that Thornton and Latrobe each knew the other's opinion of the statue, discussed the problem together, and each supplied a review of the relative value of Italian marble compared with marble found in the United States. There are sketches by Latrobe of areas quarried to obtain local marble for construction.

There is additional evidence that reconciliation between Thornton and Latrobe did occur. Latrobe sent a specification of a lock that he had designed, and wished to patent, to Patent Commissioner Thornton on February 15, 1815. On September 30, 1816 Latrobe said that he had indeed obtained the patent. A



*Pavilion 7, the University of Virginia. (Wills)*

different attempt to produce the brass lock and market it in England did not bear fruit, but Latrobe stated: *“The lock has taken wonderfully with the Commissioner who’s carried it about with him in his pocket and shown it to everybody.”* It thus seems that somehow Thornton and Latrobe, despite major differences, each managed to respect the other’s abilities as their days to cooperate together grew shorter.

In fact, as with the steamboat story involving Thornton, no one person is responsible for the success of our Capitol building. Not only Thornton, or Jefferson, or Hallet, or Hoban, and then Bulfinch contributed. Many outstanding men of the day were involved; as were workmen, including slaves. The location still seems ideal, and the building is instantly recognizable all over the world. The later overly dominant dome, not a part of the original plan of Thornton, was not completed until after the Civil War. Thornton’s concept that the West Side entrance was to be primary, looking toward the President’s house and across the mall, is not what we now have. If the White House had opened to the South, not the North as now; and the Capitol faced the West as planned, the two key buildings would face one another as Legislators moved between. Both East and West entrances are, however, memorable, and our Capitol looks both back East

toward Europe, and forward to the West in the direction of the future growth of the country.



CHAPTER 6

## William Thornton, Residential Designer

**1782-1784** Sketching castles in Scotland, attends art classes in London.

**1789** Thornton wins the competition for the design for the Philadelphia Library.

**1799** Designs what becomes known as the Octagon.

**1799** Thornton supervises construction of houses for George Washington near the Capitol.

**1800-1825** Thornton designed the gardens of the White House, helped Daniel Carroll, Thomas Law, and others with their homes.

**1800** Designed Woodlawn for the niece of Washington's.

**1805** Designed Tudor Place.

**1817** Designed Pavilion VII for Jefferson's University of Virginia.

Numerous other residencies may have been influenced by him, including Willow Brook, the Calvert Mansion, Montevideo, and James Madison's Montpelier.

Thornton, based on his winning designs for the Philadelphia Library and for the Capitol, and encouraged by his contacts with the cultured citizens of Washington, was chosen as architect for an unknown number of private residencies. The documents that were saved say little or nothing about his opinion of this important aspect of his career, but several significant buildings remain as recognized tributes to his skill.

**The Octagon House:** John and Ann Tayloe, in the spring of 1799, began the construction of a town house, located two blocks west of the President's Palace. They already had one or more plantation houses, but this was to be their official urban residence. After a few false starts, including extensive preliminary

consultations with Benjamin Latrobe, they chose Thornton as their architect, and he designed for them what is now called the Octagon House. It is this house, more than any other residence, which preserves the name of Dr. William Thornton as architect of private homes. First of all, who was Tayloe?

John Tayloe III (1771-1828) was the product of four generations of Virginia planters who lived on a successful estate on the Rappahannock River, an estate that included thousands of acres and employed at least 300 slaves. According to the British diplomat Sir Augustus John Foster, the Tayloes had become the richest family in all of Virginia by 1806, making \$60,000 per year from their 15,000 acres in Mount Airy, Virginia, plus an additional profit from their 3000 acres in Maryland. When John III was 20 years old, his father died, leaving John with eight sisters and a grand estate to manage. Young Tayloe rapidly assumed firm control of the plantation and found his necessary wife in Ann Ogle, daughter of a prominent family in Maryland. There was, at the time, a feeling of many that marriage and posterity was designed to assure enlargement of the family estate, rather than that the estate should supply funds for posterity. Ann Ogle's grandfather and her father had both been governors, and she was related to many of the most wealthy and prestigious families in Maryland society. Her own father owned a plantation of 2000 acres, and her family seems to have been as interested as was the Tayloe family in fine horses and in genteel living. Sally, the sister of our Colonel John Tayloe, as he was often called, married one of General Washington's nephews, William Augustine Washington. It may have been General Washington himself who persuaded Tayloe to build his urban home in D.C. rather than in Philadelphia. After an unsuccessful try as a politician, John Tayloe evolved into a very successful manager of his plantations, while at the same time he recognized the advantages of potential new business connections within the Federal City. It was an exciting time, and John Tayloe made the most of it.

The sweeping design for the future city of Washington, largely those of L'Enfant, confirmed President Washington's vision of an expansive new capital to begin in the spring and summer of 1791. The concepts of L'Enfant included broad avenues and open vistas for the entire 20 square mile area of the District of Columbia. The location was finally settled after the Proclamation of 1791, but

private homes were needed to make the dream a town. Perhaps nothing in American history so documents the importance of George Washington as does the location of our capital - and its name - but for the capital to survive more than just his famous name was needed. People had to come and live in the city. They needed residencies. The location seemed ideal for Washington's friends, the Tayloes of Virginia, and the district needed both their business and their home.



*John Tayloe.*

L'Enfant's plan extended over thousands of acres, but at the time of Tayloe the projected city remained largely a dream. Wild game was present in the woods and sturgeon swam in the Potomac. A mere handful of landholders owned the few dozen homes. Speculators seeking a fortune soon almost outnumbered local residents as the capital developed. It was true that L'Enfant anticipated an eventual city of hundreds of thousands, but neither he nor any others of his time could have glimpsed the full extent of Washington's growth during the next 200 years. In his own time, in the new capital, Tayloe did as well as any in predicting wise paths for financial speculation. He displayed wisdom, as well, in his choice of location and style for his urban home. From its beginning merchants such as Tayloe and realtors in the Federal City competed for areas to develop, including the lands close to George Town. Settlement would also obviously include lands extending across east from George Town to the location for the President's house, over and beyond Rock Creek, past the Capitol itself, and finally to the area at Greenleaf Point where the two branches of the Potomac merged. Eventual major development was planned for the area along the protected shoreline of the eastern branch of the Potomac, but this region was destined to develop sluggishly. Fortunes were rapidly made, and fortunes equally rapidly lost, during the first decades of feverish development of property in the capital. Tayloe was one of the few wise investors who prospered with their purchases, and he was successful in the home he built. Then he managed to conserve much of what he made for the future use of his large family.

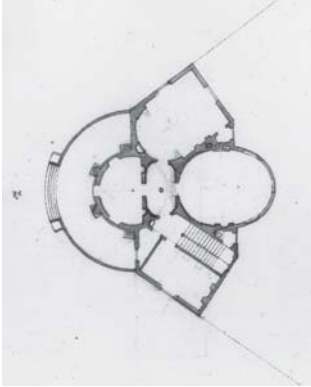


*William Thornton and John Tayloe as young men and at about the same time. Both died in 1828.*

The Federal Government was officially scheduled to occupy the District of Columbia in 1800. Its officers had already begun to arrive from Philadelphia while the Tayloes were settling into Washington and arranging for their family home and series of urban businesses. The Tayloes chose a lot, number 8, and later also number 9, for their slaves and stables, located at the intersection of New York Avenue and 18<sup>th</sup> Street. The house was only a block or two from the President's Palace. At the time the surrounding area was largely undeveloped, and the plot for the home retained a glorious view of the Potomac River. Tayloe's house not only was in close proximity to the President's house, but it was also reasonably close to the busy little village of George Town. Thornton, by that time one of the Commissioners of the district, was probably the one who specifically encouraged the Tayloes to build on this peculiar triangular-shaped plot. As one of the Commissioners of the district, Thornton had advised President Washington in 1796 to assign specific sites for ambassadors' houses. These were to be placed all around the area that the Tayloes eventually chose, and the selection of this particular plot by the Tayloes located them in the center of what was to be the first, and the most exclusive, new residential area of Washington. Since Thornton personally witnessed the deed of purchase for the Tayloes, it seems probable that it was indeed his encouragement that led to their







*Drawing for the Octagon House.*

ultimate selection of the lot. The more fully trained English architect, Benjamin Latrobe, soon to be one with whom Thornton could, and did, repeatedly argue, prepared several sets of plans for the Tayloes' fancy new home, but none of these designs seemed to fit comfortably within the triangular lot of what was then called Square 170. At the request of the Tayloes, Thornton next provided what became the final design for the house, called after several decades the Octagon House.

Thornton may have become a friend of the Tayloes through their mutual interest in fine horses and high society. Bryan quotes Mrs. Thornton in 1800 as having 23 horses on their farm, and there was also a racing stud. In fact Thornton even owned a lot on the opposite side of York Avenue from Tayloe's new home, but Bryan adds: "...he went so far as to make a plan for a house which was not built, owing no doubt, to the lack of funds, which was a common experience in the life of a man who moved in a large orbit but one not within the range of either the making or the saving of money." As Frary writes: *Washington was a familiar visitor at the Thornton home when in the Federal City. Jefferson, Madison, Randolph, L'Enfant, Hamilton, Adams, Fulton, and numerous others were numbered among his close acquaintances. His social circle embraced the Tayloes, Stuarts, Carrolls, Van Nesses, and many other families of distinction. By them his acquaintance was prized because of his social graces, his familiarity with the arts and sciences and, perhaps not least of all, by his love of race horses. This in itself was an open sesame to the southern heart.* In addition, and the most valid reason of all for his acceptance in the small and close knit society, Thornton was a locally respected artist, and the designer of the U.S. Capitol. Nevertheless it is also true that both Thornton and Tayloe were the sons of genteel plantation owners, both were fond of racehorses, both were slave owners, and both enjoyed the company of other wealthy and well-educated gentlemen. Both also considered themselves special friends of General Washington. If that seems unusual in our day, to be well acquainted with the president and other leaders of the day, the second census in 1800 gave



*The Octagon House, behind which is the American Institute of Architects building.*

the total population of the District, including Georgetown, as 8144, and Bryan calculated the total population in Washington as only a little over three thousand, including slaves.

The original drawings Thornton did for the Octagon House are missing, but the Latrobe designs are still available and these consist of seven sheets of plans, elevations, and sections, with interior detailing. Latrobe later commented, somewhat wistfully, that the Tayloe house is among those that remained “*castles in the air*” for him. Although Latrobe’s design clearly does not fit comfortably in the space, there were other reasons to choose Thornton, including the politics of the time. Tayloe was said to be a Federalist, a believer in a strong central government, while Latrobe was a Republican, the party of Jefferson that claimed to speak for farmers and laborers. Another reason Thornton might have been chosen over Latrobe was that Latrobe was too busy in 1799, being employed for designs as far away as Philadelphia and Richmond.

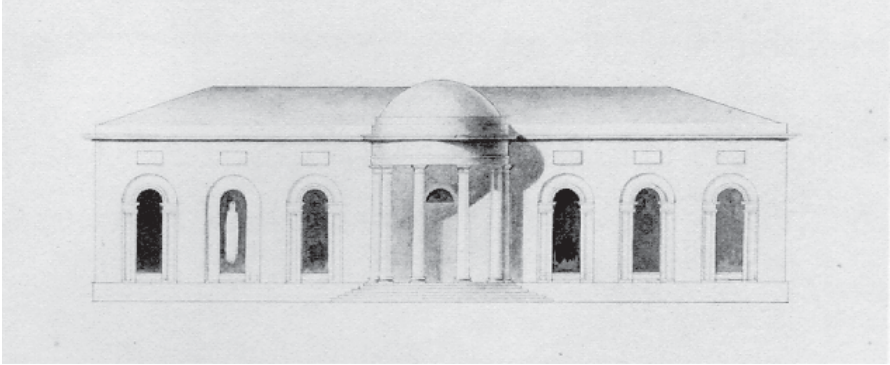
Tayloe and Thornton (McCue) had originally hoped to build the house for \$13,000, but the design offered by Thornton ended up costing the family \$30,000. As has been pointed out by Orlando Ridout, since the Tayloe properties generated double that amount per year in income it is difficult to be too sympathetic about a \$30,000 expense for the new house. For two years John Tayloe carefully considered the Latrobe design, and the lot, but the two just didn't fit together. So Thornton got the commission, and to this day he gets credit for the unusual and beautiful design. The home is not actually a pure octagon at all, of course, but it is a precious gem, that is for sure.

With this work Thornton began the first of his known residential designs. Although the current museum at the Octagon House preserves many of the original records, very little has been found to explain the several changes in original designs prepared by Thornton, nor does the record clarify the role of Thornton himself in staged modifications. There was no tradition, although it began to change with Latrobe, for the original architect to monitor each step of construction. Skilled carpenters, masons, or overseers attended to the myriad of details. By the time of construction, Thornton had become a busy district Commissioner, and had been named one of the first architects for the Capitol building. It is probable that he delegated most of the details of the Tayloe house to workmen who were in turn very closely supervised by John Tayloe himself.

Although Thornton proudly wrote, more than once, that he was untrained as an architect, his observations in Europe as well as the readily available books of patterns for construction clearly influenced his designs for the Octagon House. Thornton is known to have admired several private residencies in Scotland and he repeatedly dipped into drawings from the design books that had been printed for amateur and professional architects working in either America or England. Thornton suggested several alternative floor plans for the Octagon, and after eventual modifications, the triangular space was utilized imaginatively. For Thornton, the Tayloe project was reinforcement, in his own mind at least, of himself as a cultured gentleman, as a potential force for design in Washington City, and as a true intellectual; and possibly success convinced him that he could function successfully as an architect. He was in some ways a typical gentleman of the age, and it was that quality which opened the doors of the powerful to him. For unclear reasons he did not feel comfortable collecting fees in

Washington as a doctor, although the low fees did not prevent him from offering medical service to a few friends. Once, after the death of the General, Martha sent for Thornton to treat a relative and after a ride of twenty miles he did so. He wrote very little about medical practice, but did argue effectively that mental illnesses rested on an organic basis and was often reflected in difficulty with speech, heredity, or brain injury. Thornton also failed to commit himself wholeheartedly to the tedious work of a full-time architect or builder who would supervise all the brickwork, interior construction, installation of windows, etc. Perhaps he could just not do it. More likely his interests were always too many, too scattered, and his self-image included effort and excellence in multiple areas. Nevertheless both of the Thorntons, man and wife, became close acquaintances of the Tayloes by the time of completion of the Octagon house and they often visited one another after the home had become a showplace. Thanks to the American Institute of Architects, who leased the Octagon in 1897 and then purchased it from the Tayloe family for \$ 30,000, the building was saved from decay, and remains a treasured monument to Thornton. The project surely helped Thornton in his lifetime solidify his friendships with the genteel class of Washington, and by the early 1800s he had successfully established himself as a major local expert in design. Indeed for some years he was an official architect for the City, although others, men such as Hallet and Latrobe, had been more adequately trained.

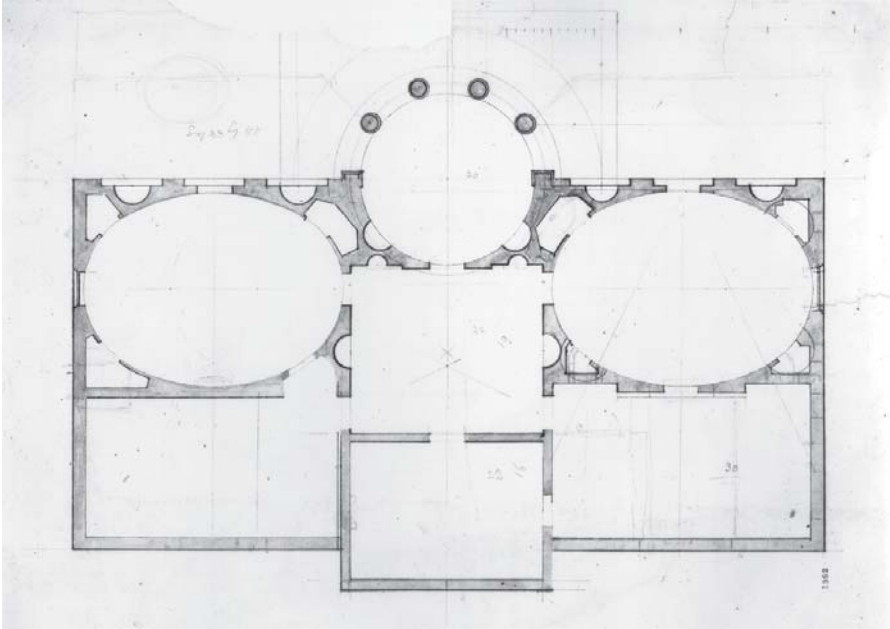
**Tudor Place:** The lovely home built between 1805 and 1816 for Thomas and Martha Peter also utilized a design supplied by Thornton. The history of the building is described and attractively pictured in a book by a direct descendant, Peter Armistead, III, the owner in 1969, a book that includes handsome drawings by Thornton and an expansive commentary on Thornton by Frederick Nichols. Tudor Place was built to accommodate the growing new family of the Peters and was part of an originally spacious tract of 795 acres. The original name, the Rock of Dumbarton, apparently reflected the Scottish origin of the earlier owner. In 1795, Thomas Peter, Jr., married Martha Parke Custis, the daughter of Martha Washington's son John Parke Custis, "*Jacky*" to the General, and in honor of the marriage, Thomas Peter, Sr., the patriarch of the family who was a successful tobacco merchant, gave them a new house on K Street. That house has been demolished, and over its prior location there now



*Drawing for the Tudor House.*

runs a freeway. Tudor Place was built to accommodate what was to be the busy young family of Thomas and Martha, a couple who eventually had eight surviving children. Some of the daughters had remarkable names, including America Pinckney, Columbia Washington, and Britannia Wellington. (Ecker, page 212) Britannia was born on January 27, 1815, and lived in the house until her 96<sup>th</sup> birthday. It was pointed out by her descendant that the rationale for the name Britannia is puzzling, since only six months earlier her mother, standing side by side with Mrs. William Thornton, had watched from the west wing of the Tudor Place as the Capitol was burned by the British. Tudor House is remarkable in that it remained in the hands of the original family for so many years and that it even now survives completely intact. Many prominent visitors have passed through its arches and gardens. The Marquis de Lafayette visited the house in October of 1824, and gave a desk to little Britannia. Robert E. Lee, the Confederate Hero, perhaps reflecting the old friendship of the Peter family with the Custis children, made it his home for his last visit to the District of Columbia during May of 1869 (Jackson, page 68). Tudor House has now become open for less famous folks to visit and to admire.

Many of the architects of the time, not just Thornton, were seeking pure geometrical forms, as can be seen not only in the Tudor house but also in Jefferson's rotunda at the University of Virginia, designed as a sphere set within a cylinder. At the time there was also a taste for romantic classicism throughout cultured America, and both Jefferson and Thornton were contributors to that trend. Any gentleman of the time was expected to be multifaceted, and to



*Drawing for the Tudor House.*

demonstrate skill and interest in art and architecture. William Dunlap, a friend of Thornton's, said: "*He was a scholar and gentleman – full of talent and eccentricity, a Quaker by profession, painter, poet, and a horse-racer well acquainted with mechanic's art . . . he was a man of infinite humor – human and generous, yet fond of field sport – his company was a complete antidote to dullness.*" Such personal qualities, as well as his skill, would have made him attractive to the leaders of the time even if his letters did sometimes trigger offense. Thornton may also have been selected as architect for Tudor Place because of his personal linkage with George Washington, whose gift to his granddaughter paid for the home. Furthermore the family, as was true of their friend Thornton, owned slaves, and they probably shared political views.

Thornton seemed particularly gifted in his ability to adapt the design of one structure to fit another setting, and there were several patterns to choose from. The different schools of architecture in the fledgling United States, at the time, included those inherited from the earlier English tradition, a New England School based upon a rational and nationalistic appearance, and buildings with a strong link to the old-fashioned English Palladianism; all very distinct patterns



*The Tudor House.*

in addition to the romantic classicism encouraged so successfully by Jefferson. Jefferson, Hallett, and Latrobe, all three heavily involved with construction of the Capitol, had many contacts with Thornton regarding the preferred architectural styles for the grand homes of the new nation. Thornton gradually evolved his ideas for the Tudor Place from an initial complex and formal beginning into the elegant and rather daringly simple house that was eventually erected. In the Tudor House, Thornton placed oval wings within restricted rectangles, all linked to a prominent circular center. The family referred to the primary central area as “*the temple.*” The central hall has sweeping coves and quarter rounds with fillets, beautiful windows, and ornate wooden strips. The entrance facade is simple, but the garden side offers pleasant shelter with the arch of the porch completed within the structure of the house. The architect created a unified composition in the house, a whole that still inspires and pleases. In the process he stimulated others to use the treatment of triple windows under an arched recess. The location of Tudor Place has seen many changes since the day a homesick Scot named Beal named the general area the Rock of Dumbarton. During the Civil War the home was temporarily turned over to wounded soldiers, perhaps in an effort to avoid confiscation of the mansion, the owners of which had been slave owners and possibly even southern sympathizers. They were relatives of the Custis family whose mansion could





*Woodlawn. (Cannavaro)*

then be seen across the Potomac River, from where the children of the two families could signal each other from the windows.

**Woodlawn:** Thornton designed the home for Nellie Custis and Lawrence Lewis who were married at Mount Vernon in February 1799, the last year of Washington's life. Before he died, in December 1799, Washington gave the land to them. Nellie was one of two Custis granddaughters and her husband Lewis was Washington's nephew. The property was part of 2,000 acres of land offered to the couple as a wedding gift. Thornton, in addition to supplying the design, returned frequently during the construction. The Thorntons welcomed any chance to visit with the beloved General and his family.

Thornton developed a severe cold during March, 1800, at a time he was at the future Woodlawn helping arrange the removal of trees that blocked the view towards Mt. Vernon. He had to spend some days in recovery at Mt. Vernon, and for his return home Martha Washington gave him two kegs of brandy, ones she said the General always had meant for him to have. Martha surely knew that Thornton had at least an intellectual interest in the production of wine and spirits. At about that time he purchased two female asses for \$180 from Martha Washington's estate, but for the time being left them at Mt. Vernon for feeding. In August 1800, William and Anna Maria Thornton again spent a weekend at Mt. Vernon. Dr. James Craik, Washington's dear friend who had ministered at the death of the General, as well as several others, were also guests of Mrs.

Washington at the time. One wonders if Thornton, who had by then published criticism of the terminal management of Washington, brought up the issue of the excessive bleeding of the General. The other guests included a couple who had just come up to see the house and were invited to dinner by the “*amiable*” Martha Washington. The morning they were to leave the Thorntons discovered their horse was missing, so Mrs. Washington invited them to stay yet another day until a replacement horse could arrive from Washington.

Thornton, in addition to planning the construction of Woodlawn with Lewis, selected chestnut saplings from the area to transfer closer to his own home in Washington. The family also surely discussed Thornton’s hopes for a monument, a tomb for Washington within the Capitol building, but despite all of Thornton’s efforts to arrange that memorial, George Washington’s body was to rest at Mt. Vernon, just as Martha had always insisted.

It is surprising that in this most lasting of Thornton’s accomplishments, his architectural accomplishments, the documents left in his files are particularly thin. There must have been other architectural efforts, including designs for Thornton’s own several houses, and for the two houses that he supervised for Washington, and for which he managed the bills while the houses were being built as rental property. Even the trips to visit Madison’s home probably led to architectural suggestions. A note by Editor Hunt in the Smith papers (page 236) says: “*The original house at Montpelier was built between 1756 and 1760 by Madison’s father and was a plain rectangular brick edifice of four rooms. It was enlarged at different times and various improvements made, the most important being in 1809 by Dr. Thornton.*” The review by Davis credits Thornton with one of Charles Carroll of Carrollton’s great homes. This member of the extended Carroll clan did not refer to himself as “*of Duddington*”, nor of “*Carrollton*”, but “*of Bellvue*”, the location with a house which was later moved and rebuilt as the current Dumbarton House. Another Carroll, Bishop Carroll of Baltimore, consulted with Thornton about the new Baltimore Cathedral, but it was ultimately built using a plan supplied by Latrobe. Thornton, without firm documentation except a mention in his wife’s diary, has been credited with personal residences and rental properties for the wealthy and aristocratic Englishman, Thomas Law, who married Eliza Parke Custis, another granddaughter of Martha Washington. Davis states Thornton was the architect

of St. John's Church in Georgetown. Davis also mentions that some commentators, long after he was dead, classed Thornton as the greatest architect of the time. For a man who said his method to win the competition for the Philadelphia Library, later to house the Philosophical Society that honored Thornton, was simply (Pierson): "*I got some books and worked a few days, then gave a plan in the ancient Ionic order which carried the day,*" that is high praise indeed.



*St. John's Church, Georgetown.*



CHAPTER 7

## Republican versus Federalist in the times of Dr. Thornton

**Words can heal, enlist, inflame, or wound. Republic and Federal were such words in early America.**

**Republic implies Greece and Rome, or a type of architecture, or a representative government.**

**Federal implies a territorially diversified pattern, a local plus a strong central governmental system.**

**Federalists were represented by Hamilton and Adams, Republicans by Jefferson and Madison.**

**Although Washington felt political parties should not be necessary, soon Federalists and Republicans became two distinct groups.**

**Federalists as a viable party atrophied after the Hamilton, Burr, and Adams difficulties.**

**Federalists, and Thornton was classed as one by some people, were often considered aristocratic and privileged.**

**Republicans, in Jefferson's dream, represented the noble laborer who worked the soil.**

Words are powerful. In Thornton's day they probably meant different things than is the case currently. Words also have different meanings to different people, and words can inflame even the most sensible of people. People choose sides on the basis of words; and humans as well as causes die because of words. The powerful effect of words in the days of our founding fathers, standard designations for people and parties in the early capital, was no different than the intensity some still feel about a label. The words *republic* and *republican* and *federal* and *federalist* are good examples, and are relevant to discussions about Thornton and his day. Thornton was labeled, even derisively by some, including

by Latrobe, as a Federalist, a member of the party that was already going out of favor during the Jeffersonian years. Thornton called himself a Republican more than once, and his philosophy may have changed, even if his lodestar was always the opinion of General Washington. What did these labels mean at our nation's historical beginnings? And did Thornton's appearance, language, and aspirations cause him to be labeled Federalist at a time that title implied aristocracy and privilege? There was something about Thornton, the man, that generated antipathy in some that knew him well, and one reason may have been the suspicion that this man, this cultured gentleman of the time, who came from England and seemed, according to some, "almost French," might be an aristocrat by nature and by choice.

Republic may mean a state that is not ruled by a monarch, or a state where power is in the hands of representatives of the people rather than held directly by the people. This is in contrast to a democracy, which more generally, at least in our day, means any regime in which the government depends on popular will, although several totalitarian governments have shamelessly claimed to be a "democracy." The term republic has also commonly been applied by historians to one phase of ancient Rome, and also to the Greek city-states that included many classes of citizens, even slaves. Elimination of a monarch, a freedom ardently fought for by many in 1776, does not necessarily mean there is freedom for all, and certainly absence of a monarch does not eliminate the risk of having an irresponsible ruler, even a dictator, in control. Furthermore, the presence of a representative hardly means perfect representation. Justice Anthony Scalia of the United States Supreme Court at the time of the millennial celebrations in 2000 informally suggested that the major legal advance of the past 1000 years has been the move toward a representative rather than a monarchical government; a shift away from government by kingly genetics, or government by the most ruthless or strongest, toward government by leaders chosen by the people. Among the major elements seen in both the American Revolution and the French Revolution was the desire to eliminate monarchical rule. Another feature of both revolutions was the dream, at the time truly amazing, of rule by the consent of the governed with full and equal protection of the rights of each individual man. Equal for each man, but not for each person, not for each woman, and certainly not for each slave. James Madison used the term republic

to mean a representative government as opposed to direct democracy. Madison hoped we could, by such checks and balances, avoid the potential “*tyranny of the majority.*”

One of the additional aspects of the term republic, for Thornton as well as for many in the early USA, was the appearance of the architecture in republican Rome and Greece with idealization and copying of this form of architecture. The central portion of our Capitol reflects the Parthenon of ancient Rome, or at least did so in the original design prepared by Thornton. Probably this choice by Thornton was part of the reason Washington and Jefferson so readily approved of his designs. Thornton readily utilized features of Roman architecture as well as the Georgian construction patterns he had studied in Scotland and England. And he did so in a manner that seemed at the time entirely logical. As Frary writes about the Capitol: “*Washington said ‘grandeur, simplicity, and convenience appear so well combined in this plan of Dr. Thornton,’ that he felt assured it would meet with the Commissioners approval.*”

The basic philosophical concepts of the Federalists before 1800 seemed to be, at least for us in retrospect, remarkably sensible. They felt, in fact they knew, that it was necessary to replace an almost impotent and clearly dying Confederation with a new and stronger Constitution that linked the states. The nation, if it was to be a nation, had to develop uniform policies in areas ranging as widely as from customs and import duties to a totally new relationship as the sovereign nation dealt with France and England. Powerful men were guiding the ship of state; Henry Knox was in the War Department, and Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson were in place as Secretaries of the Treasury and of the State Department. Other able men were beginning to explore the potentials of the Northwest Territory, and there was discussion of the possibility for an adequate mails system and predictable collection of taxes.

The brief interruption of tranquility and then its restoration when 15,000 militiamen responded in 1794 to President Washington at the time of “*Shays Rebellion,*” confirmed more than anything else the eagerness of ordinary citizens to have the experiment in nationhood succeed. Nevertheless, the people that were crucial to achieve success included the landowners and owners of large estates, and the new merchants and entrepreneurs. The clergy also remained significant, as did former officers of the Revolutionary Army and Representatives

in Congress. It was this group of upper class leaders, loosely aligned together, which came to be called the Federalists. Washington held himself above any party, but he did accept the overall Federalist program with an emphasis on focused power and a national administration. Soon Jefferson and his friends in the Republican Party, or the Democratic Republican as the party was called, offered a counter weight with emphasis on progress in agriculture, small farms, and crafts, in contrast to the manufacturing and industrial development that fit better with the goals of many of the Federalists. When Thomas Jefferson is spoken of as a Republican, the title implies one who defends the rights of individual land owners and small farmers, and by extension includes those who believe that freedom within the states, and a predominantly agrarian system, is the true key to a successful Confederation of States, and even the key to a successful United States.

The Federalists, in the infant republic, were most clearly represented by the written views of Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, men who felt that a strong central government, a national bank and a national military, for example, were necessary components for true progress to occur. The concept of a federal government is usually characterized by a territorially diversified pattern; and there are often two levels of such a government, the local and the central. The Hamiltonian and Madisonian concept of a federal system, one that accepted limited autonomy for the states, provided varied communities a chance to organize themselves with different interpretations in different ways, at different times, and in different parts of the nation. In contrast, the Republicans felt that the independent spirit of men who worked the soil offered the best assurance of survival of the American experiment.

In this discussion one can already sense the seeds of the looming North versus South split in the country. There was sincere concern by some that the growing power of the executive branch would mean not just creation of a central power, but a return to a monarchy. Jefferson and others felt that special privileges inevitably meant an equal tendency to corruption. A few citizens probably felt that government of any sort or in any fashion, at its best, was always an evil, even if a necessary evil. Fortunately for the future of the American experiment, the Constitution, plus Washington's personality, led to an administrative style which assured that cabinet members did have input,



conveyed information, and occasionally could dominate on policy decisions, even though the ultimate authority was vested in the chief executive. This strong central system tended to break down during the time of John Adams, primarily because of his personality plus his prolonged absences from the capital city, but also because of the rising significance of Jefferson, the planters, and the southern landholders. Washington's personal dominance assured that during the 181 days in eight years that he traveled outside of the capitol in Philadelphia, or made tours, his policies were still firmly in effect. The powerful cabinet pulled together as a group to make decisions and then rapidly moved to have presidential approval. Adams during only four years as President was gone a total of 385 days, and by nature Adams was less likely than Washington to have cleared up departmental business before he left. Adams had never had experience in leading men who were recalcitrant, an experience Washington had so much of when he was a general. Sometimes a ruler maintains power by not acting, by not consulting, and some of the consolidation of power within the Presidency during Washington's two terms may have reflected the fact that it was not congenial for Washington to negotiate one on one with legislators. At the time there was often no clear leader within the legislative branch, in contrast to times since. The Federalist solution regarding the Presidency was thus to develop leadership by active direction from the President in all stages of negotiation, foreign and local, and to set a cultural tone for the country as a whole.

The Federalists in general felt Congress wouldn't really lose anything by requesting direction from the executive branch of government, and for a time the House of Representatives frequently did seek leadership from the Executive Branch. Nevertheless, even before Washington's second term ended, Congress had expressed increasing unwillingness to rely exclusively on executive leadership from the President or through his Cabinet. The consolidation and success of the Federalists at the time, albeit briefly as seen in retrospect, was enhanced by the skill of Alexander Hamilton who was in charge of the Treasury. The Secretary of the Treasury was the one with the most central role, was at the crucial seat of power, and his policies affected all the country. At the time the Treasury was our largest department, and it remained our most influential one for the next several decades. Secretary of the Treasury Hamilton also dealt with

the entire country because of the customs service, as well as through the post office. It is now generally agreed that Alexander Hamilton was the greatest administrative genius of his time and one of the best public administrators of all time. His restless energy and ability at analysis fit comfortably with his Federalist views, while he and the other great men of his day helped the new country evolve. It was Hamilton, along with Madison and John Jay (1745-1829), who had composed the Federalist Papers with its systematic exposition of public administration. The word Federalist in the nation's politics appeared in connection with that series of 85 essays on the proposed new constitution, written in 1787 and 1788. These papers offered a comprehensive analysis of the means by which the ideals of justice, welfare, and personal rights could best develop under the mantle of a strong central government. The authors assumed that every man's primary political motive is self-interest, and good government by fallible men, in the absence of a governing God, will necessarily rest on the ability of men to devise institutions that compensate for deficiencies that are universal. From the concept of a federalist approach arose the formal Federalist Party, the group that initially was almost completely responsible for the organization of the national government of the United States. The Federalists felt that republican institutions, including the principle of absolute majority rule, were not necessarily good when uncontrolled, but did, if controlled and when tied to appropriate legal limitations, constitute the best means to pursue both rights and justice.

The Hamilton-Jefferson feud that soon became apparent at many levels, including in departmental inter-relationships, plus their personal antipathy, limited even at the top most level the success of efforts for a centralized Federalist approach. In dealing with foreign powers, with Indians, with state and international relationships, and with federal laws, there was much to recommend the approach of the Federalists, and to this day their style of administration strongly influences our government. The Federalists tended to have definite ideas about the role of government in all areas and their views soon separated them from those who chose to rally around Jefferson, or Gallatin, in the group called the Republican Democrats. The Federalist concept was not "*warmly democratic*," as White has pointed out. It was government for the people but not government by the people. The Federalists were by nature

supporters of a strong executive branch and were concerned that government would become too weak, not that it would become too strong. Thornton was identified, usually pejoratively, as a Federalist. He clearly benefited from eventual designation of a single strong national patent office during the time of the Federalists, but despite that for some years the Secretaries of State and Treasury and the ex-officio Board of War, the Attorney General, as well as the individual states, could all bypass Thornton to award patents.

By 1787, the specific political group that had developed during the presidency of George Washington was officially calling itself the Federalist Party. Ultimately it was not to survive, but in 1791 its political organization seemed solidified as a movement led in large part by Alexander Hamilton and John Adams. The Republicans, the “*Democratic Republicans*,” and later to become the Democratic Party, were led by Jefferson and Madison. They eventually became suspicious of any strong central authority whereas the Federalists felt central control was absolutely necessary. Many of our early leaders thought it should not be necessary to have more than one party. All were to be Federalists and all were to be part of a federal style of Republic, loyal citizens were not to stoop to become “*political squabblers*.” Nevertheless a persistent two party system soon evolved, and eventually became another protection for political rights.

Washington never foresaw the desirability of having such two openly competing approaches, nor any need for two parties. The Federalist Party soon provoked deep public resentment, as each side, both Federal and Republican, accused the other of intolerance and of pandering to a narrow and elite group. By 1801, the insufficiency and political incapacity of the Federalists, their internal dissension including particularly that between Aaron Burr (1756-1836) and Alexander Hamilton (1755-1804), and the inability of the Federalists to persuade the majority of the country, led to the common feeling that to be Federalist was to be supportive of power, influence, or monopoly. Americans have more than once rejected, out of hand, any concept or person that smacked overtly of elitism. As John Adams himself noted, there are basic ironies in these concepts. Adams, a Federalist whose family never went bankrupt, was a man who never hired or owned a slave and who worked the soil by hand, whereas the man of the people, Jefferson, owned over 100 slaves at his hilltop mansion. The

issue of who is for the poor and who is perceived as a supporter of the rich still remains powerful in American politics. Nevertheless, whatever the reasons, the Federalists themselves never again held national office following Jefferson's victory over Aaron Burr in 1800, though a narrow and sticky victory it was.

One reason the Federal Party ultimately failed is that its great leaders, including John Adams and Alexander Hamilton, felt they had the real truth, and tended to develop personal enmities. In addition, neither Adams nor Hamilton was comparable to Jefferson as a skillful party organizer and devious political leader. From the diaries of John Adams and John Quincy Adams one sees that both men felt Jefferson was a genius at politics and clearly also a patriotic man; but in addition a superb schemer, a bit of a hypocrite, and exceptionally well able to shape the truth to fit his overall goals. On the other hand, the Federalists seemed for many to represent a transitory union between the clergy and the upper classes, or perhaps a unity of lawyers and "*respectable*" society. The dynamics of the expanded United States needed a broader base, needed it more at a time when the Federalist leaders offered less, or at least seemed to offer less for the majority of the citizens.

It is not fair to wedge one or another of any of these men rigidly into a barrel with their arms pinned and a particular label tattooed on their forehead. Both their aims and their speech remained free, and differed in many ways. John Adams' choice of a name for our first President was "*His Highness the President of the United States and Protector of the Rights of the Same.*" Other potential titles included "*His Excellency*" and "*His Elective Highness.*" Adams wanted our government to be surrounded with near-regal dignity and fully clothed in splendor. In fact, the controversy over titles consumed much of the Senate's time from April 23 to May 14, 1789, but the most often mentioned result is that Adams became known as "*His Rotundity.*" We must be forever grateful as a nation, however, that when the Federalist John Adams was narrowly defeated for reelection he relinquished all power, almost but not quite gracefully, and thereby helped consolidate the precedent of a peaceful succession, a precedent that has continued ever since that time.

The issue of monarchism, and talk of a desirable and enlightened aristocracy, accentuated the splits that were latent within the Federalist Party. Even Washington was criticized for his elegant carriages and formal levees; they

seemed just too regal, a reminder of the privileges once claimed by Kings. A more substantive split related to import duties, which were carefully designed to be higher for British ships than for all others, and which particularly favored French and American ships. The Southerners could be counted on to suspect that import concessions, or even the lack of them if such concessions were intended to finance the infant republic, would disproportionately hit the South. A continued fear of the Southerners was that the North would necessarily become recognized as the commercial center, while the South remained penalized as an agricultural one. Hamilton did not want to engage in commercial warfare with Great Britain, nor with the South, but he did want a stable government and minimal debt. Despite the wisdom of many that were involved and many good intentions, however, after only a few years it seemed Federalist had come just to mean Yankee and Republican or Democrat meant Southern.

The anti-Federalists were among those who pushed Congress for a Bill of Rights, and they eventually succeeded. All the Supreme Court justices appointed by Washington, even though they were men of remarkable integrity, were basically Federalists. Hamilton as the first appointed Secretary of the Treasury occupied the position next in power to the President. One of Hamilton's main goals was to convert the significant national debt into a greater national union. The underlying theme of state rights versus national sovereignty was not to be solved in the United States until the time of the Civil War, in fact not even until considerably after that time. Alexander Hamilton wrote to Washington on March 17, 1783 and stated: "*There's a fatal opposition to continental views.*" He said that people in Congress consisted of two classes: "*One attached to states, the others to continental policies. The last have been strenuous advocates for funding the public debt upon solid securities, the former have given every opposition in their power.*" Hamilton was always perceived as one of the founders of what became the Federalist Party and even though that party after the time of John Adams tended to become atrophic, the concepts expressed so well by Hamilton still influence us today. Undoubtedly this conflict in national groupings contributed to the dispute that led to the ultimate compromise location for the Federal City. The insecurity of the smaller states with in a federal system led to the electoral system and to assurance in the

Constitution that the Senate offers equal representation to both the large and small states.

Reducing the debt and enhancing credit were considered early keys to national survival. Selling untitled land to raise money, speculation in government securities, and similar fund raising approaches were inevitable, but the fact that Hamilton proposed national assumption of all state debts seemed patently unfair to the southern states, who carried less debt or whose debt had already been liquidated, than it was for more heavily indebted Northern states. Hamilton's insistence on minimal federal debt, emphasis on development of a stable currency, plus a national bank, soon increased commerce throughout the entire United States. All these successes further encouraged Hamilton's dream of a strong central, in fact a federal, government. Jefferson, on the other hand, innately distrusted government, and loved farming with an intellectual passion that convinced him that the true Republican was the man who works the soil. Hamilton felt convinced that his personal political acts on the other hand were actually working to preserve the best aspects of Republicanism, and was sure that Republican virtues would always require national commerce. Hamilton feared for the union as a whole, feared demagogues would arise if absolute democracy was unleashed or unbridled, and he argued that some systematic centralization was required. *"I desire above all things to see the equality of political right, exclusive of all hereditary distinction, firmly established by a practical demonstration of its being consistent with the order and happiness of society."* Did his own illegitimacy influence his desire to eliminate what he called *"hereditary distinction"*?

In 1792 Hamilton wrote: *"One side appears to believe there is a serious plot to overturn the state governments, and substitute a monarchy to the present republican system. The other side firmly believes that there is a serious plot to overturn the general government and elevate the separate powers of the states. Both sides may be equally wrong. . ."* The personal relationship between Jefferson and Hamilton deteriorated with time, soon became vitriolic in the press, and the basic national differences as spelled out by Hamilton weren't resolved until the Civil War, if even then. Hamilton, instead of attempting to unify the country actually developed policies that ultimately tended to create the two large parties, the planter slave-holding farmers, and the merchant-shipping-

financial group. By 1792 the opponents of Hamilton were routinely calling themselves Republicans, the rest were firmly labeled as Federalists, and the differences in the two parties were probably greater than those between any two of our parties since.

Miller offers a concise summary of the failure of the Federalist party: *“The Federalists downfall was owing primarily to their self-defeating political philosophy, to their ineptness as politicians, and to the vindictiveness with which, in their hour of triumph they pursued their political enemies...Confronted by an opposition which extolled the wisdom of the people, appealed to the dominant economic and social groups of the population, and exerted itself to organize the forces of resistance on a national scale, the Federalists were helpless.”*

On March 4, 1801(Allen), Jefferson was to take the oath of office. The defeated staunch Federalist John Adams slipped out of town at daybreak, probably to avoid the ceremony. Jefferson addressed the Senate later that day and offered his comment: *“We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists. If there be any among us who would wish to dissolve this union or change its republican form, let them stand undisturbed as monuments of the safety with which error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it.”* It is not recorded whether Adams expressed a view about being labeled a monument, or considered it true that others reflected reason and he represented an error of opinion. It is true that the country was blessed by Adam’s acceptance that his time in office was over.

Thornton was, by nature, probably a true Federalist. He was certainly labeled as such by others. He was most comfortable with aristocrats, was a slave owner, and had a European background. He owned a plantation, raced his horses, and hobnobbed with the wealthy. These traits may have narrowed his potential for accomplishment in the early development of the capital, but still very provincial, city. Thornton’s lack of a stable political base, as the Federalist Party faded following the defeat of John Adams, combined with Thornton’s quicksilver interest in first one and then in another project, helped truncate his chance for a more substantial political contribution to his adopted country. He did a lot, and establishing a reliable system for patents was a major

accomplishment, but it is certain from review of his letters and notes in newspapers that he wished to do much, much, more.



## CHAPTER 8

# Publications and Publishers in the Time of Thornton

**National Intelligencer was a highly successful political newspaper favored by Thornton.**

**The Editor's wife and children were particularly close friends of Mrs. Thornton.**

**It is in the pages of the Intelligencer that many of Thornton's essays and comments were recorded.**

Thornton published many of his letters, including rebuttals, observations, and old fashioned and apparently deliberate provocations, in the primary medium of the day, the *National Intelligencer*. The *Intelligencer* was more than a routine modern newspaper and more than just any typical publishing house. Relying in large measure on government patronage, but nevertheless committed to a scholarly discussion of the major public issues, the *Intelligencer* was usually firmly placed in the camp of Jeffersonian democracy. It was like nothing this country has seen since. The *Intelligencer* was a dominant journalistic force in politics from 1800 until almost the Civil War, not only in Washington but also along the entire east coast. Its founder, Samuel Harrison Smith, along with his young wife Margaret Bayard, arrived in the fall of 1800 to the village that was largely wooded with one small road that almost, but not quite, succeeded in avoiding the swamps. The village of Washington, then still often called the Federal City, boasted of only a few substantial wooden houses placed largely south and to the west of Capitol Hill. By May of 1800 the entire city of Washington had grown to a grand total of 372 buildings with 263 of these made of wood planks or logs.

Smith's family had been enthusiastic about the American Revolution and was consistently devoted to public service. After his education at the University

of Philadelphia, Smith set out to become a publisher. When he came to Washington he had had over five years' experience publishing in Philadelphia, and had been frequently immersed in the vitriolic press of that city. Much of the most intense political discussion of the day revolved around the Republican versus Federalist concepts. During these controversies Smith discovered, after two failed attempts, that he was simply not successful in founding a newspaper based in Philadelphia. At the time, he was philosophically pledged to support Jefferson and the Republican Party, and could predict a continuing national importance for Jefferson. Thus Smith moved to Washington at least partly to be near the future president. Smith foresaw the rise of the Jeffersonian ideals and clearly the support of Jefferson did help his new paper survive. Smith's wife, Margaret Bayard, was 22 years old when they arrived in Washington but she already had important connections of her own. Her father had been a lesser hero of the Revolution and was among those who had urged the choice of Washington as Commander in Chief of the Colonial forces. Margaret remembered that when she was a young girl she moved hurriedly as the British swarmed into Philadelphia. Her mother died when she was only four, and Margaret received most of her substantial education, substantial for a woman and for the times, from the Moravians of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. She was basically a Federalist but this domestic political split between Margaret and her husband did not ruin a successful and apparently very happy marriage. Her letters have been published, and the close friendship she and her family had with Mrs. Thornton, in particular, is documented in her the letters and in the Anna Maria Thornton diaries.

Thomas Jefferson and Albert Gallatin (1761-1849), the latter an important figure in Washington for over three decades, strongly encouraged Smith to move to Washington and launch a newspaper that could be predicted to have a decidedly Republican slant. Smith had been a member of the American Philosophical Society in 1797, as were both Jefferson and Thornton, and Smith had actually received an award for an essay on national education. It is certain that he knew Thornton in person, and probably had met him earlier in Philadelphia.

The senior members of the Bayard family were uneasy about any young bride, especially their own daughter, moving from Philadelphia down to the

unkempt, poorly settled, and primitive new district. Nevertheless, they acquiesced and a wedding date was officially settled upon, September 13, with the details arranged while Smith was already in Washington. On September 26<sup>th</sup> he arrived back at Margaret's home, where they were married on September 29, 1800. They were resting their personal economic prospects on the fact that Jefferson would some day become President and that since the federal printing would be done under Jefferson's direction, there might be a steady source of income for the Smiths. This was at a time before most reporters searched hard for conflicts of interest in politicians, and certainly did not search hard in themselves. For financial protection, Smith held onto his ties with the newspapers in Philadelphia, and he continued to do so until he sold all of his newspaper interests in 1810.

Producing a newspaper was a different proposition then, by far, than it is now. Smith not only wrote almost all the news and selected the stories but he also handled the accounting while at the same time organizing three issues a week, all done essentially single-handedly. He routinely included reports about Congress, often from his personal observation, as well as excerpts of current books and lengthy political speeches. Published letters included many submitted by unidentified correspondents, men such as Thornton. James Bayard, Margaret Bayard Smith's foster brother, continued to play a key role in Federalist activities in Washington. Apparently the relationships within the larger family circle were never very close, possibly due to marked differences in political concepts. Despite his own personal opinions, however, it was Congressman Bayard himself, distrusting Aaron Burr more than he detested Jefferson, who finally cast a blank ballot after the repeated balloting had become deadlocked between Burr and Jefferson. This blank ballot assured that Jefferson was selected President.

John Adams was a Federalist, and might logically have resisted Smith's efforts to start the newspaper, but Adams was nevertheless courteous and helpful to Smith as he began to obtain public printing duties. Some of the national antipathy between Republicans and Federalists may have spilled into a congressional vote later, a vote that refused Smith any direct access onto the floor of the Congress. He therefore retreated to the gallery and wrote his editorial views: "*Uninfluenced by personal feeling, and guided by due respect*

*for the speaker, and a sincere respect for the people of the United States, he will not, while he retains the power, cease, by publishing a record of truth, whatever or whomsoever it may affect, to manifest to the people, on whose support he relies, a spirit of dignity and moderation...*" The issue of whether or not reporters should be available and could witness all the sessions was discussed by reporters and congressmen at least up until 1810, and the extent of press participation as observers, even as shapers, of political decisions remains controversial even in our own day. The *National Intelligencer* certainly had a broad national circulation. One of the people who followed Smith's work most carefully was Joseph Gales, Sr., who was at the time the editor of the Raleigh, North Carolina *Register* and who was destined eventually to take Smith's place.

Smith had to defend the freedom of the press in 1801 after he contended in print that the federal judges were not always administering the law impartially. Justice John Marshall took personal offense at Smith's remarks and ordered the District Attorney to institute libel prosecution against "*the Editor of the National Intelligencer for publication of his paper entitled 'Appointments by the President'.*" Smith defended himself on the basis of the Constitution which stated "*that the liberty of the press ought to be . . . preserved.*" Smith could in addition argue that he was the printer and not the writer of the articles, and eventually the entire issue was dropped. In Ames' review of the period, personal journalism, so characteristic of the *Intelligencer*, was more than simply entertainment. In fact, entertainment played little part in the newspaper, in contrast to our current press, but rather the *Intelligencer* was filled with official statements, advertisements, and fierce letters to the editor. Even if the editor's skill at acquiring federal patronage for printing expenses did link his newspaper closely to the government for financial support, the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century offered an intense, critical, and highly informative political journalism. The *Intelligencer* led the way.

Much of our information of the time Thornton lived comes from the charming diaries left by Mrs. Smith. Young Mrs. Margaret Smith, the Federalist wife of the editor, was not impressed with what she had heard of the Republican Thomas Jefferson, and expected him to be coarse and vulgar in manner, probably awkward, and rude in speech. From her notebook we can see, however, that when an unknown gentleman dropped by to see her husband she was markedly

impressed with the man's dignified and reserved air, and her "*heart warmed to him with the most affectionate interest.*" She finally discovered that the man was Thomas Jefferson himself. For decades Mrs. Smith was one of the leading figures in the Washington community, as is documented by her notes and by the Library of Congress records entitled the "*Mrs. William Anna Brodeau Thornton Diary.*" During the early decades of the 1800's Mrs. Thornton and Mrs. Smith (Parlor Politics, by Catherine Allgor) were among the primary social arbiters of the fledgling community. The women, whatever their politics or that of their husbands, were friends. It was hard to remain impartial in the days of Aaron Burr, Federalists and Republicans, or around the strong willed Adams family, and there were markedly polarized views in almost all directions. It is no surprise that Thornton felt a need to express his opinions, clearly and often, both in and out of the *Intelligencer*.

It is astounding to us, of course, that someone, a single person such as editor Smith, could attempt to record most of the relevant government information, synthesize it, and publish it in a readable fashion, all done without significant help. It must have been exhausting. Editor Smith's major patron, Jefferson, retired from Washington in 1809, and by that time the Smiths had been successful enough to purchase gracious acreage (that has now become part of the campus of the Catholic University of America) in the northeast section of Washington City. Apparently Smith wished to retire from publishing because of persistent squabbles with the postal department, as well as persistent difficulty collecting money for subscriptions for the *Intelligencer*, which by then had spread its influence over much of the United States. Perhaps more than anything else he wanted to quit because he was offended by the incessant political criticism of people he was personally devoted to, in particular Jefferson. In addition, Mrs. Smith had found his long hours away from home difficult, and so Joseph Gales, Jr., of North Carolina, joined Smith to lighten the burden. By the end of August 1810 Gales had become the new owner of the paper and Smith had shifted his activity to the Bank of Washington and to Washington society.

Gales and his brother-in-law William Winston Seaton continued the paper for the next four decades until it finally folded at the time of the Civil War. By then the nation apparently no longer needed, or at least would no longer pay for, such serious political journalism. Smith remained active for decades in the city

and for his country, and after the British destroyed the Library of Congress in 1812, Smith was the man who personally negotiated the purchase of Jefferson's own library. Ex-President Jefferson had written (September 21, 1814): "*I learn from the newspapers that the vandalism of our enemy has triumphed at Washington, over science as well as the arts, by the destruction of the public library, with the noble edifice in which it was deposited...I presume it will be among the early objects of Congress to re-commence their collection.*"

Jefferson then reviews how he collected in Europe his "*between nine and ten thousand volumes*" and the fact that the collection is particularly strong in scientific and political works. According to Dumas Malone, it was Thornton who advised members of Congress to offer \$50,000 for Jefferson's library. Although troubled by the presence of works by Voltaire and others (Hazleton page 136), the Congress by a vote of 81 to 71 did approve the purchase of the Jefferson collection, after rejecting a motion to purge the collection of "*all books of an atheistical, irreligious, and immoral tendency.*" The Jefferson collection of 6700 volumes cost \$23,950.

There was widespread public mourning when both Gales and Seaton died, both having become greatly cherished for their continuation of the tradition established by Editor Smith. When Mrs. Smith died in 1814, and then Mr. Smith died in 1845, they were both quietly buried in Rock Creek Cemetery and their contribution to American journalism as well as any remembrance of their decades of relationship with the Thorntons had been largely forgotten. The relationship did, however, assure that many of Thornton's opinions are still well preserved in the now yellowed pages of the *Intelligencer*. It was in the *Intelligencer* where Thornton published, often anonymously, complaints about other architects, plans to settle Blacks in Africa, announcements about the Patent Office, or comments on current events.

CHAPTER 9

The Friends of Thornton

**Washington:** “Colossus of the Age”, a loyal supporter of Thornton.

**Jefferson:** Shared architectural interests with Thornton, but disappointed him.

**Adams:** Neighbor, and perhaps the public official who knew Thornton best.

**Clay:** Fellow slave owner, and fellow founder of the Colonization Society.

**Gallatin:** Able diplomat, and frequent visitor to the Thorntons.

**Lettsom:** Primary mentor for the youthful Thornton, a fellow native of Tortola.

**Fothergill:** Mentor for Lettsom, and an example of the intellectual Quaker society.

**Volney:** Example of the European friends that Thornton cultivated, but a reputed spy.

**Banneker:** Proof for many, in a time of doubt, that a black man could be a scientist.

**Fitch:** The controversial man Thornton credited with invention of the steamboat.

**Rumsey:** An early competitor in steam power for boats.

**Fulton:** “Genius of the Age”, and an implacable Thornton enemy.

**Barlow:** Fulton’s dear friend, and once the owner of the house where Mrs. Thornton died.

**Latrobe:** Capitol architect, engineering master, and the man who sued Thornton.

Review of the papers in the Thornton collection reveals this man had opportunities to see, argue with, admire, and even envy people who not only appear larger than life in retrospect, but who were exceptional by any standard, in any age. Of course, Thornton was just one leader among many, just one “*lesser light of the enlightenment*” as Jenkins called him, not a major shaper of the nation. Out of many statesmen a country was forged, and Thornton was just one of the leaders among these many. He did visit with the giants of his time, and he knew many of them as friends. The stories of some of the prominent people of his time are reviewed with anticipation that their stories will reveal issues of the time. Mention of their contacts with Thornton may help elucidate Thornton.

No one among the many stood as tall as did the colossus, George Washington. Thornton knew the general well as an older and much admired leader, and would surely have placed him at the head of any list of men he respected.

**George Washington** (1732-1799): Washington was the towering figure of the time, and not just to Thornton. For a brief time Thornton served as volunteer secretary and guide about town to the General, as Washington was almost always called, but the official position as Secretary went to a relative of the General. Washington appointed Thornton one of the three Commissioners of the district. At the time of Washington’s death, Thornton was helping prepare two rental properties in D.C. for the retired President, and a plaque is present on the grounds of the U. S. Capitol marking the spot. Thornton spent the night of November 10, 1799 at Mt. Vernon, as recorded in Washington’s own diary, and the ex-President died barely a month later, on December 14. Thornton had also been a guest at Washington’s home on February 7, May 16, and July 8<sup>th</sup> of the same year. The deep feelings of Thornton for Washington are illustrated not only in Thornton’s letters but also particularly vividly by his response to Washington’s final illness and death. The death was dramatic enough, of course, and plunged the entire country into mourning. A lot is known about Washington’s health, and as a physician Thornton had a particular interest in Washington’s physical condition, even though he never officially attended him.

J. Worth Estes reviewed the illnesses of Washington, who died at the age of 67, just eleven days before Christmas. Washington was indeed the supreme



super-hero, and the outpouring of grief was unprecedented. Even Dolly Madison (Gerson, page 105): “*who was always in command of herself, was seen to weep in public for the first time.*” Detailed summaries of Washington’s medical record and of his almost 50 illnesses are available in the data recorded by the physicians of his time. The major medical concept of the time, which seems strange when laymen such as Washington clearly did recognize contagion, was that disease represented an imbalance in the four primary humors of blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. Excess of heat or fever implied an excess of blood, which often led to its enthusiastic removal. If the pulse was stronger than usual, or faster, the doctor might again assume there was too much blood and thus bleed the patient with assured enthusiasm. After all, what the doctors could do was limited, but they could remove blood. They often did. The purpose of medication was to tune the internal balance, not to tackle disease directly, and in fact the entire concept of specific diseases was not truly recognized in Washington’s time.

Washington’s health record included the potentially lethal smallpox that afflicted him while he was a youth in the Caribbean, but in him the disease left only modest scarring plus later immunity. He became infected with smallpox while in the Indies assisting his brother Lawrence who suffered, and who later died, with tuberculosis. In the Barbados, before attending a welcoming party on November 4, 1751, the 19-year-old Washington (Wessel) wrote in his journal: “*We went-myself with some reluctance since smallpox was in his family.*” Then on November 17, “*Was strongly attacked with the smallpox: sent for Dr. Lanahan whose attendance was constant until my recovery and going out, which was not ‘til Thursday the 12<sup>th</sup> of December.*”

Both Drs. Lettson and Thornton were involved in the fierce discussions regarding the then standard inoculation methods to prevent smallpox, a technique performed by taking pus from the pox of a patient with the disease and placing it within the skin of the person to be protected. The issue before 1799 then became whether or not Jenner’s system of vaccination with cowpox virus, less virulent than smallpox, was better or worse than the earlier and generally accepted inoculation technique using the pox itself. Washington’s rigorous medical experiences, including with smallpox, may have produced a partial immunity in him, as an adult, to many major diseases.

As a mature adult Washington was always very conscious of the dangers of infectious diseases, including of course smallpox, and he demonstrated particular concern for the safety of his men. He once heard that General Howe of the British was hoping to infect the patriot army by donating blankets, blankets infective with smallpox, across the lines, carried by men who had been inoculated with smallpox. The plan was to produce an epidemic of smallpox in the American army. Washington formally warned his troops about this early concept of biological warfare, an experiment that was probably never actually attempted. As prophylaxis Washington ordered all of the soldiers not previously inoculated to be treated, and the subsequent mortality rate in his men fell from 16% among the soldiers who developed smallpox to no deaths at all from smallpox among those who had been inoculated. There were other medical ailments of military interest to Washington, in addition to the many that he personally suffered. He had frequent attacks of cramping diarrhea, and even as early as at the time of Braddock's defeat Washington had been weakened by dysentery, the intractable diarrhea, which during his life more than once sent him as well as many of his troops to bed for weeks at a time. Washington may have had troubles with malaria as well, and he was known to regularly employ the Peruvian bark, the early precursor of quinine. Washington waged a vigorous campaign for cleanliness on behalf of his soldiers, probably a more useful measure than any of the drugs that were available at the time. It is known that in his later years Washington flatly refused to endorse Dr. Hugh Martin's request for support for a secret cure for cancer, not on grounds of lack of efficacy, but because Washington felt that all medical cures should be readily available to anyone. It is seen that medicine did play a prominent part in the Washington story, as it did in Thornton's life.

Washington's personal physician for 44 years, Dr. James Craik, was with the General on many of his trips and during many of his illnesses, including for management of abscesses, colds, dysentery, as well as the frequent upper respiratory infections that die-hard British loyalists who lived in Boston during the revolution preferred to call "*Washington influenza*." On December 12, 1799, after riding around his farm for over five hours in rain and snow, Washington developed a cold, then a sore throat, and within three days had severe shortness of breath. He worsened at 2:00 a.m., the first day, but would

not allow anyone to call a doctor that early in the morning. The General soon became unable to swallow the various home remedies of molasses, vinegar, and butter. He next sent for one of the farm overseers, not for a doctor, to remove 14 ounces of his blood, a presumed therapy Mrs. Washington tried to limit. Her husband prevailed. His secretary also tried to persuade Washington to swab his throat with flannel soaked in various materials, and to soak his feet in water. When Dr. Craik finally was called in, he sent messages to esteemed physicians in Alexandria and southern Maryland to come for consultation, and then bled his patient of another 50 ounces. One of the several doctors felt a tracheotomy was indicated to allow respiration, but in 1799 this seemed too radical a suggestion for such an important “VIP” patient. Another 32 ounces of Washington’s blood was next removed, and when one remembers that an ounce is 1/16<sup>th</sup> of a pint, it is not too surprising that after this “heroic” treatment, plus vigorous emetics and purgatives for his bowels, then blisters applied to his legs, our first President was noted to have a very thin pulse and he quietly died.

Five days later the local newspaper added up the amount of blood removed from General Washington and it came to a total of six pints, over half his entire blood volume. It was Washington’s own good health that had permitted him to escape from the more serious illnesses through the years, and perhaps that and his natural immunity enabled him to escape more than once from his physicians. No escape for him at the end, unfortunately.

What were Thornton’s views of the death of Washington, and what do they tell us about Thornton himself? Writing immediately after that event, Thornton expressed dismay that he himself was not included among the consulting physicians, but in fact he had never been a practicing physician in America and he was idiosyncratic enough that it seems unlikely that the General would have called for him. Furthermore, the General’s proverbial loyalty was such that he never would have dismissed his primary physician, and it was Dr. Craik who decided whom to consult. Apparently Thornton was struck by the amount of blood removed because he stated immediately after the death, and more specifically in writing than did others, that this therapy was an error. So much blood should never have been removed. Perhaps Thornton remembered one of Washington’s several reported last statements: “*Let me go off quietly.*”

In addition, Thornton specifically mentioned the need for tracheotomy and the fact that it could have been performed, even should have been done. His sensible initial statements about Washington's death are juxtaposed to his bizarre conviction that if only he had been called he could have helped resuscitate Washington after death. As a member of the Humane Society, the resuscitation group in England, and as a man fascinated with writing about sleep, dreaming, death, and suspended animation, it is not surprising that Thornton believed that with only the right intervention, the right amount of heat, and the right stimulation, his beloved General and mentor could have been returned from the dead. His judgment about phlebotomy, the removal of blood, was clearly better than his judgment about resurrection. Later, when Thornton was among those that tried to persuade Martha to place Washington's body at the Capitol, he wrote several letters about the statue he would like to design for such a tomb. He frequently mentioned in later years his recurrent sense of loss when he thought of his beloved "*Colossus of the Age*".

**Thomas Jefferson** (1743-1826): Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States, key author of the Declaration of Independence, and political philosopher for the Republicans, had opinions that cast long shadows over both the construction of buildings in Washington and the structure of the government that served in those buildings. He was at times a friend, and sometimes a key supporter, of William Thornton. Jefferson also directly disappointed Thornton when Thornton diligently sought a political position in South America and was consistently and repeatedly rebuffed by Jefferson, as well as by John Quincy Adams, James Madison, and James Monroe.

Jefferson was reared like any successful Virginia planter's son, but his youth was spent living closer to the frontier than many, and he defended democratic and rural ideals from an early age. At 16 he was in William & Mary College where he studied with the remarkable George Wythe, the leading legal scholar of Virginia. After a brief stint as Justice of the Peace, Jefferson took what had become almost a family seat in the Colonial Legislature of Virginia, and he soon became prominent in that group despite his avowed distaste for "*the morbid rage of debate*." He stated that he chose to be guided by reflection, but as John Adams in his diary confirms Jefferson was considered decisive and could be frank in discussions. Because of his intellect and his writing skills, Jefferson

soon became one of the key members of the early Continental Congress. By 1774 Jefferson had published denials of the authority of Parliament over the colonies and he was a leader among the revolutionary Virginia legislators, although in contrast to Washington, Monroe, and Hamilton, he was certainly never a military hero. In 1778 he persuaded the Virginia Legislature to pass a law that prohibited the importation of slaves, but his efforts toward the total abolition of slavery were never successful and he himself never freed his own slaves, with the possible exception of the children of his slave Sally Hemmings. Several of her children reportedly “*ran*” when they became 21 years of age. Unhappy as the Governor of Virginia, Jefferson was nevertheless able to return to public political service at a national level despite his extreme and long lasting grief at the loss of his wife.

By 1784 Jefferson was in France as special envoy with Benjamin Franklin and John Adams, and the resultant devotion of Jefferson to French society and customs continued for his lifetime. Thornton’s youthful and enthusiastic experience in France may have helped him and Jefferson to appreciate one another. Current biographers consider Jefferson an exceptional politician, although he professed not to be a politician at all. It was a close call that saw him elected president over Aaron Burr when that candidate of the Federalist’s party lost the election of 1800. Despite Jefferson’s preference for a hands-off, local, Republican system of government rather than an overreaching Federal system, and despite his denial of a proper role for a strong executive, he acted without full legal authority to acquire the Louisiana Territory in 1803, one of the most remarkable accomplishments by any president at any time. His range of interests was wide; language, history, inventions, scientific farming, etc. His fundamental concepts of government derived from doctrines of natural law and natural rights, and many of these concepts were vividly espoused by the French he loved, even if not always expressed peacefully. Jefferson was also a believer in a natural moral sense implanted by the Creator, but felt strongly that a spirit of tolerance was necessary, even to the extent that some people considered him “*slippery*.” He could be charming, and Jefferson did much of his political maneuvering at his evening dinner table. Thornton supped at that table more than once.



*Jefferson, as sketched by Latrobe.*

William Thornton and Jefferson carried on a detailed correspondence with one another, for example, in a series of letters regarding a broad tailed ram and imported Merino sheep. Merino sheep were probably the hottest item in the import trade of animals. Jefferson received seeds and plants from Thornton and used them at Monticello for his work with flowers, grapes, vegetables, and sheep. Regarding the latter, Malone states that

Jefferson “*did not go as far as Dr. William Thornton who said that he himself was ‘sheepishly inclined’*”. Jefferson wrote details to Thornton regarding the workings of his personal household and the manufacturing of clothing and requested Thornton’s help in acquiring a spinning Jenny for use with wool from the sheep that they both cherished. A letter in the Thornton files from Jefferson states: “*Your kindness has emboldened me, whenever I want information that relates to the arts, to apply to you, and especially when for an object deposited in your office.*” He proceeds to ask a series of specific questions about improvements in the loom, changes offered by a new model Thornton had available. Thornton, as mentioned earlier, in an attempt to relieve Jefferson of bankruptcy and to help build the national library, advised Congress to buy Jefferson’s library. Thornton suggested that in order to buy a library of that quality, the British might offer three times as much money for the books as Congress contemplated.

Jefferson sought the advice of Thornton when the construction of University of Virginia began. Both Thornton and Latrobe suggested the ultimate pavilion structure, and each drew detailed sketches. The portico in the upper story was to be supported by an arcade on the first story, and followed the original suggestions made by Thornton. Nevertheless, the most important interaction that Jefferson had with Thornton was during the construction of the Capitol building. They did not always agree, and even after Thornton’s death Mrs. Thornton complained several times in her diary that Jefferson had allowed Benjamin Latrobe to modify her husband’s original plans. As Secretary of State, Vice-President, and as President, Jefferson certainly did take a keen interest in all sorts of architectural details and there are numerous letters that document the

relationship between the two men with useful exchange of information. There must have been infinitely more informal discussions with Thornton in his role as Commissioner of the district, and as the prominent local amateur architect.

Aspects of that relationship were apparent even after Thornton's death. A letter in the Thornton papers in Jefferson's handwriting: "*Th. Jefferson presents his respectful compliments to Mrs. Thornton and is able now to restore to her the plant of Chrysanthemum she was so kind as to send him the last summer, having taken from it this spring a luxuriant shoot and set it in a box, in which it is growing well. He returns her his thanks for the same.*"

**John Quincy Adams** (1767-1848): Thornton undoubtedly knew John Quincy Adams better than he knew any of the other Presidents with whom he interacted so often. Once Thornton, at a time Adams was being criticized, wrote an impassioned letter praising his near neighbor's absolute rectitude. John Quincy Adams has been the subject of several recent biographies and appeared as hero in a successful movie of the 1990s, "*Amistad.*" As summarized by Paul C. Nagel, Adams was "*a diplomat, poet, orator, writer, scientist, silviculturist, Harvard professor, Secretary of State, legislator at both state and federal levels, and President of the United States.*" One of the remarkable aspects of this man's busy and often controversial years was his return to the U. S. Congress as a legislator and ex-President, and while there his unceasing efforts to enter petitions to overturn slavery. He dreamed of being a successful writer or poet, and certainly always wished he could be more effective as orator in the age of formal orations. His cold demeanor and what his son considered his "*impenetrable feelings*" made it difficult for others to warm to the man, but he was dearly beloved by his remarkably able wife, and before his death he also had ample opportunity to bask in the admiration of his fellow citizens.

John Quincy Adams probably suffered from the melancholy and self doubt that occasionally affected others of his family and certainly he suffered from the tremor in old age that both he and his presidential father had. To a remarkable degree Adams' diary of over five decades reveals endless self-doubt and second thoughts throughout all his life about his abilities, motives, and success. He was indeed a complex man. For our times he is remarkably loveable, but not so in his own time. No matter what his doubts about his impact on others, he was a successful man indeed. As Ambassador, and as a member of that exceptional

group of diplomats sent to Europe to settle up with England, Adams was one of those who made possible the treaty that not only closed out the War of 1812 but helped restore our natural ties overseas. When he arrived as a visitor in Ohio in 1843 some openly credited him as the legislator who preserved a free Ohio territory. While he was Secretary of State it was he who composed what is now called the Monroe Doctrine. He translated from other languages, and published poems with enthusiasm. He loved his travels in Germany, Russia, and England, but this inveterate traveler and regular visitor to plays and musical entertainment often suffered with guilt for the pleasure he received from these activities. Diligent to a fault, he condemned himself for lassitude. An apparently tireless worker he condemned himself for lack of persistence. Perhaps reflecting the scolding that he frequently received from his mother, he tended to scold not only his children but also his fellow legislators. Nevertheless, Adams remained a servant for the public good even up until his last days when he collapsed in the Congress. There are many images of Adams that are available through his own diary, including his grief as a father who lost two sons, amorous letters to his wife, his insistence on exercise with the image of his actually swimming nude in the Potomac, his eagerness to be supportive of any scientific endeavor, and his efforts to prevent the Smithson grant from just dropping into a sinkhole in the U. S. Treasury.

John Quincy Adams's relationships with the Thornton family were probably complex, but often close. They were immediate neighbors, and the very social Mrs. Thornton remained a close friend of Louisa Catherine Adams after Thornton's death. Thornton appealed several times to Adams for a position in South America, and he was so insistent that Adams warned Thornton that President Monroe had become irritated. Nevertheless Thornton often felt free to complain to Adams, asking intercession for one or another pet project, usually to no avail. We do know that Adams attended Thornton's funeral and that the two of them, at least once, experienced church together. Adams referred to Thornton as "*the good doctor*" on more than one occasion in his diaries, even though Thornton was a non-practicing doctor, at best. Perhaps the poem that Adams, in his 80<sup>th</sup> year, sent to Mrs. Thornton, long after William Thornton's death, conveys both his feeling for her and his own love of literary activities:



*'To my kind, intellectual and benevolent friend and next door neighbor at  
Washington Mrs. Thornton.*

*“Oh! If the feelings of the herd In words could find expression;  
“When dearest friends are doom’d to part; and Truth transcends profession;  
“Then should my tuneful lyre awake The fondest of thy slumbers;  
“And thrilling strains Thy spirit shake, with more than magic numbers.  
“But what are Words? – a breath of air From human life exported;  
“In which the heart has oft no share –With falsehood oft assorted –  
“A flitting zephyr, false or true You know not where to find him;  
“Who comes and vanishes from view: Nor leaves a trace behind him.  
“Words! Never! Never, can they tell The soul’s intense emotion!  
“Can never speak the bosom’s swell; The faithful heart’s devotion.  
“Then, Lady! Let this simple lay, Until again I meet thee;  
“For thee a silent blessing pray And still in Silence greet thee.*

John Quincy Adams.

Quincy, Massachusetts 15 July 1844.”

**Henry Clay** (1777-1852): Henry Clay, nicknamed “Prince Hal,” or “Star of the West,” was one of the powers of American politics up to and through the 1830’s. As first president of the American Colonization Society he knew well the other founding members, a group which included Thornton. Although Clay had fought verbally and enthusiastically with J.Q. Adams, as Adams actually lay dying it is reported that it was Clay whom Adams particularly asked to see. Adams was Thornton’s immediate neighbor, and both visited often with Clay. Who was this man, Henry Clay, one among the many friends of the Thornton couple?

Clay was one of the most prominent Americans of all time, and, along with Calhoun and Webster, is one of several leaders who never became President but who might have been an exceptional one.(Peterson) Henry Clay was born in the Tidewater area of Virginia to a father who was a minister, a man who owned 21 slaves. Henry received the three years of schooling that was average for his time, and living in the land of the spellbinding orator and lawyer, Patrick Henry, young Clay developed a keen interest in public speaking while still a child. He was fortunate to receive additional formal education from the same George Wyeth who had earlier been Thomas Jefferson’s mentor, and Wyeth probably helped persuade both of these slave owners that slavery was intrinsically evil. Clay completed

training to become a lawyer while studying with Wyeth and then studied for an additional year with the Attorney General of the Virginia Commonwealth. Clay's family was not a truly significant member of the Tidewater aristocracy, so he moved to Kentucky and started out to build a new life for himself. He was immediately successful there as a lawyer, and he soon became wealthy indeed. From early in his adult life he was always supportive of the movements to return freed slaves to Africa, but, despite this, in 1799 he purchased a slave and began to build homes. At the same time he steadily enhanced his lucrative law practice and successful farm. Slaves were considered necessary to run a farm, even for this budding abolitionist. By the time he was 21 Clay had published in the *Kentucky Gazette*: "*Can any humane man be happy and contented when he sees near 30,000 of his fellow beings around him, deprived of all rights which make life desirable, transferred like cattle from the possession of one to another?*" Clay argued along with Jefferson who said that slavery "*in the end injures the master too, by laying waste his lands, enabling him to live indolently, and thus contracting all the vices generated by a state of idleness.*"

By age 28 Henry Clay was at the top of the Kentucky lawyer aristocracy and had greatly extended the plantation he called Ashland. He rapidly bought additional slaves and eventually owned over 600 acres, a second farm, a house in Lexington, plus additional lands in Missouri. On the very first day after his election to the National House of Representatives in 1811 he was chosen Speaker of the House. At the time he was only 33 years old, but was already legendary as a speaker, leader, patriot, and gambler. He was a fierce member of what was called the "*War Hawks*," since he supported President Madison during the controversial war of 1812. In 1814 Clay was one of the three representatives sent to Belgium to negotiate the treaty with Britain. As an elected official, he was always a supporter of selective tariffs to protect Kentucky and America's infant industries, but he also created useful broad, even federal, legislation regarding the National Bank. He always urged internal improvements throughout the country as a whole, and in that sense reflected earlier federalist concepts.

Thornton and Clay shared interest in racehorses; and they may have also both been interested in gambling, although in that recreation Clay was more notorious. There was a clear overlap in the intellectual interest of Clay and Thornton in slavery, and in what to do about it. Clay was keenly aware that the

slavery issue might eventually divide the country, and although he was not the prime mover for the various plans that transiently preserved the Union by allowing first one state to be admitted as a free state and then a second admitted as a slave state, he was one of the major supporters of these compromises. The issues of the day which included slavery, freedom for Greece and Latin America, national education, and open waterways, were all areas that assure us that Clay and Thornton met on numerous occasions, as is well documented in the Thornton papers. Thornton was one of the founding “*managers*” of the Colonization Society, with Clay its first president. Thornton, in his notes, was clearly aware of the fact that some slaves were being freed simply because they had become superannuated and a burden, and that even the more healthy among the former slaves found economic survival to be a challenge. An additional issue that was also frequently discussed, of course, was the presence of slaves in an environment with numerous freed former slaves. It was felt that each group was at risk because of the other, with the whites at risk because of both. Clay helped found the American Colonization Society (one full name was American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Color of the United States) in 1816 as one possible instrument for the nation to get past the issue of slavery. The purpose was to deport free persons of color “*back to Africa.*” For Gentleman Thornton this represented not only his own dream, but chance to interact with men such as James Madison, John Marshall, Daniel Webster, Andrew Jackson, and Francis Scott Key, all of whom openly supported the effort.

Clay ran three times for president and each time it seemed that victory was within his grasp, but each time he continued to stumble over the political conflicts, and intrinsic problems of sectionalism, and he may also have failed because of the slavery issue. Who did and who did not own slaves was well known in Washington, of course. Clay’s will did offer liberation and colonization of any children who were born after January 1, 1850 to the 35 slaves he still owned when he died. Clay was, along with Thornton, a vigorous leader in the efforts to assure freedom for the nations of Latin America. “*We behold the glorious spectacle of eighteen millions of people, struggling to burst their chains and to be free.*” He, along with Thornton, also became a strong supporter of the efforts of the Greeks to be free.

**Albert Gallatin** (1761-1849): The diaries of Anna Maria Thornton do not mention Albert Gallatin often, but it is clear from the many invitations that she saved that the Thorntons were frequently guests in the home of Gallatin, a man who was a force in his own time and who, for a while, was almost equal in political significance to Henry Clay, John Calhoun, and Daniel Webster. As Raymond Walters notes, Gallatin's present obscurity may reflect the one major personal mistake he made. He, like Thornton, was not a native-born American. Furthermore, in contrast to Pulaski, Steuben, or Columbus, he did not come from a land that was to contribute heavily to later immigration to the United States, but instead Gallatin originated from Switzerland. Thornton came from the even smaller British West Indies area of Tortola. Gallatin left no neat collection of inspired writings, in contrast to Jefferson, and with the exception of what he later considered his one major political error, support for the Whiskey Rebellion, his exemplary character and reputation prevented him from acquiring interesting trappings of anecdotes, legend, whispered scandals, or peccadilloes. Gallatin was, however, a leading collector of information in geography and history; and second only to Jefferson in his interest in the ethnology of Indians. Early explorers of our continent named rivers and mountains for him. Gallatin was also recognized as a master of administrative theory and as an expert in fiscal practice and policy. He is still ranked next to Hamilton in his ability to stabilize federal finances. While overseas as a diplomat, Gallatin was crucial in the settlement of the War of 1812, and he always acted as a man of peace. Gallatin was one of the most enlightened of men regarding our war with Mexico, a war he considered not heroic, unnecessary, and in fact without any justification of any sort. However, his love for his adopted country, as may also be true for Thornton, was equal to that of any native born patriot.

Gallatin continued to the end of his very long life, over 88 years, to offer opinions on any issue of the day, particularly regarding relationships with other countries. He was a firm abolitionist throughout his lifetime, even before the age of 31 when he spoke out as a member of the Pennsylvania legislature in overt opposition to slavery: "*Obviously contrary to the laws of nature, the dictates of justice . . . and natural right.*" His legendary honesty as well as the universal respect for his financial skills is brought out by the report that President Tyler in 1843 asked if Gallatin would accept the post of Secretary of the Treasury. At the time Gallatin was in his 84<sup>th</sup> year and replied that at his age to accept such a job

would be “*an act of insanity.*” Despite being a devout Republican in the Jeffersonian mold, he was perhaps the strongest proponent in his day of a firm and sound currency with a tight lid on national debt. In the 1830s he published one of his several writings about the Indians, in this case 422 pages entitled in the long style of the time: “*A synopsis of the Indian tribes within the United States East of the Rocky Mountains and in the British and Russian possessions of North America.*” This tome reviewed 81 tribes, their manners, their nature, and their relationship with white men and with Negroes.

It is interesting that in contrast to Thornton, a man who was so keenly eager to obtain a position in Latin America countries, Gallatin refused his own chance to serve in South America. When Gallatin was asked in November of 1825 to be a minister at a congress to be held in Panama to discuss the mutual interests of the American republics, he turned it down. He feared he lacked sufficient knowledge of the Spanish language, culture, and of the problems in Latin America. On the other hand, when he chose to be, Gallatin was actually a remarkable diplomat, as is documented by the diaries of J. Q. Adams. In the crucial negotiations with Britain it was Gallatin, not Adams, not Henry Clay, and certainly not James Bayard or Jonathan Russell who was the most persuasive. Gallatin was persuasive particularly among his colleagues, but also with the British. It has been argued that this commission to reach peace was the most skillful group of diplomats that has ever represented the United States, and in his frequently quoted summaries of the group J.Q. Adams wrote in his diary: “*Mr. Gallatin keeps and increases influence over us all, for extent and copiousness of information, for sagacity and shrewdness of comprehension, for vivacity of intellect, and fertility of resource*” there was really not anyone equal to him. Adams knew that he himself was too rigid, but that Gallatin could cope easily with others because he had “*more pliability of character and more playfulness of disposition.*” There were many crises in the first 50 years of the United States but reaching a secure peace with England in 1815 was as important as any single thing that occurred during this time. Gallatin deserved much of the credit for the resultant centuries of peace with England that followed.

The City of Washington was not an entirely comfortable place to live in at the time and Mrs. Gallatin is quoted regarding Washington: “*It is a place that*

*never will be of any consequence, even if the national government should remain there.*” Albert Gallatin, regardless of his wife’s views, glimpsed the potential of his adopted country, and did much to assure it. The Gallatins were primarily social acquaintances of the Thorntons, but it is likely that their views influenced those of their doctor friend. It is intriguing to wonder just how men such as Gallatin, who was a firm abolitionist and never a slave owner, felt when eating a meal served in his friend’s house by the slaves euphemistically always called “*servants*” in the Thornton household.

**John Lettsom** (1744-1815): John Coakley Lettsom, an 18<sup>th</sup> century Quaker, physician, and English man of letters, was a major model and intellectual mentor for Thornton throughout his entire lifetime. Washington was later to be his father image intellectually, but Lettsom served that role spiritually, especially during Thornton’s youth and young manhood. The mature Thornton wrote Lettsom: “*Though I love not my country, it is so debased, it gives me a secret pleasure that thou art my countryman.*”(Abraham) Many of the major themes of Thornton’s life were formed within the template of his admiration for the life work of Lettsom. Lettsom was the son of Edward Lettsom, proprietor of three small islands near Tortola. His family had 50 slaves and grew cotton. Out of this plantation society Lettsom became the leading Quaker physician of his time in London, and it was logical that he would be a father-substitute for Thornton who at age 5 had, like Lettsom when he was age 6, been sent out to England from Tortola. Apparently Thornton had once met Lettsom when both were in Tortola, but their major contacts were in England and by mail.

In 1734 Lettsom’s family had been among the original group of 30 Quakers present in the midst of the 100 white men who lived on Tortola, an island that, regardless of the stated abolitionist views of the Quakers, still depended on slaves for its economic survival. A drawing by Thornton done years later, at a time he was back in Tortola, was sent to Lettsom as a record of Lettsom’s own place of birth. Thornton’s description of the place Lettsom spent his early childhood records (November 26, 1795): “*The place where thy parents lie is under the two tamarind trees which stand in the middle of the picture, a little to the left of thy old mansion house. The view is taken from Great Jost Van Dyke’s, and represents the scene after a shower of rain. There may be a boat in the channel between the two islands. At a little distance from the shore, in a*



*Birthplace of Lettsom by Thornton.*

*line with the house (in the passage between the islands) there is the greatest variety of beautiful corals, sea ferns, sea eggs, and various productions that I have ever beheld . . . the sea looks purple with them sometimes, when very clear. On the print I have drawn a few plants of the great American aloe (agava Americana). The whole hill abounds with them, in great perfection.”* Thornton went on to suggest that the house of Edward Lettsom, father of John C. Lettsom, should be packed up and sent to England. Always a planner, Thornton even describes how he would go about shipping the house – but doesn’t tell us why in the world this simple and even decaying structure should be shipped. Tortola at the time of the drawing was the largest of a cluster of islands, and in the time both Lettsom and Thornton knew it the island was covered with sugar cane fields, fields worked exclusively by slaves.

At Lancaster, England, Lettsom met the Quaker minister Samuel Fothergill, who together with John Pickering back home in Tortola, became Lettsom’s personal guardian. At age 16 Lettsom was apprenticed to Abraham Sutcliff, a surgeon. After medical apprenticeship, he went back home to Tortola to practice for two years, but then returned to England where he married wealth in the person of Ann Miers and soon began practice with Dr. John Fothergill, the brother of Samuel. Many aspects of the multi-faceted Lettsom, including his own close linkage to the same area in Tortola that was the birthplace of

Thornton, appealed to Thornton as a young man, and Lettsom inspired Thornton for his lifetime in all respects – all respects except in the practice of medicine. Lettsom succeeded in practice, Thornton never really tried. When Lettsom briefly returned to Tortola from England, having been sent to England as a young man for education and for protection from the infections so rampant in the islands (similar to the exile that happened to young Thornton over a decade later), Lettsom soon freed all of his own slaves. Lettsom wrote (Abraham):  
*“When I came of age the only property I possessed was a little land and some slaves. To the latter I gave freedom when I had not £ 50 in the world. I never repented this sacrifice. Indeed Heaven has canceled it long ago, by refunding innumerable unmerited blessings, and what I estimate still more gratefully, a heart to diffuse them. I did not liberate my slaves from any advice of our Society. I do not say it was from religious motives, merely as such. I had early read much. I had considered the tenets of different religions and professions, and I thought there was only one true religion, consisting of in doing unto others, as we wish that others should do unto us . . . I hope to die in this religion, not having yet found a better. These sentiments overcame worldly interests, and I was a voluntary beggar at 21.”*

Despite what he wrote, Lettsom probably did repent a bit of his generosity in freeing his property, however, because he eventually advised Thornton not to free his own slaves. Lettsom had obviously been courageous in his decision, apparently an inevitable one for him. He had returned to Tortola expressly to get enough money to enhance his education as a doctor, and then he planned to return to set himself up in practice in England. Later Lettsom wrote of his disappointment at the near-failure of the plan to settle free Blacks in Sierra Leone, as hundreds of the ex-slaves succumbed to disease, drink, and helplessness after several of their leaders had died. Freedom was by no means an unmixed blessing for the newly freed Blacks, and by 1786 Lettsom was pouring cold water on the abolitionist ardor of his young friend Thornton. Lettsom, as mentioned earlier and as appears in many of their letters, was also not enthusiastic about Thornton’s proposal to personally accompany ex-slaves to Africa and to remain with them to help them achieve full freedom and economic independence. Lettsom apparently felt that a *“gradual emancipation is alone feasible, in my opinion easily practicable.”* From our distant perspective it



seems strange that this plan, gradual emancipation, for a resolution of the major issue of the day wasn't seen by all as necessary, inevitable, and actually desirable for both races. The major issues, discussed for over a century before Thornton and long after him, were the slave trade and shipping, ownership and property issues, resettlement as a potential solution, and the concepts of gradual versus complete and immediate freedom for all the slaves.

Review of the works of Lettsom reinforces the opinion that both Lettsom and Thornton, despite their individual styles, were remarkably erudite scientists for the age. Their life's work reflected the major social and scientific issues of their day. For example, both Doctors Thornton and Lettsom wondered whether or not rampant tea drinking was in fact a dangerous addiction, a concept that had become common among the Quakers of the time. The Quakers were not alone in this view. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was also a fierce antagonist of the stimulant and noted in 1746 when he himself attempted to stop drinking tea that: "*I expected some difficulty in breaking off the habit of six and twenty years' standing. And accordingly, the first three days my head ached more or less all day long, and I was half-asleep from morning to night.*" The phenomenon of difficulty with headache after abrupt withdrawal from caffeine has been discussed in the scientific literature as recently as in the 1990s.

Lettsom and Thornton also shared an intense interest in botany and in natural science. Both Thornton and Lettsom attempted to introduce plants, including tea plants, into England. The formidable and almost legendary Sir Joseph Banks (1743-1820), explorer, scientist, philanthropist, government power broker, and even putative spy master in the O'Brian sea novels, corresponded extensively with both Thornton and Lettsom. Much of the correspondence between Lettsom and Thornton discussed botany, plants, and agricultural cultivation. Lettsom's own mentor, his fellow physician and fellow Quaker, John Fothergill, was enthralled by his personal garden, and eventually cultivated over 6000 separate species of plants. The results of the botanical obsession of this group of creative and successful men can still be seen in the beautiful Kew Gardens outside London, a continuing tribute to the interest of many physicians of the day in botanical science.

There is nothing to suggest that Thornton preceded Dr. Lettsom or the other doctors of his time in comments on the causes of malaria and yellow fever.

We can easily forget, in our rapidly changing times, how slowly major scientific concepts developed during most of the past three centuries. Orthodox teaching at one time attributed both malaria and yellow fever to “*marsh miasmata*.” It was a long time, and only with great difficulty in a smelly age, for observers to get past odors as a fundamental cause for disease. Heat, moisture, and putrefaction of animal matter were considered the basic cause for what we now know to be mosquito-borne diseases and “*miasmata*” was still a general concept for disease as late as the mid 1800’s. The conventional views of the time were held by Dr. Lettsom and also by his admirer William Thornton.

Lettsom was clearly ahead of his own time with regard to bleeding, however, as he became completely convinced that it was never, or at best only rarely, useful. Thornton had the example of Lettsom and the opinion of some of his own teachers in that regard, but strenuous bleeding remained accepted therapy well past the time of the enthusiastic removal of the blood of the dying first President. Thornton’s opinion about rash bleeding did not prevail at his own home. His wife, slaves, and mother-in-law were all bled in the decades after Thornton’s death. Thornton was of course only one among several writers at the time who suggested Washington had been bled excessively in his terminal disease, and no modern physician would disagree.

Thornton also questioned the fundamental use of bleeding to treat yellow fever, a concept that put him, along with other physicians, at odds with the leading American physician of the time, Benjamin Rush of Philadelphia. Thornton clearly knew the famous Dr. Rush in Philadelphia, and perhaps earlier as well. In May of 1792 Thornton wrote Lettsom that he was going to leave Tortola and that mail should be sent in care of Dr. Rush. It is probable that Rush and Thornton did not agree about optimal patient care, however, and they may have even argued later. Nevertheless we have little data in Thornton’s writings about his personal concepts of medical care and the reason for such silence from a man who was interested in so many things remains a mystery. Perhaps his personal image of himself was indeed that of a gentleman who did not indulge in mundane issues such as messy direct care for patients, or perhaps he didn’t practice or write about medical care simply because he discovered that medicine wasn’t lucrative. Equally likely, perhaps, Mrs. Thornton destroyed some of his more mundane medical writings in her zeal to preserve only the more socially

acceptable letters. Clearly Thornton did admire many aspects of Lettsom that had nothing to do with medicine, more than he admired Lettsom's approach to the practicalities of illness and the management of a successful practice.

There are other features that were obviously different when we compare Lettsom and Thornton. For example Lettsom was remarkable in his ability to organize and lead other physicians, and he was unfailingly politic with others. Lettsom was well able to launch plans for a medical library, a museum, and a social center for medical activities. Lettsom was in fact a main founder of the Medical Society of London in 1773, an organization that split later and eventually led to the Royal Medical Society. The dream of a medical museum, and the example of Lettsom's attempt to establish a museum of medical artifacts during the 1780s, may have influenced Thornton's willingness to become the superintendent of the patent office. Awareness of Lettsom's museum and that of Dr. John Hunter in England may be reflected in the vigorous way Thornton fought to acquire and then to preserve all the models submitted with the original patent applications. Lettsom may not have been a scientific innovator, but he was a skillful practitioner, a beloved clinician, and a medical leader with intuitive quickness and a natural ability to inspire others – including the young Thornton.

One particular, and by our standards unusual, enterprise that Lettsom and Thornton shared was the establishment of the Royal Humane Society. The purpose of the Humane Society was not for the care or protection of animals but reflected effort to facilitate the recovery of persons who appeared dead after drowning. There was great interest in the 1700s and early 1800s in resuscitation of individuals who appeared dead. In 1744 a surgeon named William Tossack reported recovery of a man that he had treated by closing the nostrils and blowing into the mouth to distend the lungs, thereby re-starting both the patient's respiration and his heartbeat. Twenty years later similar reports of attempted resuscitation followed, fascinating to us in our day since it was not until the mid-1900s that resuscitation by blowing into the mouth became usual once again. Thomas Kogan was one of the leaders in such resuscitation efforts. Kogan spent his life divided between medicine and divinity and still found time enough, and cleverness enough, to marry a wealthy woman who could tolerate his restlessness as he moved his practice variously from Amsterdam, Leiden,

Rotterdam, and then to London. Kogan, using his marital fortune, led in establishing the Royal Humane Society, with Lettsom and Thornton actively involved in its development.

The organization established a quick response team, perhaps like the paramedics in fire stations of today. The members were attempting to eliminate prior useless actions such as rolling the body in a barrel or holding the patient up by the heels to let the water run out. They emphasized the need to restore respiration by inflating the lungs, indeed several centuries before that became a universal practice. Several mechanisms were suggested including closing one nostril and blowing into the other with a wooden pipe. It was also suggested that one could push gently on the chest to deflate the lungs, thereby imitating the action of respiration. All these seem sensible now, but an additional step in resuscitation seems startling now, and has been in disuse for several hundred years. The resuscitation team was to drive tobacco smoke up into the large intestine by means of a tube introduced through the rectum. Tobacco was considered a stimulant, and internal warmth was considered necessary for resuscitation. Perhaps many had noted, during executions linked with disemboweling, that the intestines continued to move even after the persons seemed (and were) dead, and such involuntary contractions may have suggested that the intestines of the body were preserved the longest and would therefore be the most sensitive to stimulation after near death. The original Royal Humane Society has continued to flourish for over 200 years, although now with purposes more honorary and more social than medical. Thornton was obsessed in his later years, judging by his notes, with concepts of how to resuscitate those who had been frozen, or only appeared dead. He felt certain that if he just had been called to attend President Washington immediately after he died the General could have been resuscitated.

Lettsom was involved in many activities that Thornton never commented upon, and espoused ideas Thornton never adopted, including Lettsom's enlightened efforts to improve prisons. Lettsom insisted that not just the bodies of prisoners needed to be cleaned regularly, but that the clothes must also be washed if you wished to protect the health of those confined in any such extremely contaminated area.

Lettsom was also heavily involved in another topic that was of no apparent interest to Thornton, medical education. Thornton wrote often of general education, but nothing of significance regarding formal medical education, although he did mention the need for a medical school in Washington. Lettsom, on the other hand, taught young doctors regularly and repeatedly suggested that the teaching of medicine should occur in a clinical setting. This was 100 years before such a practical educational approach became generally accepted. There is also little evidence that Thornton waged any particular effort against the generally rampant medical quackery of the day, but his mentor Lettsom clearly did, including a controversial campaign against the old medical tradition of “*urine casting*.” In “*urine casting*” the “*expert*” looked at urine and thereby judged how severely ill the person actually was and offered an explanation, including the enthusiastic diagnosis of diseases such as “*slime in the kidneys*.” In response to the diagnosis, whatever that happened to be, patients were given green drops of a sweet mixture plus silver pills. Apparently all received the same sequence of medications no matter what the complaint. After a suit or two against him by the practitioners Lettsom had labeled as “*quacks*,” he backed off from his enlightened efforts to limit alternative medicine at the fringes of science.

Lettsom was a founder of the concept of sea bathing for health, as well as of open-air sanatoria; innovations that logically led to later approaches of retreats in the country and time spent outside as basic therapy for tuberculosis. After 1799, vaccination with cowpox was replacing inoculation with material from smallpox pustules for the prevention of the disease caused by the smallpox virus. For a time Lettsom was involved on both sides of this controversy. Ultimately he became a strong supporter of cowpox and of the correctness of Sir William Jenner’s views. Nevertheless it took another 30 years before vaccination became customary across all Europe, and last of all became common in England. Thornton, on the other hand, wrote very little about preventive medicine, except for his plans to purify the privies of Philadelphia in an effort to reduce disease.

Throughout his life, Lettsom retained many friends in America and regularly corresponded with Benjamin Rush and Benjamin Franklin, as well as with Thornton. The terrible epidemic of yellow fever in Philadelphia in 1793

led to several letters between Thornton and Lettsom, and it was during this time that Thornton stated (Abraham): *“I think more people in this city were carried off by the very copious bleeding, and violent and repeated purges of jalap and calomel, than would have died if nothing would have been done.”* This was a direct slap at the man who may have been the most prominent physician of the day, Benjamin Rush. Thornton was living in Philadelphia at the time and pointed out that most of the houses in Philadelphia had cesspits under their foundation. These were ten to twenty feet deep and from six to ten feet in diameter. *“Some of these are not cleaned for many years, seldom oftener than five or six, but more frequently from ten to twenty. Imagine only the effect of all this matter in a hot season. I declare I always dreaded these in summer, and used frequently to pour into mine a quantity of the lye of ashes, with quick lime. . . and thereby the place [was] rendered perfectly sweet.”*

Thornton also suggested to Lettsom and others, in disagreement with most Philadelphians, that yellow fever did not actually originate in Philadelphia. He was sure he had seen an entirely identical disorder in the West Indies. His suggestion that the cesspits and standing water combined with abnormally hot weather had something to do with the epidemic was, in fact, very close to the truth. It was not the stench, however, but mosquitoes that were the clue to prevention.

Dr. Benjamin Rush, practicing and writing in Philadelphia, was older and much more famous than Thornton as a doctor. Perhaps Rush was even as obstinate as Thornton. As Revolutionary War patriot he remained a special friend of Washington and John Adams, and attended members of the Adams family as their personal physician. Rush stated (Abraham): *“The yellow fever is now acknowledged everywhere (Philadelphia excepted) to be of American origin.”* Thornton was living in Philadelphia and he insisted yellow fever was present in the Caribbean. The epidemic of 1793 killed 5000 people in Philadelphia, and many of the inhabitants, including most of the doctors, fled to the country. Rush may well have treated his patients incorrectly, but he heroically stayed at his post even though he lost his sister and two of his apprentices during the epidemic. Rush’s basic therapy consisted of vigorous purging and bleeding. His fame was overwhelming in the community despite the counter-statements of others, including Thornton, that there was no data that

the bleeding was at all helpful for yellow fever. There is also no evidence that Thornton served as a physician during the epidemic, nor on the other hand that he did not treat patients; nor is there any evidence that he stayed in downtown Philadelphia to be exposed and risk illness for himself. Occasional notes at the time mention doctors and others who moved or lived in the countryside. Perhaps Thornton was one of those escapees.

In addition to their mutual interest in plants, slavery, and disease, Thornton also corresponded with Lettsom regarding concepts of marriage, and especially when as a young man he had been stung by problems locating a spouse. Lettsom was clearly the mentor whose advice Thornton most avidly sought. Thornton's letters about potential brides were long and complex, usually laced with comments about his recurring fantasy of liberating the slaves, even his own slaves, and of devoting his life to the cause of the Negro. Thornton made more than one attempt to find a wife in America, and he wrote to Lettsom from Newport, Rhode Island, on February 15, 1787: *"This is called the island of beauty. The majority of the women here are pretty; they have fine complexions, and in general good teeth, which in America are not characteristics: Some are handsome here and a very few beautiful. To ask after a lady's fortune is a gross insult; the English of which is that they have none."* He was looking for a fortune, plus acceptance by the wealthy, no doubt about it. One major and accepted route for success for young gentlemen in America, and in England, was to own land, or to seek marriage to a rich widow to get land, as Washington himself had done. Thornton wrote in a querulous mood in 1788, again in a letter to Lettsom, from Philadelphia: *"It is more difficult to find a lady here with good teeth, than in England with bad."* He wrote several times to Lettsom regarding his efforts in Delaware and elsewhere to identify a desirable mate.

Finally in 1790 Thornton found his wife, and she was right there in Philadelphia. She was Anna Maria, daughter of "Ms. Brodeau." Anna Maria, at the time 15, was destined to spend decades after his death saving, and culling, the Thornton papers. In Washington he and his wife continued to own from three to eleven slaves for many years. None of the anguished discussions with Lettsom about slavery erase that fact. According to Staudenraus (page 5-6), in his summary on the African Colonization Movement, Thornton attempted for

over 30 years to reach some sort of solution to the slavery problem. The effort began when: “*In England he had been junior member of a fashionable circle of humanitarian reformers that included John Coakley Lettsom, celebrated London physician, and Dr. Samuel Fothergill, ‘the great apostle of philanthropy.’*”

**John Fothergill** (1712-1780): The Fothergill family of Quakers and public servants is important in understanding the interests of Thornton because of the indirect influence of Dr. John Fothergill, Jr., one of several prominent members of the Society of Friends who traveled extensively in America. Dr. John Fothergill, Jr., was born in 1712, the second son of the father. Alexander, the oldest son, inherited the estate belonging to the Fothergill family, Joseph who was the youngest became an ironmonger. Another brother, Samuel, traveled repeatedly to America and eventually became recognized as a celebrated Quaker preacher. He was designated the official guardian of Dr. John Lettsom, who in turn became the primary mentor for Thornton. Ann, the only daughter of John Fothergill, Sr., was a close companion of her brother John and she outlived him. Dr. John Fothergill, Jr., was for a time the apprentice of Dr. Edward Milmot at St. Thomas Hospital and studied at the University of Edinburgh, graduating in 1736. Several of Fothergill’s medical writings attracted favorable attention, and by 1744 he was admitted to the College of Physicians in London and soon became an honored member of the Royal Society. There were several contributions of Dr. John Fothergill, Jr., that probably influenced both Lettsom and Thornton, including Fothergill’s scientific efforts. He was always more than simply a physician, and never just a devout Quaker within a family of devout Quakers. Indeed he was a frequent and famous contributor to medical and philosophical transactions including an essay in 1744, “. . . *of recovering a man dead in appearance.*” This particular person had been lying in a pit in a noxious stream of coal fumes, and was resuscitated by inflating the lungs with natural breath and rubbing. Fothergill also contributed an essay on the origin of amber, and published scientific discussions of Siberia and its topographical characteristics. One of the most important of his writings was offered in 1748 in: “*An account of the putrid sore throat,*” a new and severe difficulty with a variety of sore throat that had spread throughout England.

Dr. Fothergill cultivated one of the first botanic gardens in Europe with hothouses and greenhouses that were as long as 260 feet, with a particular



concentration of plants that might merit a place in the *materia medica*. There are many examples of Fothergill's effort to stabilize or improve the foundling hospitals, then primarily a place for orphans to die. He became the major medical mentor for Lettsom, who later emulated Fothergill's example of kindness to patients and concern for the indigent. Both Lettsom and Fothergill worked to establish schools for the poor. John Fothergill died a bachelor and left the bulk of his property to his sister, but by the time of his death he had already contributed paintings, numerous anatomical drawings, and inspiration to the medical school in Philadelphia. Thornton, long before he came to Philadelphia was aware of the philanthropy, and of the medical prints. Fothergill supplied one of the many early links that connected Thornton, England, Quaker medicine, and Philadelphia.

**Constantine-Francois Volney (1757-1820):** Constantine-Francois Volney frequently corresponded with Thornton near the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup>. By that time Volney had achieved international fame as an intellectual, as a French Republican, and as a scholar. He is an example of the European correspondents that Thornton enjoyed, and the friendship perhaps also reflected Thornton's high regard for French ideas. Volney published popular works about the ruins of past empires, and published travelogues from Europe and America. He visited with Benjamin Franklin both in Paris and in America and spent several weeks as a guest in Thornton's home. Following his visit with Thornton, Volney lodged with Jefferson the following several weeks, and took a letter of introduction and greeting from Thornton to Jefferson.

Having also been given letters of introduction from Thornton to other prominent Americans, Volney proceeded to travel widely throughout the expanding United States and to write about it. He published a substantial book on the soil, climate, and topography of the United States. With lyrical descriptions of areas ranging from Niagara Falls to the Deep South, he displayed particular interest in types of plantings, and he made sagacious comparisons between the climate and crops in the new world and those in the old. It all seemed very innocent, in fact. But it did not seem innocent to everyone.

Volney abruptly left for France in June of 1798 at a time there was great upswing in anti-French sentiment in America, particularly crystallized in President John Adams. Congress was actively considering war measures against

the French. The French were becoming even more ruthless towards Americans at sea than had been the British – neither country totally accepted the United States as a viable entity, and both Britain and France still believed they were entitled to most of North America. Many in both countries considered it probable that the American experiment would fail. Volney was warmly received earlier when he first visited former President Washington, and it is likely that Jefferson, as a lover of France, also considered Volney a personal friend. On the other hand, the political group led by John Adams, the Federalists, considered Volney at least a potential threat to America, and perhaps an actual spy. Adams' experiences in France were far less pleasant for him than had been true of Jefferson's impressions there.

Volney believed President Adams actively campaigned against him because other leaders, including particularly Jefferson, had supported the visitor from France. Volney contended that Adams harbored unfair suspicions, and had always suffered from a profound and even deliberate misunderstanding of the purpose of his travels. Perhaps Volney was correct, and certainly this all happened at a time Adams did distrust Jefferson, and had become uneasy about any prospects for true democracy in France. It is even possible that the support of Thornton for Volney did not comfort the Adams family, who knew Thornton well. Volney, enlightened for the age, had once held extreme revolutionary views, ones that clearly offended Adams, but when in America Volney seemed to regret the bloody excesses of the French Revolution. The terrible reports from Revolutionary France were anathema to the American Federalists, who at that time controlled the U. S. Congress.

Thornton was among many who lost friends to the guillotine and deeply regretted the shed French blood, but he perceived Volney as a personal friend as well as a friend of America. Thornton was probably correct, and Adams wrong. At least 10 long letters were exchanged between Thornton and Volney, and these remain in the collected tapes. If Anna Maria tossed controversial letters from France, she chose not to eliminate this evidence from the file. Volney was charming, and she had ample time to get to know and respect him when he spent weeks in her own home, in contrast to her lack of personal contact with the Countess Fanny or to James Smithson from Thornton's earlier days. The Volney letters were often overtly critical of the policies of France with regard to the

United States, and he once specifically wrote that the French government should abandon its secret goals of reclaiming Louisiana from the infant United States. Nevertheless he had to leave America, and leave abruptly, primarily in response to pressures from the U.S. government and because of the suspicion of some, including most particularly President John Adams, that Volney might truly be a spy.

The diary of John Quincy Adams records examples of the continued distaste of the entire Adam clan for Jefferson, the man who so loved France, and confirms the Adams family's basic uneasiness about Volney. Letters now available from Thornton do not give a clear picture of the views of Thornton about Volney, but it seems logical that Thornton was torn between his love for France, his friendship with Volney, and his concern about his personal position in Washington if he ever became too friendly with a perceived enemy of the USA. Nevertheless Thornton welcomed Volney as a friend and did continue to correspond warmly with Volney even after he had been banished back to Europe. In addition to love for France, Thornton and Volney shared similar enlightened ideals about universal education. It is possible that the later concerns of John Quincy Adams, who feared his neighbor Thornton could become meddling in national affairs, reflected memories of the Volney experience, and of Thornton's friendship with the peripatetic Frenchman.

**Benjamin Banneker** (1731-1806): The tapes by Thornton do not comment often regarding individual Blacks, although Mrs. Thornton in her later years does express both appreciation and fear about particular slaves. Thornton could not, however, have avoided an opinion about the remarkable Benjamin Banneker. Thornton, as Commissioner, corresponded for a time with Banneker, one of the surveyors of the District of Columbia. Who was Banneker? Only a few records of Banneker are available but they are ample to recognize his remarkable qualities as a black man who became one of the primary surveyors of the District of Columbia. He assisted the Ellicot brothers, and did so in his later years when he no longer had the physical vigor of his youth. Banneker's personal history is remarkable, and his grandmother's story is also unusual. Molly Welch, the grandmother of Benjamin Banneker, was a white servant in England who, while doing her chores at milking time, spilt a pail of milk. Accused of stealing the milk, she was arrested, and could have been executed in England at the time. At the time, when a person was convicted

of a felony he or she could “*call for the book*,” and a sentence of death would be lightened if the prisoner could read. By the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century prisoners could also be completely pardoned if they were available for shipment overseas as indentured servants.

Molly was shipped out to America, not executed, and arrived in Maryland in 1683. She was sold, after an appropriate advertisement, to work for seven years as an indentured servant. The proceeds of the sale paid for the cost of her passage, and perhaps also offered a bit of profit for the ship captain. This almost voluntary slavery could last from five up to seven years and after the completion of the period of servitude a freed man was entitled to 50 acres of land, an ox, two hoes, a gun, and clothing. After her service, a woman was provided with a skirt and waistcoat, a smock and apron, two caps, stockings and shoes, plus three barrels of Indian corn. Molly apparently had won her freedom by about 1690, and she began to establish a farm of her own. She knew few who lived in the immediate area but she was industrious enough that she soon had sufficient money to purchase two slaves to work her crops. One was a vigorous Negro that she could predict would be useful on the farm, the second was not as strong nor was he as tractable, but he did claim to be the son of an African chieftain. His name was Bannka or Bannaka, and Molly apparently did have initial difficulty utilizing him on the farm. Nevertheless she, and they, became successful enough that several years later Molly gave both of her slaves their freedom, and then she chose to marry Banneky, as he was now named. The more diligent slave had become a Christian, but Banneky still held to the beliefs of his African ancestors. Laws regarding the intermarriage of black and white persons had become quite firm by 1661, indeed the offspring were usually considered slaves and both the parents often became slaves themselves. By 1681 it was completely illegal for a white woman to marry a Negro, but nevertheless Molly did so, changed her name to that of her husband, and thereafter tended to withdraw from most of her white neighbors. The little family soon had four daughters but Banneky died at an early age and it was left to Molly to raise the four young children. The oldest daughter, Mary, married a Negro named Robert, an African who had been captured from Guinea and sold into slavery, and who had converted to Christianity. His Christian name was Robert and he took the Banneker surname. Molly’s farm remained the center of the active family life, as Mary and her husband joined her, and young Robert eventually was able to buy a small tract of land for

himself. The fact that a Negro slave and the daughter of another Negro slave could become owners of land must have been impressive to the neighbors, and the land was deeply cherished by the Banneker family.

After seven years of living with Molly, Robert had built for his family a log cabin that contained a small amount of furniture that he also built, and the new family was able to survive with game and homegrown vegetables. It was probably true that Mary Banneky was heavily involved with healing, using woodland herbs. Their cash crop was surely tobacco, and Robert also had a few cows and probably pigs as well. Benjamin, the later surveyor of D.C., was born to Mary and Robert on November 9, 1731. The boy Benjamin's free time was spent with his grand mother Molly, who taught him to read and write and who enhanced his religious concerns. She was even able to get him enrolled in a one-room school nearby, and his interest in books was described as insatiable. Benjamin also had unusual ability with mathematics and became skilled in mechanics. He was soon famous in the local area for his skills, and particularly for his interest in measuring time. In his life he had seen only two timepieces, one a sundial and the other a pocket watch. Nevertheless he was able to construct a working clock. This meant he succeeded in calculating the size and number of teeth and wheels it needed, carved them from carefully selected pieces of hard wood, and eventually had a functional and striking looking clock made totally of wood. Because of this, and in recognition of his erudition, the 22-year-old Benjamin Banneker was considered a treasure by his neighbors, and the white daughter of the Ellicots who had visited his home in 1790 (Bedini) later said: *"His clock struck the hour, and at their request he gave them an account of his construction. With his inferior tools, with no other model than a borrowed watch, it cost him long and patient labor to perfect it. It required much study to produce a concert of correct action between the hour, minute, and second machinery, and to cause it to strike the hours."*

When Benjamin was 28 years of age, his father Robert died, and Benjamin not only had the farm to tend but also had to support his mother and sisters. In addition to hard work Benjamin apparently enjoyed music, owned a flute and violin, and could play both reasonably well. He had become known locally as a man of knowledge at a time when anyone one who could read and

write well was used by his neighbors, and he was also much admired for his dignity and modesty.

In addition to his education from his grandmother, the former Molly Welch, and possibly also learning from an unknown Quaker schoolteacher, Benjamin benefited from his friendship with the nearby Ellicot family. George Ellicot had become Benjamin's neighbor when Ellicot was still a young boy and although 29 years his junior, George became Benjamin's lifetime friend and was ultimately responsible for the fact that Banneker was called upon to play a major role in surveying the lots and plots in the District of Columbia. Reticent by nature, but incessantly fascinated by learning, Banneker was soon a quiet participant in the conversations that swirled around the wealthy and busy Ellicot family.

It was George Ellicot who loaned Banneker several astronomical instruments, instruments that Banneker learned to use on his own. Using his personal observations plus his mathematical skill, Banneker developed an ephemeris, or predictor of the sun and moon, and soon he developed an accurate assessment of the number of eclipses that would occur to either the moon or sun, doing most of his calculations totally independently of anyone else. Banneker began to think in terms of publishing his information in an almanac, but as a poor black man he had problems getting it published, although eventually it did appear in press. This was a period when most timepieces still consisted of sand in a glass or a sundial, and clocks remained uncommon. Yet it also was the time that sunrise, noon, and sunset were important for farmers and for everyone else as well. Old-time almanacs included a lot of such information, and Banneker contributed to the factual portions. Banneker was alive long enough to be intensely interested in the anti-slavery movement which was developing throughout the entire East Coast, and he might have been particularly encouraged by the efforts of the Society of Friends. By 1775 there had developed a "*Society for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage*," with Benjamin Franklin as its first President, and the national, even if fledgling, abolitionist efforts were off to a start.

The Ellicot brothers were involved with the survey of the District of Columbia even before the efforts of Major Pierre Charles L'Enfant. The Ellicot brothers never worked directly for L'Enfant, the man who had the contract to



*Benjamin Banneker and George Ellicot. (Maryland Highway Department)*

prepare drawings of the grounds best suited to be the site for the Federal City. L'Enfant was also to note prospective roads, streams, etc. within the overall area that Ellicot was surveying. Andrew Ellicot worked closely with Banneker during this time, and he was the brother who chose Banneker as his major assistant. It was partly Andrew Ellicot's astronomical and surveying abilities that allowed him to be employed in the first place, and he shared his star and moon interests with Benjamin.

The George Town Weekly Ledger, as quoted by Bedini (page122), reported: "*Sometime last month arrived in this town Mr. Andrew Ellicot, a gentleman of superior astronomical abilities. He was employed by the President of the United States of America, to lay off a tract of land, 10 miles square, on the Potowmack, for the use of Congress; - is now engaged in this business, and hopes soon to accomplish the object of his mission. He is attended by Benjamin Banniker, an Ethiopian, whose abilities as a surveyor, and as an astronomer, clearly prove that Mr. Jefferson's concluding that that race of men was void of mental endowments was without foundation.*" Banneker probably never met personally with all the Commissioners, although he did write to Thornton as

well as to Jefferson, but apparently: “*he was invited to sit at table with the Engineer Corps, but as his characteristic modesty induced him to decline this, a separate table was prepared for him in their dining room; his meals being served at the same time with theirs.*” Banneker’s almanacs were published and praised at least partly because of an upsurge in the antislavery feelings, and it is possible that as later antagonism to the abolitionists grew, it became more difficult for Banneker to get follow-up additions of his ephemeris published. Banneker remained a bachelor all his life. Even in the field of astronomy he was unfortunate in that it was only late in his life that he had become obsessed with this avocation. He was 60 when the first almanac was published and by that time was living alone with little responsibility to anyone other than himself.

In 1844 John H. B. Latrobe, the lawyer son of the architect who had sued Thornton decades earlier, was a leader of the American Colonization Society, and on behalf of that group read a memoir of Banneker. The correspondence with Jefferson was triggered by Banneker having sent his ephemeris to Jefferson, and although Jefferson responded politely, he later expressed doubts that Banneker had done the almanac all by himself. Jefferson suggested that Ellicot had assisted Banneker, although this opinion was followed by public criticism of Jefferson for his earlier comments on the lack of a potential for Negroes to achieve intellectual substance. Banneker, whatever else he may have done, demonstrated that it was possible at the time for someone with a philosophically temperate personality plus kindness, generosity, and brains, to survive in the most difficult of circumstances, and to survive with dignity while achieving the respect and praise of his neighbors. Banneker was an early American man of science, far more than just a black man who happened to achieve local distinction. Thornton was lucky as Commissioner to have corresponded with him, and probably also to have met him.

**John Fitch** (1743-1798): Thornton’s relationship with John Fitch assured him contact with one of the most creative, as well as one of the most unsettled, men of the time. Most of the information we now have about Fitch is derived from his writings about himself, and the writings include persistent self-aggrandizement. Fitch offered formal and repeated expiation for all his irregular wanderings and abandonment of family, with explanations that are carried to extremes. Thornton himself also wrote “*memorials*” concerning Fitch, and many of these were about



Fitch and his overlooked work, written particularly after Fitch's death when others claimed priority for Fitch's ideas. Since he was Superintendent of the Patent Office, some effort to defend the priority of inventions seems to have been an appropriate activity for Thornton, but far more than just administrative propriety was involved in Thornton's interest. Fitch and Thornton always seemed, in a sense, to be kindred spirits, and through the years Thornton joined Fitch in more than one of his dreams.

What do we know about Fitch? Fitch stated that he left home early and struggled to obtain a formal education. In his autobiographical writings he discussed the death of key family members, including death of his mother at a difficult time in his childhood, his brief fling as a sailor, and his unsuccessful experiences as an apprentice clock-maker. Fitch had hoped to become a master clock-maker and repairman, but was frustrated when he was refused admission to the craftsman's main workshop. He said he was consigned to kitchen duties "*because of the failures of the lady of the house.*" Moving to a second apprenticeship, carpentry, Fitch reported that during this second chance he lacked even enough to eat. The carpenter, now an even firmer master of Fitch, was secretive about how to put clocks together and equally protective about any expenditure of money for food, candles, or firewood. Indeed he was, according to Fitch, "*wicked, unjust, and intolerably mean.*" As with others of his time, the Connecticut Yankee John Fitch then became resourceful and inventive on his own, and he set up for himself a brass work and proceeded to make buttons. Through that experience, and by learning as he cleaned brass clocks for others, he became an expert in the care and construction of clocks.

Fitch married Lucy Roberts, whom he described as "*a decent woman enough and no ways ugly, but somewhat delicate in her make*" and "*rather inclining to be an old maid.*" Lucy was soon dissatisfied and, according to Fitch, she tended to pick away at him. John recalls that he was not "*of a passionate nature,*" except for his inventions, and as he became "*convinced that we cannot live happy together, resolved to make both her and myself happy so far as I could,*" and thus he abruptly left her and their small children, never to return. Fitch was part of an age when mechanics, farm instruments, and inventive odd constructions were the rule, with restlessness the pattern for many people. Each workman tended to own his personal means of production and many accomplished their work in a spirit of careful craftsmanship. Fitch

continued for years to make brass buttons, and in the process sharpened his skills as a metal worker. He attempted to join the British army six years before the Revolution but failed even at this, as he also failed later to adapt to the even minimal discipline of the irregular Revolutionaries. Fitch worked throughout much of the Revolution in a gun shop in the Trenton and Brunswick area. When he did happen to become tied formally to the military he rapidly disappeared in an informal desertion. He just walked away, as was common with both the Revolutionaries and the troops of the British. He had an opportunity to join the half-naked soldiers at Valley Forge, an opportunity that would soon be considered heroic, but Fitch chose to stay warm. The extent of his profiteering with Revolutionary troops by selling tobacco, buttons, etc., was limited, but not from any failure of effort. After the war the varied negative public attitudes around him began to settle down and he was soon past what he reported as a feeling of disgrace for failure to follow through on a potential Revolutionary commission. For a time Fitch devoted himself intently to making buttons and buckles, with the aside of an occasional silver spoon.

Once, when he traveled to the Ohio Territory, Indians captured Fitch, and he was able to turn that experience into an opportunity to survey the entire area. The maps he prepared were used later all up and down the Ohio region. After an initial terrifying time living with the Indians, Fitch spent peaceful months in a Sandusky Indian village, and eventually was taken by the Indians up to Detroit for a prisoner exchange. By 1785 Fitch was back once again in New England and Philadelphia, fully recovered in health and spirits from his frontier experience. He was, however, becoming chronically agitated and all too often quarrelsome with his neighboring Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists about questions of immortality, conduct, virtue, etc. He remained, as he said, "*crazy after learning*" as he had been since he was a child, but also remained crazily argumentative. Mechanical inventions and religion both were his lifetime obsessions.

Although the steam engine had been in use in a limited and largely inefficient fashion for over 50 years in England, in the United States there were only three steam engines, and these represented the original old-fashioned type. As Fitch heard of steam power he tackled the overpowering task by solitarily designing an engine to harness steam power to a vehicle that would run on the

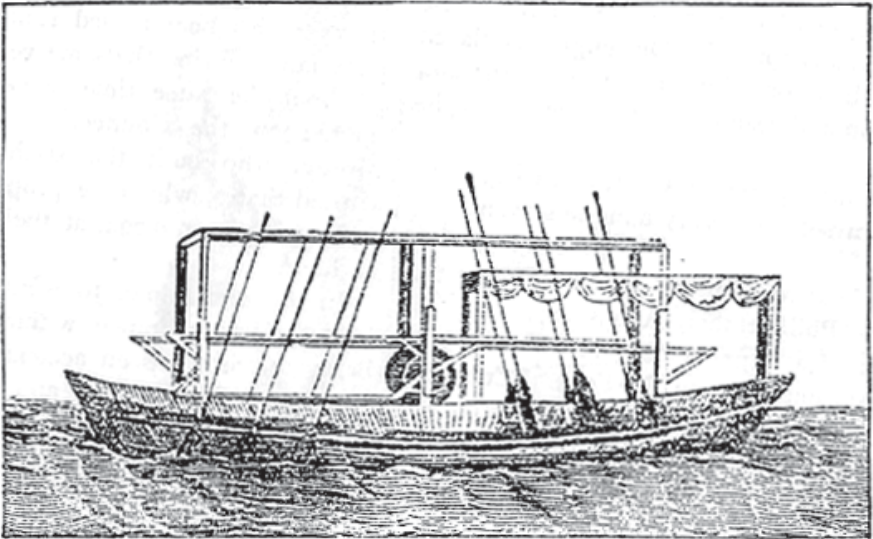
road. There was no railroad at that time, no metal tracks, and the ordinary roads were mired in mud with frequent use of transverse logs to supply stability. Fitch soon realized, however, that a steam engine could more logically be placed on the smooth surface of a river, rather than on land, and therefore he began to make drafts for a working engine, a “*steamboat*” engine, apparently having formed the original conception entirely independently of significant help by others. In fact he was absolutely sure his design for the engine was totally original until he was shown the work of Thomas Newcoman of England, a man who had developed an earlier steam engine powered with piston and cylinders. A model of this engine had been available since 1729 but had been used primarily to pump water out of mines, not to supply propulsion on either roads or water. Fitch next proceeded to try to develop a propeller to drive a boat through water, using a revolving chain and sprockets. For a time Fitch tried steam driven oars and paddles, after he had failed to harness his prospective steam engine to any type of effective propeller.

Philadelphia was the place with the most money, the most educated persons, and the most innovations; so Fitch gravitated there with his ideas and dreams. Unfortunately Fitch’s cantankerous ways, his crude models, and his abysmally poor spelling and language did not recommend him to the academics or the aristocrats of the town. He sought help from the leaders of the day, including David Rittenhouse (1757-1796) and James Ewing (1736-1806). Ewing was supportive and clearly scientifically inclined and liberal, and he suggested that an acquaintance of his in Trenton examine Mr. Fitch’s proposed machine, a machine designed to row a boat. During this time in Philadelphia, and while his abandoned family struggled along without him, Fitch existed by selling copies of the map that he had prepared during his Indian times. Fitch was inevitably frustrated as it became apparent that most of the great men, including Benjamin Franklin, had their own pressing needs to fulfill, had different interests to pursue, and were at best neutral toward visitors like Fitch.

Fitch was also disconcerted to hear of a potentially successful competitor, James Rumsey, a man who had made a boat that was reputed to go against the current. The Rumsey boat was not driven by steam and so there could be no question about prior rights. There was, however, a clear question of political clout since General Washington was supportive of Rumsey. Thus Fitch went to

visit Mt. Vernon where the General is reported to have welcomed Fitch in his customary manner, according to Fitch's biographer Boyd, with typically stiff but not forbidding dignity. Despite this effort at influence by Fitch, and also despite the interest of Thornton, who was an acquaintance of Washington, the General remained a supporter of Rumsey and was cool to the much less personally adroit Fitch. Similarly, Rittenhouse never actually contributed money even though he felt Fitch deserved encouragement. *"Fitch had failed to win the support of the Philosophical Society, where Rumsey was more successful. A few members, including Vaughn, aided Fitch's enterprises privately, but Franklin, Hopkinson, Rush, and many more gave their support to Rumsey."* (Hindle) Some in Virginia and Pennsylvania did manage to encourage Fitch to continue, but even they were inclined to suggest that places like Kentucky would be more accepting of a steamboat than would ever be the case in Pennsylvania. Benjamin Franklin was approached, but his concept for a power driven boat was to construct a pump that would bring water in from the bow, carry it through a pipe, and then pump the water out the stern to supply propulsion for the boat.

Prior patents, the frequent delay in obtaining patents, and new legal issues about patent rights in the infant Republic all slowed everyone's progress at the time. One of the major mechanical difficulties Fitch encountered in his own construction was uncertainty about the optimal size of the cylinder. His original design proved a cylinder with a diameter of one inch was too small, because of the friction generated by such a small cylinder. Fitch, with characteristic determination, and with the help of a man named Harry Voigt who was for several years Fitch's most loyal colleague, eventually did develop a small skiff that was powered by a modest steam engine. Voigt helped Fitch develop the engine driven boat propelled with side arms that led to paddles that were in turn attached to cranks. The *Columbian Magazine* of the time stated: *"The steam engine is to be similar to the late improved steam engines in Europe. The cylinder is to be horizontal, and the steam to work with equal force at each end thereof. The mode of forming a vacuum is believed to be entirely new, also of letting water into it and of letting it off against the atmosphere without any friction. The undertakers are also of the opinion that their engine would work with an equal force to those late improved engines, it being a twelve-inch cylinder. They expect it will move with a clear force, after deducting friction,*



*John Fitch's steamboat. (from Grant)*

*between eleven and twelve hundred pounds weight; which force is to be applied to the turning of the axle-tree on a wheel of 18 inches diameter. The piston is to move about three feet, and each vibration of the piston turns the axle-tree about two-thirds around. They propose to make the piston to strike thirty strokes in a minute; which will give the axle-tree about forty revolutions. Each revolution of the axle-tree moves twelve oars five and a half feet. As six oars come out of the water, six more enter the water; which makes a stroke of about eleven feet each revolution. The oars work perpendicularly, and make a stroke similar to the paddle of canoe. The cranks of the axle-tree act upon the oar about one-third of their length from their lower end; on which part of the oar the whole force of the axle-tree is applied. The engine is placed in about two-thirds of the boat, and both the action and reaction of the piston operate to turn the axle tree the same way.”*

Fitch seemed always to have had a stormy relationship with his various stockholders, primarily because no money was made but much was spent. Having initially obtained rights to all the waterways of New Jersey, he then petitioned the Pennsylvania Assembly in November of 1786 and a bill was introduced giving to “*John Fitch, his heirs and assigns*” exclusive rights to all boats propelled by fire or steam. Ultimately however he received a more

modern, and therefore more limited, 14-year grant to develop and utilize his patent. During these unsettled years in Philadelphia, Fitch visited frequently with many of the creative and prominent men of the day, including Rembrandt Peale, the famous painter.

For several months Fitch and Voigt offered exhibition runs up and down the Delaware or Schuylkill River. Later there developed an almost incessant controversy about steamboats, patents, and inventive priority, and also regarding whether or not Rumsey's boat was truly different than that of Fitch. There were additional attempts to get General Washington's approval. Voigt once attempted to slip totally out of the partnership with Fitch, perhaps due to arguments between Voigt and Fitch over money, alcohol, or women; and certainly arguments regarding each man's priority for various portions of the engine. In addition, they had major and enthusiastic dissension regarding religion. Both were deists and reportedly both liked to argue with alcohol in hand and "*on board.*" Jefferson was accused by some of being a deist. To be a deist did not mean the individual was truly an atheist. Deism proposed a natural religion and morality, and for some adherents only meant they had not yet found a suitable god to worship. The mechanically talented Voigt eventually drifted back to making clocks and this left Fitch single-handed with the overwhelming tasks of raising money, designing a more useful boat, and launching new appeals for even more money from people who invariably found him personally uncomfortable, as well as absolutely obsessed with the concept of a steam-driven boat.

During these days of uncertainty for Fitch, William Thornton came onto the scene, having moved to Philadelphia in 1788. Like many others in his time, and in our own, Thornton attempted to exploit the connections between science and industry, and he sought fame as an inventor as well as money as an entrepreneur. Nevertheless, his true and most sustained, even if limited, income came from his shares of the plantation in Tortola. The development of a working steamboat certainly became one of the major efforts Thornton made to seek a fortune in his adopted land. Most of his similar efforts as entrepreneur failed, and ultimately this was no exception. Where did Thornton acquire his own dreams of steamboats, science, and progress?

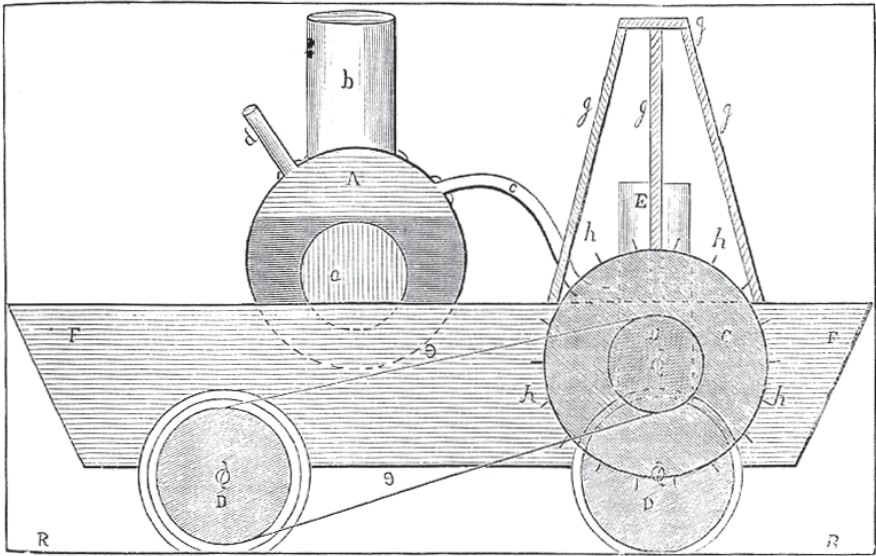
Thornton had been to France following his education in England at Edinburgh and Aberdeen, centers that encouraged invention, and when he arrived in Philadelphia in 1788 to some observers Thornton seemed more French than English. Perhaps from the French Enlightenment he was convinced of the inevitability of scientific progress, and developed a broadly continental vision. Of all the men whose belief in the validity of scientific discovery led them to support the steamboat, Thornton was clearly the friendliest, the most tolerant, and the most consistently loyal to Fitch at a time when Fitch desperately needed friendship plus money. Thornton even sought, and received, money from his mother-in-law for the steamboat ventures, and he purchased shares in the new company that he organized with Fitch. Thornton invented a new type of condenser that he anticipated would transfer water into steam more quickly than had been true of the old pipe condensers. Fitch turned out to be correct when he questioned the value of Thornton's invention, arguing that the new condenser would never be strong enough to propel a boat. Eventually the new steamboat they constructed caught fire and sank, delaying efforts for an additional year. The Thornton condenser was re-made, despite Fitch's objections, and again it proved a failure and ultimately seems to have been of no value for the overall project. Fitch came up with a new proposal to make a smaller condenser that used a single straight tube, one in which the power of steam was transmitted directly to the paddles. The company directors, which included several of the Philadelphia notables, allowed money for this change, and Fitch, Thornton, and Voigt were once again joined together in dreams, in the tap-room, and in constructing the engine.

Finally, after several years of work, the group did prove that a steam-driven boat could indeed travel as fast as eight miles an hour, even against the current. Despite Fitch's objections Thornton designed an elegant cabin to accompany the new venture, assured it would soon be a commercial success. On June 16, 1790, Governor Thomas Mifflin and other city officials marched on board the new steamboat. This particular social occasion was indeed a great success, and a special flag was presented to the inventors. Before long the governor became more cautious and several key officials totally disassociated themselves from the entire enterprise. It is unclear how much of this retrenchment was the effect of the rival Rumsey enterprise, or reflected the lack

of support by public figures such as Franklin and Washington, or even reflected the new interest of the wealthy Livingston family. The social awkwardness of the inventors may have played a role. However, all during the summer of 1790 advertisements for trips could be seen in the local papers. The *New York Magazine* reported: “*Fitch’s steamboat really performs to a charm. It is a pleasure, while one is on board of her in a contrary wind, to observe her superiority over the river shallops, sloops, ships, etc., who, to gain anything, must make a zigzag course, while this, our new invented vessel, proceeds in a direct line. On Sunday morning she sets off for Chester, and engages to return in the evening – forty miles . . .*” The predictions that Fitch, and also Thornton, would make a fortune turned out not to be the case, even though on some occasions the steamboat did travel up to eighty miles in a single day. By September of 1790 it had proved itself mechanically superior by actually going faster than Robert Fulton’s famous *Clermont* was able to go even as late as 1807. Nevertheless the *Clermont* remains the boat that is generally credited, at least by school children, with being the first boat to use steam effectively. Thornton was the most dependable contributor from among Fitch’s several stockholders during all these years, but Thornton then left Philadelphia with his wife for two years in his effort to re-evaluate the Tortola Plantation. With his departure the overall project just lost steam and financial support.

Robert Fulton was of course disturbed years later by the truth that Thornton asserted over and over that someone had preceded Fulton in developing the steamboat. Thornton stated: “*I will contract to reimburse you the cost of the boat and give you \$150,000 for your patent or if you can convince me of the success by any drawings or demonstration I will join in the expense and profits.*” Fulton had said no boat could go more than six miles an hour in still water and Thornton called his bluff at once saying, “*Write the terms.*” But Fulton chose not to do so. The ostensible reason for the dispute between Fulton and Thornton was that Thornton had informed Fulton there was nothing patentable about the steamboat because Fitch had built the first boat, and the rights of Fitch had already expired. Memorials and letters, and repeated reminders by Thornton, who then had the job overseeing all patents, were futile compared to the power of the new steamboat monopolists that included the Roosevelts, Livingstons, and other famous landowners along the Hudson,





*Fitch's design for a steam car. (Whittlesey)*

Delaware, and Mississippi Rivers. Cornelius Vanderbilt, founder of the Vanderbilt fortune, had been running steamboats across New York Bay to the Battery and Robert Fulton and Robert Livingston had already secured their own monopoly. Vanderbilt was actually running “*Gibbon's Steamboats*” with no authorization, as was another steam boater, Aaron Ogden, who sought an injunction against Gibbons. The Supreme Court eventually ruled that only Congress could regulate commerce on navigable waters and eliminated any potential for total monopoly control of future steamboats by anyone. Permanent state monopolies, and permanent personal patents, were finished for all time in America.

The truth is that the steamboat was certainly not the product of any one man. It evolved through the efforts of many on both sides of the Atlantic, but John Fitch deserves more than his current near oblivion as a participant. Thornton was always the major supporter for John Fitch, the troubled man who so diligently pursued steamboat development. Fitch himself eventually became totally dependent on the charity of the widow from whom he was renting. He had been absolutely devastated as the Commissioners for the Promotion of Useful Arts, men such as Thomas Jefferson, Henry Knox, and Edmund

Randolph, settled the ongoing Fitch-Rumsey steam-boat dispute by giving patents to both of them. One purpose of any patent, for the inventor, was to assure a fortune. There is absolutely no question that by the 1790s, Fitch's boat had been successful in progressing against the current, but his overall efforts failed to make any profit for him or for his sponsors. The French government still remained intrigued, however, and during the next several, but ultimately fruitless, years, Fitch did attempt to develop a military boat for the French. This turned out to be just one more disappointment.

Fitch died, perhaps of alcohol abuse or even of suicide, in 1798 in Bardstown, Kentucky, having spent his last days trying to perfect a steam-powered machine to run on land, using rectangular rails with a flange to keep the wheels on track. This effort was well before rails or even decent roads were possible. His will, written in 1798, divided all the property he possessed, and that which he hoped to possess, equally between his children, Thornton, and two others. By the time Robert Fulton had developed his own economically successful boat, Thornton had become Superintendent of the Federal Patent Office. From that position he loyally defended the priority of Fitch – even if he irritated others when he did so.

**James Rumsey (1743-1792):** We have now heard about the ties between John Fitch and Thornton, but who actually were the major competitors of Fitch, in particular, just who was James Rumsey, and then, even more importantly, who was Robert Fulton? George Washington, the primary supporter of Rumsey, met Rumsey in a small town called Bath in what is now West Virginia, a town that was a modest resort with five bathing houses plus dressing rooms, a town that boasted the approval of a Methodist Bishop who had praised gaiety and the purgative quality of the waters. When Washington reached the inn to visit Rumsey and learn of his invention, the two men went to a secret area where Rumsey made a flow of water through a narrow channel, and in the channel Rumsey demonstrated two miniature boats with poles reaching down and joined together on the side by a sort of paddlewheel. As the paddlewheel actuated the poles, the poles pushed on the bottom and moved the boats forward. The model seemed to walk upstream. The general gave Rumsey a certificate testifying to the efficiency and the simplicity of what he had seen and Rumsey applied for exclusive rights to use it on the waters of Virginia. He did receive such a

monopoly on January 1, 1785. This was several years before the first contacts of Thornton with Fitch.

Rumsey was born in Maryland, with little chance for any formal education, but he picked up skills as a mechanic while working as a blacksmith and millwright. As John Fitch had done, Rumsey tried his hand at many businesses. He too was chronically restless, but in contrast to Fitch, James Rumsey was not only handsome and gracious but he also enjoyed quiet visits with his fellow men. Rumsey claimed later that he had thought for years about using steam for power, but there is little written evidence that he had ever done so. He did once make an effort to use water propulsion as he attempted to see whether or not liquid driven by a steam pump could, as Franklin had suggested, push a boat forward. After his initial visit with Washington, Rumsey continued to communicate with the General and in turn Washington continued his support of Rumsey. Both Fitch and Thornton felt that any such support represented a major error by Washington. Although Fitch in later days could prove he did have a priority in his patent, a priority of some three months, Rumsey clearly was also one who eventually did develop a steamboat that could propel boats against the current. It seems obvious to us now that no one single person merits all the praise for steamboats. The boats evolved out of many ideas and all the boats were designed to meet a clear need, and all attempted to use the new technology offered by steam.

Legal battles and competition of the day between the inventors seemed endless. Both Fitch and Rumsey had personal problems with money, both attempted to utilize experts in England, and both approached the American leaders of the day seeking support. Rumsey succeeded in inventing a successful pipe boiler at about the same time Fitch alienated Benjamin Rush and Benjamin Franklin, as well as most of the other scientists, entrepreneurs, and leaders of the day. On April 12, 1787, and again on April 16<sup>th</sup> Fitch demonstrated that his own boat would indeed go up to eight miles an hour. Having failed, despite that, to make an impact in Philadelphia Fitch then made a new financial appeal to Westerners. He requested loans from the western members of Congress, including Albert Gallatin. In Europe, during the fall of 1790, Rumsey was trying to solve his own similar trouble with finances, but then he died suddenly

in 1792, apparently from cerebral apoplexy while attending a meeting of the Committee of Mechanics of the "*Society of Arts.*"

**Robert Fulton** (1765-1815): the man most commonly credited with the steamboat, had arrived in London six years prior to Rumsey's death. When Fulton came to England, Benjamin West graciously received him. West was considered the leading American painter in Europe and was also an intimate friend of the King. Fulton had actually arrived in England in an effort to become a painter, but he discovered in Europe that he lacked the skill for major artistic success and soon began to dream of steamboats. Fulton and Rumsey did know of each other's work when they were both in London. Fulton once stated that he felt that the Rumsey method of jet propulsion was well worth further experimentation, even though steam could not then be mobilized for jet propulsion in any truly predictable way.

Fulton, probably more than anyone, used little models and painstaking experiments to find out exactly what would work. He gradually developed side paddle wheels rather than his earlier experimental type of stern paddles, or the contemplated propulsion by fish-like motions, etc. By September of 1792, Fulton could write that he had not painted a canvas in more than two years, and that work on canals, and steam engineering, was now going to be his true profession. After Fulton increasingly turned to engineering, he invented a mill for cutting marble and developed innovative concepts regarding canals. Fulton wrote to James Watt and others who were earlier experts in steam engines and he seemed to wish that Watt, one of the true inventors of the steam engine, would design an engine for him. In addition to Fitch, Rumsey, and Fulton, Oliver Evans was another one of the early steam engine designers, and he was located in Philadelphia. All the inventors could see why each engine was desirable and should serve usefully, no one alone completely solved the how.

Fulton was more successful financially than Rumsey was, and certainly more so than Fitch ever could have been, but Fulton also failed in many of his own efforts to link money, engineering, machinery, and boats driven by steam. Nevertheless it is true that Robert Fulton now gets most conventional credit in America for developing steamboats, even though in several countries many other individuals worked quite independently to produce a working boat. Finally it was Robert Livingston, the financier, who combined with Fulton to develop a

truly useful boat, one that could predictably run at a speed of six miles an hour. Fitch's old backer Thornton continued to use published "*broadsides*" and letters stating that Fulton's patents were actually worthless, and that Fulton was an imitator rather than an innovator.

The obvious thing in retrospect, on reading the many angry letters, is realization how potentially desirable any of these boats, if they ever had worked well, would have been. This was a time Americans were launching their own Industrial Revolution. No one could foresee with clarity the amazing changes that such industrialization, and the power to improve mobility, would mean in the next decades. Water transportation, river movement, canals and lake development, were all keys to settling the nation. Shared ideas, even if shared unwillingly, along with a great deal of capital was required to experiment, build, and then also to litigate. Robert Fulton deserves credit as a major inventor because he pulled together the work of the numerous preceding experts, and above all because he developed a boat that actually worked, one that worked consistently and one that made money. That doesn't mean, not for a minute, that Thornton was ever willing to give Fulton much credit for such priority.

Latrobe, the superb engineer who was later to sue Thornton, as late as 1803 doubted that the problems in making a steam-driven boat could ever be solved. In his report to the American Philosophical Society at Philadelphia in May, 1803, Latrobe stated: "*during the general lassitude of mechanical exertion which succeeded the American Revolution the utility of steam-engines appears to have been forgotten; but the subject afterward started into very general notice in a form in which it could not possibly be attended with much success. A sort of mania began to prevail, which indeed has not yet entirely subsided, for impelling boats by steam-engines . . . For a short time a passage-boat, rowed by a steam-engine, was established between Bordentown and Philadelphia, but it was soon laid aside . . . There are indeed general objections to the use of the steam-engine for impelling boats, from which no particular mode of application can be free. These are, first, the weight of the engine and of the fuel, second the large space it occupies; third, the tendency of its action to rock and rack the vessel and render it leaky; fourth, the expense of maintenance; fifth, the irregularity of its motion and the motion of the water in the boiler and cistern, and of the fuel-vessel in rough water; sixth, the difficulty*

*arising from the liability of the paddles or oars to break if light, and from the weight, if made strong. Nor have I ever heard of an instance, verified by other testimony than that of the inventors, of a speedy and agreeable voyage having been performed in a steamboat of any construction. I am well aware that there are still many very respectable and ingenious men who consider the application of the steam-engine to the purpose of navigation as highly important and as very practicable, especially on the rapid waters of the Mississippi, and who would feel themselves almost offended at the expression of an opposite opinion. And perhaps some of the objections against it may be obviated. That founded on the expense and weight of the fuel may not be for some years exist in the Mississippi, where there is a redundancy of wood on the banks; but the cutting and loading will be almost as great an evil.”* Latrobe’s cautious views did not prevent him from pursuing the same will of the wisp, a self-propelled boat that would go against both stream and wind. He became bankrupt in the process. All the observers and dreamers were right, it could be done, and fortunes could be made – but they weren’t to be made by the early inventors. Fulton remains the most famous of the lot.

While in France, Fulton became a friend of Robert R. Livingston, the U.S. Minister Plenipotentiary to France. The attraction was not just Livingston’s wealth and political fame, even though Livingston had a lot of both to admire, but rather their joint interest in steamboating. For five years, even before the two met in 1801, Livingston had struggled to build a successful steamboat that could go from New York City to Albany. His gigantic estate was on the eastern shore of the Hudson River and rapid and predictable transport to New York City was needed. Fulton also worked closely with Nicholas Roosevelt who owned a large boat foundry. Fulton continued to be involved, for both better and for worse, with both of these successful long time New Yorkers, right up until the time of his death.

Fulton, along with his dearest friend, Joel Barlow, visited several times with Thornton at the Patent Office and while there Thornton did allow Fulton to review all the 12 prior patents pertaining to steamboats. This initially gracious meeting eventually evolved into an intense enmity. Fulton’s biographer, Cynthia Owen Philip said: *“However, beneath his urbane veneer, Thornton was jealous, avaricious, and unscrupulous. Of all the enemies Fulton could make in the*

*course of establishing his steamboat empire, Thornton would be the most implacable.*” The lawsuits over precedence and patents for the steam navigation rights seemed incessant and in retrospect both unseemly and counterproductive for all concerned. The legal issue of monopolies was not officially settled until the suit of Ogden against Gibbons in 1824 reached the U.S. Supreme Court. According to Philip (page 352) Thornton supplied material to assist Gibbons, and Ogden was eventually ruined by the lawsuit. Daniel Webster eloquently argued the case against R. Fulton and R. R. Livingston, and opposed their efforts for a total and permanent monopoly of all steamboat navigation in New York. And thus ultimately it was the court of John Marshall that established the principle, once and for all, that only the U.S. Congress, not the states, can regulate commerce on our major navigable waters.

In 1809 Fulton was asked to join the prestigious American Philosophical Society, the organization in which Thornton, Jefferson, and Latrobe were all members. All these men knew one another, it was a small population of the intellectuals, after all. Thornton once actually wished to join Fulton in developing a steamboat, as he also had wished to join John Stevens, another early developer and entrepreneur in steam navigation. Both Stevens and Fulton refused overtures by Thornton for any such joint effort. Perhaps such a combination of their skills would have accelerated the process. As Philips concludes, *“Fulton did not invent the steamboat, nor did Fitch, Ramsey, Roosevelt, or Thornton. He attempted more than he could accomplish.”* As with many technological advances, progress is evolutionary, and many minds and hands were involved in developing the mode of river transportation that for a time seemed uniquely American. The effort mattered a great deal, for individuals and for the country. As Flexner states in his superb review, *“The steamboat was the first American invention of world-shaking importance; unlike the cotton gin, which was a simple gadget that could be built by any blacksmith, it required a new technology.”*

Robert Fulton was considered a national hero when he died suddenly on February 25, 1815. By that time he had helped establish a steamboat network and in the eight years since he had returned from Europe he had become the leading symbol of American mechanical genius. His skills as a painter and draftsman were considerable, but his ambitions in that arena were never fully

realized – nor indeed was the half empty glass in any area ever completely filled for Robert Fulton. For example he had earlier conceptualized a canal system for both France and the United States, had composed a 56 page manuscript “*To the Friends of Mankind*,” and widely published his thoughts on free trade, his declarations of democratic faith, plus his visions for a new world order. Along the way he spent years trying to link manufacturing, benevolence, and personal profit.

This inventive but scattered effort by a man generally considered at the time to be a genius, was even true regarding his plans, on both sides of the Atlantic, to develop a submarine. For a time he worked to prove the efficacy of explosives that could be presented in some other way than by conventional cannons from shipboard. He argued that a powerful submarine fleet would make America beloved and respected, and in addition would make the United States unlikely to be attacked by a foreign power. What a remarkable man he must have been, and he lived in a time of exceptional men. One of these men was his truly dearest friend, Joel Barlow.

**Joel Barlow** (1754-1812): Joel Barlow, diplomat, poet, and friend of the great and near great, visited with Thornton, and when they first met they exchanged meals, writings, and prints (Philip, page186). Perhaps of greatest interest to Thornton was the Washington home of Barlow. After considering an effort to purchase Mt. Vernon, Barlow bought an old mansion on the banks of Rock Creek. At the time, and for decades afterwards, one could look from that point down to the Potomac and even see the Capitol. As Barlow himself said in December of 1807, “*It is a beautiful hill, about one mile from the Potomac and 200 feet in elevation above Tidewater, with Washington and Georgetown under my eye and Alexandria eight miles below, still in view, the Potomac reflecting back the sun in a million forms and losing himself among the hills that try on each side to shove him from his course.*” A visitor (Woodress) observed: “*It is situated on a high hill with about 50 acres of large trees...He has Washington, Georgetown, the President’s house, the Capitol, Alexandria and the majestic Potomac in full view.*” Barlow changed the prior name of Belair to Kalorama, or “*fine view*”, and the 30 acres and home site was considered elegant even before Barlow totally transformed the area. As another example of how close knit the small Washington society once was, the same property had once belonged to



Gustavus Scott, one of the Commissioners who preceded Thornton. The Barlow couple had no children, and Kalorama eventually became the property of Colonel George Bomford and Barlow's sister. Bomford was the ultimate financial advisor for the Widow Thornton. Kalorama stood at the top of Twenty Second Street east of Rock Creek. "S" Street between Massachusetts and Florida Avenues now crosses the site of Barlow's former estate. Kalorama always had special meaning for the Thorntons, and after Thornton's death, Anna Maria attended many social events there. In her very last days she boarded in the then aging mansion.

Latrobe, eventually a near neighbor to Barlow, gave advice to Barlow for construction of the house, and the Barlow Library soon was classed the most valuable in America. Presidents and Congressmen frequented the estate at a time there were only a few homes in Washington that could offer comparable elegance with a warm welcome. Robert Fulton lived for eight years in the home and was said to have designed his steamboat Clermont while there.

Barlow made an effort to prevent Fulton from battling with Thornton regarding priority for steamboat inventions. Barlow once took Thornton on an extended carriage ride and according to Philip he persuaded Thornton to admit Fulton's claims with respect to Europe. But: *"Thornton was seriously ill. At the time of Barlow's carriage ride he had a high fever, which Barlow attributed to his drunkenness the previous night, but which lingered on. As Barlow gleefully wrote Fulton, 'the poor fellow can dispose of nothing now unless it be his bones. He has not recovered from his fever & it is thought by some that he never will.'"*

James Woodress suggested there was stress in both Fulton's and Barlow's marriages because of the closeness of Fulton, Barlow, and Barlow's wife. One of Fulton's biographers, Cynthia Philip, supplies many examples that suggest the friendship of Fulton and Barlow became even too intimate, and that ultimately severely stressed both marriages. Earman stated: *"The Barlows were among Washington's most generous hosts. Robert Fulton, who tested torpedoes in Tiber Creek and is rumored to have been the lover of both Barlows, figures most prominently among their long-term guests."*

While he lived at Kalorama, Barlow finally released his lengthy epic poem "*Columbiad*", at least partially published with the financial assistance of Robert Fulton. This most ambitious poetic work of its time is not now

considered a literary success, and at the time some considered it anti-religious. Unfortunately the friendship since boyhood days between Barlow and Noah Webster was ruptured after this publication since Webster could not (Unger): *"omit to pass a severe censure on the atheistical principles it contains... No man on earth not allied to me by nature or marriage had so large a share in my affections as Joel Barlow until you renounced the religion which you once preached, and which I believe."*

Along with Thornton, in a reflection of the interests of the times, Barlow attempted to transfer agricultural and mechanical products from Europe into the United States. These included improved machinery to manufacture woolen goods, the previously unknown sugar beet root he sent to Mrs. Madison, as well as the much sought after Merino sheep for importation as a gift to Jefferson. Thornton was also involved in very similar efforts at importation. Barlow took time to translate some of the works of Thornton's good friend Volney from French into English. Barlow was serving as the American ambassador to France when he died on the road in Poland at the time of Napoleon's wintertime flight out of Russia.

**Benjamin Henry Latrobe** (1764-1820): Benjamin Henry Latrobe was the founder of the professional practice of architecture in the United States, and he was a genius in practical engineering. He was also, at least as perceived by Thornton for several years, a most implacable enemy. Latrobe was involved in steamboat ventures as much as was Thornton, and both worked on the Capitol building, and, not totally unrelated, Latrobe sued William Thornton. Latrobe did more in his lifetime than any other one person to transfer the engineering technology of Europe across the ocean to America. Who was Latrobe, whose life was so intertwined with Thornton?

Latrobe was schooled in the Moravian system, his father having been a successful minister who could afford to send Latrobe while he was still a young boy to Silesia in Germany, in order to enhance his education. Thornton was similarly sent, as were many children of the successful folk of the time, to another country to enhance his formal education. For Thornton it was Quaker schooling in England, for Latrobe it was Moravian education in Germany. After young Latrobe achieved a sound classical education in Europe, he next had opportunity to apprentice with the engineers of England while he worked with

the renowned architects who designed the Admiralty Building in Whitehall. Perhaps because he was so talented and already recognized as a superb watercolorist and draftsman, as is witnessed by drawings made on his trips along the Ohio River and on the way to New Orleans, Latrobe was eventually able to succeed on both sides of the Atlantic.



*Benjamin Henry Latrobe.*

Latrobe had a happy marriage in England, and could potentially have expected a brilliant future as he launched a successful career in London as both architect and engineer. Then, and this was so very common at the time, his beloved wife died in childbirth leaving him the care of two small children. After the emotional shattering resulting from the death of his wife, and placement of the children with a relative, and also after a time struggling with his own decline for months into the melancholia that plagued him off and on all of his life, Latrobe opted for a totally new start. He moved across the Atlantic. He arrived in Norfolk in 1796, bereft of his superb library and tools since they had been in a different ship and lost on the high seas. His trip was at a time when both French and English ships could, and did, pounce on weaker ships and seize goods, or sailors, or both. The affable personality and superb training of Latrobe, training which both he and others felt surpassed the experience of any other person in America at the time, including Thornton, quickly won for Latrobe numerous influential friends along the entire East Coast. By 1799 he had been commissioned to install the new waterworks in Philadelphia, and he then designed a new building for the Bank of Pennsylvania. After Latrobe remarried, his new American wife, Mary, insisted on moving his children from England to the USA, and the family was united in October of 1800. The son, Henry Jr., who was considered the equal of his father in genius, died of yellow fever in 1817 in New Orleans, at age 24. He died in the same house where his father was also destined to die of yellow fever several years later.

By 1803 Henry Latrobe, Sr., had been appointed by Thomas Jefferson to be Surveyor of the Public Buildings of the United States, and was told to

complete the Capitol that had been started using Thornton's design. In so far as was possible Latrobe adhered to Thornton's original design; in fact he praised it enthusiastically, but he discovered much of the internal structure of the Capitol needed modification. Latrobe is given credit for solidifying the interior design and particularly for some of the more attractive and surprising architectural flourishes found within the Capitol, including the use of sculptured corn, tobacco, and other primarily American symbols. The Capitol interior, even its roof support, was physically unstable until structural changes were made, first by Hoban, followed by further improvements by Latrobe. Nevertheless, it was Thornton's overall image for the building that continued to dominate the appearance then, and even now, of our Capitol building.

Latrobe became heavily involved with steamboat efforts initiated together with Fulton and Livingston, particularly planning for steam boating on the Ohio and on the Mississippi. In fact Latrobe was one of many who became bankrupt in that process. He invested much of his engineering creativity in New Orleans, beginning with the design of an innovative but now modest appearing Custom House in 1807. He was awarded the exclusive privilege to supply New Orleans with waterworks in 1809, but even this potential source of sustained revenue was thwarted and became one additional reason for erosion of his funds as he continued to support, from his personal money, workmen on both the steamboat and the New Orleans waterworks project. He, and his son Henry, despite conflicts with envious competitors and an almost incredible chain of misfortunes including war, flood, and fire, were responsible for much of the modern basis of the city of New Orleans. The elder Latrobe, the one of the two who knew Thornton best, terminated his own Washington affairs after the death from yellow fever of his son in New Orleans in 1817, since he felt recalled to New Orleans to complete work for the contracts they both had signed. And soon he followed his son in death.

During these New Orleans years, Latrobe helped with the design of sugar warehouses and in the process of this work invented various new types of machines. The steamboat and waterworks enterprises that consumed the energy and funds of the Latrobe family for over a decade severely depleted his fortune by the time of his own death, which occurred in the same house and only two years after the death of his son. Both died at times when mosquitoes were noted

to be ubiquitous, but before anyone had yet linked the mosquitoes with yellow fever. Latrobe's wife was left almost penniless, deep in debt, as she discovered she was able to achieve almost nothing from the various financial promises of the past. There are many buildings outside New Orleans that Latrobe helped design, some as far away as Adena, the home of the 3<sup>rd</sup> governor of Ohio. Latrobe designed private residences in Philadelphia and Washington, The Baltimore Cathedral, several government buildings, and engineering works for road, steam, and water facilities.

There was clearly a basis for intermittent conflict because of the differences between Thornton and Latrobe about how to finish the Capitol. Perhaps this was one reason for the later smoldering lawsuit between Latrobe and Thornton, but some of the explanations for the legal conflicts between the two men remain buried. What was its real source? The now distant difficulty between men who considered themselves Republicans and those who were Federalists was probably at least one factor, as Latrobe himself stated. Both men were interested in design, and had been open competitors for the commission for the Octagon House as well as for other homes. Thornton's propensity to begin a project, leave its completion to others, and then be unhappy with the way they did it may have contributed. Certainly, Latrobe did modify some of Thornton's designs. In addition Thornton was sensitive, to a fault.

The undoubted genius of Latrobe, plus his superb training, could have been a source for jealousy. Even one of Thornton's own pet projects, a potential monument for Washington to be placed in the Capitol after death of the hero met with derision from Latrobe as can be seen from the following (Latrobe): *"Some years ago Dr. Thornton of Washington described, in a large company, the allegorical group which it was his intention as Commissioner of the city of Washington, to place in the center of the Capitol, around the statue of the general. 'I would,' said he, 'place an immense rock of granite in the center of the dome. On the top of the rock should stand a beautiful female figure, to represent Eternity or Immortality. Around her neck, as a necklace, a serpent – the rattlesnake of our country – should be hung, with its tail in his mouth, the ancient & beautiful symbol of endless duration. At the foot of the rock another female figure stretching her hands upwards in the attitude of distressful entreaty should appear ready to climb the steep. Around her a group of children*

*representing agriculture, the arts & sciences, should appear to join in the supplication of the female. This female is to personify time, or our present state of existence. Just ascending the rock, the noble figure of General Washington should appear to move upwards, invited by immortality; but also expressing some reluctance in leaving the children of his care. There,' said he, 'Mr. Latrobe, is your requisite in such works of art; it would represent a matter of fact, a truth, for it would be the very picture of the General's sentiments, feelings, & expectations in departing this life: regret at leaving his people, but hoping & longing for an immortality of happiness & fame. You yourself have not ingenuity sufficient to pervert its meaning, & all posterity would understand it.' The Doctor was so full of his subject that I was unwilling to disturb his good humor. But I said that I thought his group might tell a very different story from what he intended. He pressed me so hard that at least I told him: that supposing the name & character of General Washington to be forgotten, or at least that the group being found in the ruins of the Capitol, the learned antiquarians of 2000 years hence were assembled to decide its meaning. I thought then that they would thus explain it. There is a beautiful woman on the top of a dangerous precipice, to which she invites a man, apparently well enough inclined to follow her. Who is this woman? Certainly not a very good sort of one, for she has a snake about her neck. The snake indicates assuredly her character, cold, cunning, & poisonous. She can represent none but some celebrated courtesan of the day. But there is another woman at the foot of the rock, modest and sorrowful, & surrounded by a family of small children. She is in a posture of entreaty, and the man appears half-inclined to return to her. She can be no other than his wife. What an expressive group! How admirable the art which has thus exposed the dangerous precipice to which the beauty & the cunning of the abandoned would entice the virtuous, even to the desertion of a beautiful wife & the mother of a delightful group of children! I was going on, but the laughter of the company & the impatience of the Doctor stopped my mouth. I had said enough, and was not easily forgiven."*

Thornton and Latrobe carried on what would have to be termed at least a spirited correspondence. Some of the later letters are quite long. In these Thornton lists various funds or accounts for the city that he felt Latrobe had mismanaged. The Thornton papers also include extensive summaries by

Thornton explaining why Latrobe should not have sued him. As an example of an early part of the correspondence several letters are included:

*23 April 1804*

*To Benj. H. Latrobe, Esq. Philad.*

*“It is with extreme regret that I think myself under the necessity of addressing you, but as I am unwilling to offend any Gentleman without provocation, so am I equally disinclined to receive unnoticed any Insult. Never was my surprise so much excited as on reading this Day, for the first time, your Letter to the Committee of Congress dated the 28<sup>th</sup> of Feby last. My uniform behaviour to you in the City of Washington I did imagine would have precluded you from offering any thing like insult or even incivility; but I am sorry to be obliged to declare that your Letter to the Committee is, as it respects me, not only ungentlemanly but false.”*

*I am*

*Sir with due respect-*

*Signed William Thornton*

*Latrobe answered:*

*Newcastle, April 28<sup>th</sup>, 1804*

*Sir,*

*“Open hostility is safer, than insidious friendship. I cannot therefore regret the declaration of War contained in your letter of the 23<sup>d</sup> April. For a considerable time I have been convinced that an open rupture with You would be more honorable to me than even that show of good understanding which has prevailed between us; - and which was kept up last winter by the respect of my wife for the Ladies of your family: a respect which led me to accept an invitation to a Ball at your house. For the civility of this invitation, and for three or four former invitations to your table, in which the hospitality of your disposition ranked me with every other stranger of respectability who visits the City of Washington I feel myself indebted: and particularly for the transmission of your Essay on Negro emancipation; a mark of respect, as unintelligible on any principle of consistency, as it would have been flattering had it been possible for it to be Sincere.*

*The terms used by You in your letter, would preclude further remark, did you possess the sort of memory recommended by the proverb to persons of your*

*character. It seems however necessary to remind You of Your conduct to me the day after you consented to the alterations proposed in the South Wing of the Capitol in April 1803, and of the insults you then offered me; of the coolness which since subsisted between us: - of the frequent attempts which I notwithstanding, made to come to an amicable discussion of the subject; - and especially of the insulting audience with which you honored me in the public passage at the door of the Patent office; when I called upon you for no other purpose but to know to what alterations in the plan you would consent, and what answer I could give to the Committee, to their enquiry after the original plan approved by General Washington.*

*When I accepted the office which has connected my character with the successful & honest management of the public Buildings at Washington, I was informed that I had nothing to do with you or your plan. Thinking however that much was due to your feelings, and to Your reputation, and perceiving much superior talent, and, as I thought much fondness of heart under the confusion of your conversation, & the rubbish of your language, I determined to consult, and advise with you on every thing I did. – In this determination I persevered notwithstanding my illness with You. Those who despise you most, in Washington, can bear witness to my perseverance in this resolution. My last call upon you is the strongest proof how far I was willing to go. The insulting treatment I received closed all further prospects of amicable arrangement, which I might have expected from your politeness or your understanding.*

*I now stand on the Ground from which you drove Hallet, & Hadfield to ruin. You may prove victorious against me also; but the contest will not be without spectators. The public shall attend & judge. I shall not court public discussion. It is in my power however, - more than in my inclination to show You in a more ridiculous light, even, than were I, in the fashion after such a correspondence, - to call you to the field. – But you have other accounts of that sort to settle before it can come to my turn. –*

*There is one certain advantage which I shall gain by your declared enmity. Your standing in society is such that in proportion to your abuse of me I shall be respected, and to your denial of my assertions they will be believed. And indeed you must also be a gainer by the present states of things. Hitherto your detraction has been limited to the circle of those whom you thought*



*unconnected with me, you can now indulge it without restraint, and whenever you please.*

*I am Sir with due respect*

*Yours*

*Henry Latrobe*

By “*rubbish of language*” did Latrobe mean the speech defect Thornton may have had? Although much of the correspondence is of course missing, and some letters are illegible, this heated exchange was by no means the end of the argument. For example, on the 27<sup>th</sup> of June 1804 Thornton wrote to Latrobe:

*I did not hear till today of your Arrival in this City, or I should before now have noticed your letter. –*

*How much so ever you may exalt in an open declaration of enmity it is nevertheless distressing to me that any person should conceive he had reason to call me Enemy. You mention some Instances of incivility on my part. I remember none ever intended, not any act that could be so construed except in the Lobby of the State Office, when I must own that your perseverance in alterations of the South wing of the Capitol (which I thought unnecessary after those I had made) did for a moment put me out of patience; & the purpose of public Business upon me at that time prevented perhaps the attention I ought to have paid to your wishes; but the want of attention is all you can charge with. I made use of no insults. I am more affected by your charge of insincerity than by all the malevolent aspersions contained in your Letter. I had at the time I sent you my pamphlet no Enmity to you, for I had not then seen your Report to the Committee of Congress. I was sincere in the Expression of my good wishes toward you and your respectable Lady. The pointed Injury you had intended me must have been the cause of your suspecting my sincerity, & your feelings toward me must have been bitter indeed to dictate your subsequent Invectives. –*

*You accuse me of having driven Mr. Hallet & Mr. Hadfield to ruin. Mr. Hallet was dismissed from public service on the 28<sup>th</sup> of June 1794. My commission was dated September 12<sup>th</sup>, 1794. – Mr. Hadfield resigned his Employment on the 24<sup>th</sup> of June 1796, which the Board accepted on the 27<sup>th</sup>. At his own request he was restored to the Superintendence of the Capitol on the 29<sup>th</sup> Sept. 1796, and though his behavior to me was what few would have overlooked, yet on his apology, which he made voluntarily, I was the first to reinstate him.*

*He was afterwards dismissed by the Board for reasons not necessary to mention. I consider him as a man of taste & am not his Enemy. – You charge me with detraction, but I deny it, & should be sorry to compare my character with yours in that respect. – You say I have some Field Business to settle. I know of none. I received several months ago a challenge, which I accepted, and I waited in the country the appointment of the time & place by the Seconds. My antagonist was in the meantime bound to the peace: but before Heaven I declare that no Information ever came from me direct or indirect relative to the affair, and my Family, I believe have never yet heard of it. I am thus, and shall always be prepared to repel any attack from any quarter. –*

*I am*

*Sir*

*with due respect-*

*W. Thornton*

No duel was fought this time, but the vitriol continued back and forth. Among many other statements Latrobe stated: “*Nor am I surprised that you know as much as you actually do, when I consider the quickness of your talents and the grasp of your memory but it is impossible that you should ever be on a level with me except in your own opinion, and equally so that I should revert to the ignorance of the art with which I began 25 years ago to descend to your Scale of knowledge,*” . . . Another place he says: “*If you wish for further light on your character as an underhand destroyer of reputation I refer you generally to your conscience, particularly to your recollection of a visit to Mr. Stuarts painting rooms with my pupil Mr. Mills. If this be not enough, I have a volume of additional facts, ready for you.*” In the same letter Latrobe says, “. . . *I cannot help expressing my opinion that any further correspondence between us will not only be unnecessary but tend to increase the irritation of the minds of each of us as the primary cause of our differences can never be removed.*” Undoubtedly additional correspondence did occur.

One of the letters is particular poignant in that Latrobe states: “*...Mrs. Latrobe expected hourly to be confined to her chamber. Her mother was suddenly carried off by an inflammation of the bowels. This misfortune has not yet been fully communicated to her. She has been brought to bed, and is still in a situation very far from health.*” These were undoubtedly difficult times for

both men. Nevertheless William Thornton could not drop this battle, and there are dozens of pages in which he defends his actions, mentions people who could, even should, be called to testify in a court of law.

He stated that Latrobe may have actually come as a secret agent of the Moravians as a missionary and he regularly questions Latrobe's architectural abilities. He also claimed Latrobe had been just a clerk in the Office of the Comptroller of London and had had no significant study of architecture. In July of 1806, two years later, Thornton wrote to complain that even though Mr. Monroe stated that Latrobe had been directed by the President to assure that the Capitol should be ready for the sitting of Congress, in fact that Latrobe had not been there often. Others had had to discharge the work. Thornton questioned the amount Latrobe is being paid, the amount of money spent for the timber "*more than was due,*" and mentions that an arch at the Capitol fell and killed someone. The arch at the Secretary of State's Office apparently also fell, and then Thornton says, "*Who can with propriety call him an arch – etec.?*" Thornton goes on to complain that Latrobe had been stated to be an engineer, "*military I presume, for I have not found him a civil one.*"

There was always suspicion of aristocratic titles in this infant America. Thornton tries to defend himself because; "*I have not stated that he changed his name for any sinister view. His ingenious lawyers have put construction on my words that common good sense will not warrant. I know nothing of a good republican's great nobility. It would be well to strike out re and leave only publican, for there is much of the rem in re; but I care not whether he is noble or ignoble and I think he deserves the ig as I have struck out the re, permit me now to exhibit for the benefit of the learned of the signature of the great Benjamin Henry Latrobe Boneval.*" Thornton then supplies poems. Thornton uses many plays on words for the fact that Latrobe had at times added the name Boneval, an aristocratic French family's name, to his total name. For most of these topics Thornton felt compelled to write a small poem, one we can be sure he circulated, judging from the responses seen in some of the letters. As examples:

*I heard Benny came as a missioner here,  
The doctrine of truth to support; but this must be false information, tis clear,  
Because of the truth he makes sport.*

One long poem pokes fun at the trim and symbols placed by Latrobe in the Capitol. One tucked away in the notes includes:

*“This dutchman in taste, this monument builder  
This planner of grand steps and walls,  
This falling – arch maker, this blunder gilder,  
himself still an architect calls!”*

*“Benny’s name, “nom de terre” – of the Boneval Branch!  
What fooleries fill folly’s brain!  
At his noble Pretensions I see that Judge Cranch,  
Can scarcely from Laughter refrain. –  
He presumes to lay claim to Columbia by birth,  
Begotten it only could be,  
This Frenchman in name, born nowhere on Earth,  
But dropt like gull dung at Sea.”*

Thornton then adds a note. . . “*He was actually born at Sea.*” He also mentions that Latrobe once spent wasted time designing chimney stones and adds a little poem:

*Evan said that Latrobe had his name on a stone,  
Stuck up at the end of his shed; -  
And he bought chimney pieces – aye many a one,  
The work of Latrobe’s hand & head.”*

Thornton even insisted in his own notes that Latrobe “*hates Washington.*” “*Benny’s hatred to Washington never can end - He hates both the name & the place – For he knows that this good man could never be his friend, Having fully pronounced his disgrace.*” Finally, and perhaps that now makes at least enough for us to include, he offers this poem to “*examine this spotless man... This ‘Big Ben’*”

*“Description-  
He’s about six feet two  
Of an ash coloured hue.  
His Face is of brass –  
His eyes cas’d with glass,*

*not to see,  
as do we;  
But, because they are green, -  
To prevent being seen.  
When e'er he walks bye,  
He looks in the sky,  
Like one in a wonder,  
As Ducks do in thunder.  
His manners are blunt,  
And his laugh is a grunt."*

And then, perhaps revealing again this sour aspect of the shorter Thornton, always aware he too was not a native son, there is not a poem but a statement: "*He denies that he was a carver of Chimney pieces – From the high head he carries now one would suppose he never would condescend to look at any thing lower than a Shot Tower or a Church Steeple, and this high cock of the head may account perhaps for his overlooking a marble slab at the end of a chimney carver's shed with LATROBE in large Letters.*" The action that was brought was a libel suit against Thornton. Latrobe collected one dollar from this suit. As one reads Thornton's notes it is hard to believe that antipathy between them wasn't the basic reason for the lawsuit, each had insulted the other, but there was no substantial injury to either. The visceral dislike was based primarily on personality, words, competition, and envy regarding the Capitol; and both men were touchy and quick to take offense.

Perhaps some clue as to Latrobe's personal views of Thornton at the time Thornton was Superintendent of the Patent Office can be obtained from a letter Latrobe wrote to Robert Fulton on April 20, 1812: "*Thornton this morning petitioned the house for an increase of salary, and that he should be allowed a clerk. The petition was near being rejected, and was with some difficulty allowed to be referred. I do not see how Congress can act upon it, as he is in fact only a clerk in the office of State, unless they erect the patent office into an independent department of government which I hardly think they will do in Thornton's reign.*"

In a letter of September 15, 1812, to Archibald Benny, Latrobe describes Thornton as an unrepentant and “*bitter Federalist.*” Latrobe felt that the national spirit and habits now coincided more clearly with the system of republican government than with a more centralized, sometimes even called monarchical, federalist approach. The conflicts between Thornton and Latrobe always involved more than simply differences about Capitol construction, of course. The two men were to cross swords, verbally at least, more than once over steam propelled boats and related patent rights.

The issues between Thornton and Fulton, and then with Fulton’s colleague Latrobe, regarding steamboats were several, and they stretched over at least a decade. One issue was priority. Thornton had, just a few days before Fulton submitted a very similar idea, almost simultaneously patented the concept of a paddle wheel that could drive a boat from the rear. The ideal duration of patents was another issue between the men since Thornton argued that State Legislatures ought not to be allowed to grant 20 or even 30 year monopolies for steamboat navigation at a time the U. S. Patent Office conferred exclusive rights for only 14 years. During the time of these disputes Latrobe was already deeply in debt because of his personal steamboat ventures. From his position as Director of the Patent Office, Thornton was successful in preventing a long-term steamboat monopoly bill, one that might have benefited both Fulton and Latrobe, from ever passing the Virginia legislature in 1810. Thornton had several, and mixed, goals during all this time of dispute but from all the correspondence it is apparent that Thornton felt certain that the process of converting steam power into transportation on the waters had been developed well before the efforts of either Fulton or Latrobe. Thornton argued that others deserved more credit, and Latrobe and Fulton less. Thornton argued this in several papers including a substantial one entitled: “*A short account of the origin of steamboats*” written in 1810. We cannot help glimpsing in the overall disputes, seemingly endless at the time, why it was that Thornton never played as constructive a role in the modifications and improvements in the Capitol as might have been possible for a more tactful man. Perhaps in his desire always to be first, and particular to give credit to his difficult friend John Fitch, and to prevent credit given to Latrobe, Thornton himself was sure to be overlooked, ignored, and even scorned. In the

disputes about the Capitol it was, of course, his own designs that he was defending.

Latrobe gradually moved towards a final reconciliation with Thornton, particularly as they developed concurrent views of Fulton. Latrobe's letter to Thornton sent from Pittsburgh on February 13, 1815, speaks to Latrobe's own developing anguish regarding his personal relationships with Fulton. The letter starts with: *"I thank you for your information respecting the informal, if not fraudulent, signature of Mr. Fulton to his specification . . . the effect in a court of law would, I presume, be fatal to his patent as the specification is part of the subject matter sworn to."* After discussing the patent issue a bit more Latrobe adds: *"I have tried, but have never been able to get him to bring suits against the pirates on his patent, and he's always contrived to put me off. This portrays a bad conscience. I'm not a little ashamed that at my age and with my experience I should so blindly have confided in this man, and that I had not sufficient penetration to see under his exterior of plausible generosity and enlarged views, the selfishness, and low cunning of his character. I have been his dupe, and am now suffering the punishment for my credulity."*

He acknowledged that Thornton's summary of the short history of steamboats which gave precedence to Fitch, not Fulton, was accurate, and that he did not doubt the truth of it, but Latrobe added he was sorry to see it published because of the interests of his own friend and marital relative, Nicholas Roosevelt, who along with Fulton had become a major steamboat entrepreneur. Latrobe also feared that the Thornton publication, which questioned the right of Fulton to claim precedence, further opened the whole issue up for general competition in such a way that in the long run only those with large capital resources could ever hope to reap any significant profit. In this Latrobe was absolutely correct.

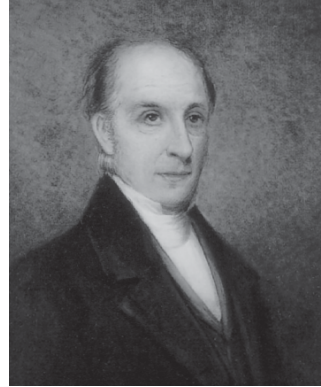
The libel suit against Thornton by Latrobe was the ultimate climax in the dispute. In retrospect it seems multiple factors were at work. Thornton had been dismayed by changes, albeit necessary ones, in his original design for the Capitol. Many of the changes were those suggested by Latrobe. Latrobe had become interested, as was Thornton and many others at the time, in competitive projects to develop a steamboat. It may have been Latrobe's linkage with Robert Fulton and with Nicholas Roosevelt, Latrobe's son-in-law, in joint efforts to

develop a steamboat that prompted Thornton to publish, and then publish repeatedly, documentation that John Fitch and Thornton had already accomplished successful travel on the water using steam. Indeed even accomplished it better, a decade earlier than the efforts that involved Latrobe. The Fitch boat did go faster, but its commercial success was always severely limited. Both Latrobe and Thornton shared acquaintance, even friendship, with Washington and Jefferson, but whereas Latrobe was tall and charming, friendships may well have been harder for the doctor who was short and feisty, and who seems by nature to have been a fierce supporter of lost causes, eccentric language, and of financial ventures that were doomed to fail. Both men died relatively young, and left wives behind who worried about financial survival. The final irony in the dispute may be that Thornton is buried in the Congressional Cemetery, buried under a tombstone designed by Benjamin Latrobe.

**Charles Bulfinch** (1763-1844): Charles Bulfinch, a major architect for the Capitol, was born in Boston in 1763, the son of a distinguished physician. As was true of many privileged youths in the infant United States, Bulfinch had opportunity to see Italy and France, where he received direct encouragement from both Jefferson and Lafayette. His European trip was brief, and not linked with formal study or apprenticeship, but when he returned home, in 1787, he began a series of enlightened architectural efforts on behalf of his beloved Boston, first on Beacon Hill, and then with a design for a new theater. Finally he was given the major commission for the new State House on Beacon Hill. He was only 31 years old at that time. These remarkable opportunities for the advancement of a young man are further confirmed by the fact that by age 31 he had already been a member of the Board of Selectmen for four years, and for three years he had been a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences as well as of the Massachusetts Historical Society. According to Cummings, Bulfinch was made superintendent of the Boston police and for years continued to perform all these various duties, even while he supervised laying the cornerstone for the new State House in July of 1795. Like Thornton, he was largely self-taught in architecture, and at the time there would have been only a few printed works readily available to him. Despite any such handicaps, for a time he was, in fact, the only person who could be considered a truly



professional architect in all of New England. There was one defect in his skills, however. When compared to others in America at the time, including even Thornton, Bulfinch had relatively little facility as a draftsman. Despite any such potential disadvantage, he successfully pursued a career in architecture for 20 years in Boston before he was called to Washington to complete the Capitol.



*Charles Bulfinch.*

Bulfinch had manifest ability to restrain the popular tendencies for affectation, and he chose to design in classical lines. He quickly learned to utilize whatever materials were available. His main virtue as an architect seems to have been that of practicality and simplicity. As a person and as a stylist he was an archetypical American. Bulfinch was called to Washington to help rebuild the national Capitol immediately after it was burned in 1814, and his personal modesty and dignity made it possible for him to interact gracefully with both leaders and citizenry during this troubled time. His was the major hand in redesigning the Senate and Representative Chambers. He used models produced by his friend Willard to demonstrate plans to his troubled patrons, as well as to the varied Commissioners and officials, and he always spelled out just exactly what he planned to do. Such clarity served to soften any potential criticism almost before it began.

In addition to Bulfinch's skills as probably the only truly American architect of the time, perhaps particularly American in that he was so self-trained, he was recognized as a noble and generous citizen. He was chosen Chairman of the Board of Selectmen of Boston for several decades. Cummings offers evidence of what sort of person he was in the eyes of his colleagues in that in 1815, having already served for 20 years, he was not re-elected for causes that are now unknown. Every elected member of the Board of Selectmen immediately resigned, and when the vote came up again a decided majority voted to reinstate Bulfinch.

The second week of January in 1817, Charles Bulfinch made a special trip to meet Thornton, who was then head of the patent office. By then Bulfinch had

been hired to become the new architect for the Capitol, and reported he found Thornton a “*singular character,*” and “*very decided in finding fault with Latrobe for changes he has introduced.*” Bulfinch understood that the general designs prepared by Thornton were to be followed for the Capitol, but Bulfinch also accepted Latrobe’s newer plan to make the east front the main approach, contrary to Thornton’s original goal of making the western aspect the more imposing. Thornton had planned that the Capitol overlook both the river and city, and also face the President’s house. For some visitors it still seems strange that the Capitol faces east, not down the Mall as Thornton so clearly preferred.

Bulfinch tried to stick to Thornton’s original plans for the interior, however, although some of these plans he considered defective and finally even he had to abandon the great circular room. Some, and not only Thornton, felt this to be an error. In a letter to Bulfinch in the 1830’s John Trumbull stated: “*I feel the deepest regret at the idea of abandoning the great circular room and dome. I’ve never seen painting so advantageously placed in respect to light and space, as I think mine would be, in the proposed circular room, illuminated from above.*” Congress had previously authorized Trumbull to paint historical scenes for the Capitol, and the plan was for these to be placed in the rotunda.

Despite his tact and skill Bulfinch ultimately could not avoid the nearly endless Capitol controversies, not any more than Thornton had been able to do. The effort of Bulfinch to increase the height of the central dome produced particular criticism, including from Latrobe and his son. In fact, although the final structure of the currently imposing dome had to wait until after the Civil War, to some the Capitol dome still seems a bit much, a bit top-heavy. It is true that Thornton had planned a taller second dome in addition to the attractive one, the one much like that on the Pantheon, which appears on the east elevation drawings he supplied. Thornton’s projected dome for the west entrance looks perched up on stilts. Perhaps Thornton even smiled when Latrobe and Bulfinch had their own disagreements about the Capitol. One letter written at the time was so strongly critical that Latrobe’s son later called on Bulfinch’s son in order to make a full apology.

Peacemakers then and now have pointed out that this public work, the Capitol building, was designed and executed by various architects in succession,

with changes separated by long interruptions, and therefore the nation should just feel proud that it looks as harmonious as it now does. Bulfinch was also employed for landscape work at the public buildings, as Thornton had been earlier, and to prepare a garden in front of the White House. It was Bulfinch who ultimately addressed specific designs for the steps and fence that were to face toward the West. According to Place the circular terrace and the west steps as they now appear actually involved concepts that utilized the original and imposing approach from the west side as was first planned by Thornton. Who was this man, Charles Bulfinch, who served so well as our Capitol architect?



*Thornton sketch of Capitol dome.*

Charles Bulfinch has been the subject of several biographies, including one that is, perhaps no surprise, full of praise since it was written by his granddaughter, Ellen Susan, in 1896. There are also several memorials for Bulfinch in Boston, where this first of native-born American architects dominated the city that, according to a saying attributed to Henry Cabot Lodge, had “*the most famous municipal organization of America.*” Bulfinch began his professional efforts when London, Paris, Berlin, and Vienna were already fully developed capitals, whereas the capital of the new world consisted mostly of meeting houses constructed informally by occasional, even if skillful, carpenters. The most imposing architectural aspect in most American towns at the time of Bulfinch was the steeple of the local church. There were some colonial mansions of course, but these were not usually original works of architecture. The profession of architecture in America was limited. Bulfinch had to learn for himself, in Europe, and in America with European books. When Bulfinch visited in Europe it is not surprising to note that young Bulfinch interacted with fellow Massachusetts citizen John Adams, as he also did with Jefferson. After all, there were few Americans in France, and most of these were fiercely tied together by their patriotism and often, as with Adams, pulled together by their sense of isolation.

Soon after Bulfinch married, he obtained the contract for his first formal professional undertaking. This was to replace the old Beacon Pole, the origin for the name Beacon Hill. The original pole had blown down in 1789. For this monument Bulfinch designed a Roman Doric column built of brickwork and then covered with stucco. The monument rose 60 feet high and was crowned with a gilt eagle. This was reportedly the first monument ever built in the new country to commemorate the Revolution. Bulfinch had experience in reshaping other areas in Boston, including the famous Faneuil Hall that had to be totally modified following fire. As architect for this effort he was particularly careful to preserve all previous appearances and he acted similarly when he reconstructed several of the Boston churches, and then redid University Hall for Harvard College. Perhaps that quality of respect for others, and for past structures, made him particularly suitable in the role of architect for the Capitol, following Thornton, Hallet, Hoban, and Latrobe. How exactly did Bulfinch get the job?

William Lee wrote to Bulfinch in 1817 saying that Latrobe, who had been called back for reconstruction of the Capitol after the burning of 1814, had lost the confidence of the President and that nothing progressive was happening in the rebuilding efforts. Lee was convinced that the President of the United States would soon approach Bulfinch to take on the job of architect and commissioner. Probably Lee even arranged for the contact. Typical for the methodical Bulfinch, in his response he expressed concern about his family and the other architects, and he wondered whether or not his sons would be able to do well in Washington. He also perhaps simply wanted more specifics about the job, and why it was available. Lee wrote back in October of 1817 that *“either the commissioner of public buildings or Latrobe must go out. As the commissioner has more friends than the architect he will, I think, be continued. I do not know how it is, but so it is, Latrobe has many enemies; his great fault is being poor. He is, in my opinion, an amiable, esteemed man, full of genius and the head of his profession. Every carpenter and mason thinks he knows more than Latrobe, and such men have got on so fast last year with the President’s job (a mere lathing and plastering job) that they have the audacity to think they ought to have the finishing of the capitol, a thing they are totally unfit for. That superb pile ought to be finished in a manner due credit to the country and the age.”*

Bulfinch was a friend of John Quincy Adams, the neighbor of Thornton, and probably Bulfinch and Adams had been friends back to the time both were youngsters in France. Bulfinch frequently mentioned Adams' name in his letters. Despite such political contacts and his proven skill, Bulfinch reported that the first time he saw the drawings by Latrobe, Thornton, and others: *“My courage almost failed me – they are beautifully executed and the design is in the boldest style – after a longer study I feel better satisfied, more confident in meeting public expectations.”* Bulfinch soon discovered, however, that the stairways tended to be crowded, that some useful changes should be made in the great rooms, and he proceeded to offer sensible overall suggestions. He remained very supportive of the original dreams, now from several builders earlier, as well as of the original plans outlined by Thornton.

Perhaps of all his successors, Thornton should have been most gratified by the work of Bulfinch on the Capitol. At least Thornton never offered substantial complaint about changes made by Bulfinch, and Bulfinch tried hard to preserve the best of what had gone before. And he also preserved the peace while doing so - a remarkable accomplishment.



CHAPTER 10

William Thornton and the Patent Office

- 1790** On January 8 President Washington urges effort to encourage inventions.
- 1790** On April 10 George Washington signed the first patent statute into law. Only 3 patents were awarded in 1790.
- 1793** Patent Board abolished, secondary to a bill from Jefferson, and awarding of patents was placed under the State Department.
- 1802** Thornton employed by the State Department to oversee patents.
- 1804** Thornton empowered to register patents.
- 1809** Thornton wrote Jefferson and said the work had increased six fold, and there were 219 patents issued the previous year.
- 1810** Move to Blodgett Hotel, beginning the collection and popular display of the models.
- 1814** Following several years of disputes generated by Thornton, in particular with Robert Fulton, James Monroe (Secretary of State) forbade the superintendent from seeking patents for himself.
- 1814** Thornton saves the Patent Office from British torches.
- 1825** The Patent Office finally had its own horse and assistance, average number of patents per year had gone from 45 to over 300, but Thornton's salary had not changed.
- 1828** Thornton's death.

The United States was not the first governmental authority to establish a patent office, but by any standard, whether local or international, our country has much to be proud of in producing an administrative structure that encourages and rewards inventiveness. Patents helped. In the 1640s, the Massachusetts Bay Colony granted exclusive rights for the manufacture of salt, and also rewarded

one ingenious inventor, Joseph Lenks, Sr., the exclusive rights to manufacture an improved scythe. His blade was thinner and longer, and was thickened at the back for added strength. In 1715, the colony of Pennsylvania awarded several patents, one for a donkey-driven machine and one for a water-powered engine that could pulverize corn. There was legislation in Connecticut in the mid-to-late 1700s that confirmed the importance of new inventions for British Colonial America, and awarding patents locally might also reflect the desire for independence from Britain. Exclusive patents also helped consolidate the notorious American desire for wealth. James Rumsey in Virginia had filed a petition with the Maryland legislature by 1783 for his invention to propel boats on water by using the power of steam. Rumsey and Fitch fought for complete and exclusive state monopolies all during the 1780s. Almost as an addendum to the national constitution James Madison in August, 1787, suggested additional patent powers for the legislature: “*to secure to literary authors copyrights for a limited time*” and to “*encourage by patents and provisions the advancement of useful knowledge and discoveries.*” Charles Pinckney of South Carolina, an exceptionally prominent man and major politician of the day, at about the same time suggested a proposal: “*to grant patents for useful inventions.*” This activity in Philadelphia during the Constitutional Convention closely coincided with John Fitch’s demonstration ride on his steamboat on the Delaware River on August 22, 1787. Apparently most members of the convention reviewed his boat and many even rode on it.

The acceptance of the right of an inventor for a patent monopoly became widespread even if specific details were to remain murky for years. By September 5, 1787, it was proposed that Congress should have the power: “*to promote the progress of science and useful arts by security for limited times to authors and inventors the exclusive rights of their respective writings and discoveries.*” This statement rests now in the constitution, paragraph 8, section 8, of article 1. Madison had demonstrated his interest in patents in the Federalist Papers stating: “*The utility of this power will scarcely be questioned. The copyright of authors has been solemnly adjudged in Great Britain to be a right at common law. The right to useful inventions seems with equal reason to belong to the inventors. The public good fully coincides in both cases with the claims of individuals. The states cannot separately make effective provision for either of the cases, and most of them have*



*anticipated the decision of this point by laws passed at the instance of Congress.”* It took an additional several decades before the concept of separate state monopolies for inventions of real national significance fell into disrepute and all could agree that major patents should have a national scope.

Thornton arrived in America in 1787, and while in America he consistently urged preservation of inventiveness and creativity as accepted national policy. The intensity with which he defended the priority of Fitch in later years suggests that he recognized the difficulties that could affect any inventor. He was willing to accept what he always felt to be the modest position as the Chief, and then Superintendent, of the Patent Office in May of 1802 since that position reflected his personal dreams of both inventions and potential wealth. He had failed to receive several of the appointments that he had sought from the federal government, including that of Secretary of the Treasury. In addition the job was available at a crucial time for Thornton, he was not as wealthy as some believed. He had over-extended his financial resources and overestimated his ability to manage and increase his personal possessions. Thornton still lived at 3221 M Street in Georgetown when he was appointed a Commissioner in the new Federal City, on September 2, 1794. To move he borrowed cash, and then spent money he barely had, in order to purchase city lots. As he did he dealt with Samuel Blodgett, a man whose later bankruptcy further reduced Thornton’s income.

Choosing one of the new lots, Thornton, and his wife, who lived longer, became residents of the District in their home at 1331 F Street, Washington. In addition to this house expense, however, he arranged to purchase a farm, said to be slightly larger than one square mile, in the Georgetown, Montgomery Courthouse, area of what is now downtown Bethesda. The farm was called Park Grove and included a one and one-half story frame building. Thornton is also reported to have had a personal garden located at the southeast corner of New York Avenue and 18<sup>th</sup> Street, and seemed to have had at least partial control of twelve city lots near the present Corcoran Gallery. For a while he also apparently owned a 56-acre farm at Kalorama, just south of the present National Zoological Park where the Belmont Apartments now stand, and he used this area for his horses. He and his near neighbor, Secretary of State James Madison, stabled racehorses and once started a racetrack to pursue their hobby. That hobby

was also an expense, and one that Anna Maria complained of in her diary. There was no way Thornton was not going to need a steady source of money, and the income from the plantation in Tortola was never going to be enough. He needed a job.

The job at the Patent Office was at times frustrating for Thornton, as pointed out by Post: *“in 1802 James Madison established a separate Office of Patents. He awarded the superintendency to William Thornton, architect of the Capitol building and a close personal friend. Dr. Thornton remained as superintendent for more than a quarter century and came to feel a sense of personal ownership in the Patent Office.”* Thornton’s actual power was deliberately circumscribed, however. He managed to persuade Congress to allow him an assistant in 1810, but Congress studiously ignored each of his subsequent pleas for additional clerical help. Moreover, when he recommended the withholding of letters patent *“in cases notoriously without merit,”* the Secretary of State rarely backed him up. James Madison was the Secretary of State and concerned not to subvert the relatively new Patent Act of 1793. The infant republic was feeling its way about patents carefully.

At the time the job at the Patent Office became available Thornton’s private income from Tortola was probably diminishing. After the American Revolution, the economic situation in the Islands of the British West Indies, so dependent on a single crop, had begun to decline. Thornton needed money, and he needed it badly. He did not practice medicine, and his former job as Commissioner, which had been supplying him \$2000 a year, had been terminated. He requested the job of Federal Treasurer, but was turned down. He did obtain certificate as a Magistrate, and he was empowered to manage bankruptcies. He was offered \$1400 a year for the patent office job, with anticipation that the receipts for patent work would cover that amount. It was his friend, former fellow boarder in Philadelphia, and now the Secretary of State, James Madison, who offered him the job in the Patent Office. At the time the Patent Office was located administratively within the State Department. Thornton took the job.

The years from 1790 until the time in 1802 that Thornton took the Patent Office had been uncertain ones for anyone involved with patents. The active patent statute created no distinct single patent office and applicants for a patent

would first petition the Secretary of State who was sure to be busy with affairs of state. In the response to a patent petition the Secretary of State in conjunction with the Secretary of War and the Attorney General were next to determine whether an invention or discovery was sufficiently useful and important enough to merit a patent. The United States Patent Office evolved slowly and intermittently, arising out of the even less well-defined patent system that had pre-existed in England and in the colonies.

The physical beginnings for Thornton as Superintendent of the Patent Office were modest, just serving as a patent clerk in a crowded room. Despite Thornton's repeated efforts to have his salary and the overall support for the office increased, it was decades later, indeed ten years after his death, before there was substantial change in administrative support. Some details of the early beginnings are lost because of the 1836 burning of the patent office. There was, initially at least, clearly a difference from current practices in the ethical aspects of the office. In his time Thornton felt free to challenge petitioners personally, even offered competing patents of his own. He showed patent requests to competitors on a few occasions. His personal patents, according to his wife and public papers, included over a half dozen in several areas of his interest.

The complexity, and yet primitive nature, of decisions about patents is best demonstrated with the story of the largely American invention of the steamboat, as reviewed earlier. During Thornton's time there were numerous patents directly related to steamboats or to steam power. On November 23, 1814, Thornton himself was awarded one for "*an application of steam to flutter or paddle wheels on the side of a boat or vessel, as a propelling power.*" Steam also attracted inventors as a source of heat. Robert Fulton, Henry Latrobe, Andrew Ellicott, and Joel Barlow all had an interest in a technique offered by Daniel Pettibone to warm large chambers of air, basically an air stove, related to heat and steam power. By the mid 1790's there had already been a half dozen patents awarded to James Rumsey regarding his steam engines. In August 1791 John Fitch presented his concept for a steam boiler to propel boats, and in April of 1815 George Styles was able to patent a steamship or floating battery. How hard was it to get a patent in those days? Not hard at all, it appears. It was even possible at this time to file a caveat, or informal paper, by which a person was allowed to file incomplete papers that described the

invention while he attempted to perfect the discovery. Thornton handled such caveats.

As part of the development of the Patent Office, Thornton was also charged with registering all copyrights. It was possible in the early days of the patent system to seek patents for inventions lodged in other states, countries, or cities; as Thornton's friend, the artist Charles Willson Peale (1741-1827) did when he felt that others had infringed on his own device to trace silhouettes. The two men were friends. In a letter September 22, 1818, Thornton welcomed Peale to Washington and asked Peale for help in obtaining a tooth of a hippopotamus to fashion an artificial tooth for himself. In 1804, when the Baron von Humboldt and Peale visited Washington (Sellers): *"There followed a dinner at Dr. Thornton's, with James Madison and Gilbert Stuart among the guests. Mrs. Thornton played to them and sang in English, French and Italian, and the doctor exhibited his collection of botanical drawings."*

By October of 1804, an ancestor of the DuPont Company applied for a patent to automate the granulation and preparation of gunpowder. Benjamin Latrobe in 1806 applied for a patent for a new method to construct stone bridges, claiming that he had done this type of work for 15 years, and complaining that others had begun to do so while he received no credit at all for it. In January 1807, the then Secretary of State James Madison, still a friend of Thornton's, officially reported that business relating to patents had doubled in four years and he was sure such an increase would continue. Indeed that was the case when one notes that from 1790 to 1800 there were fewer than 50 patents each year, but there was an increase by 1830 to 544 and by 1930 to over 45,000. By 1985 there were over 125,000 new patents each year.

Thornton was not without critics during his time as Superintendent of the office. Perhaps some of the criticism was generated for political reasons, perhaps some because of his role as a Justice of the Peace or "*Mayor*" of the District, but clearly there were also some who felt that the patent office was run in a disorderly fashion. In January 1807 Senator William Plumer of New Hampshire, clearly no friend of Thornton, wrote in his diary: *"This Justice Thornton is the keeper of the Patent Office – who records all those inventions, and titles of books for whom patents and certificates of copyrights do issue. With him a set or volume of each book is lodged, and the model or drawing of each piece of*

*mechanism, for which a patent has issued. His office is a room in the same building which the War and Post office is kept. The floor and shelves are covered with models thrown together without any order or regularity. The books lie in an irregular confused pile on shelves and window stools covered with dust. The room is too small for the purpose; but a little money and labour would procure a convenient and useful bookcase and arrange the models and drawings in order. This Dr. Thornton ought to do – he has too long been guilty of great negligence.”*

Certainly Thornton never had the money to get what he wished for the office, even though he did spend a lot of energy writing letters complaining about the working conditions. Several times he requested an increase in his salary to \$2000, stressed the need for a clerk and a proper office plus one attendant, and also wanted the power of franking correspondence. Thornton was particularly interested in preserving all the models and needed to obtain an area to house these with a secure way to protect them.

One of the episodes reviewed in Kenneth Dobyns' history of the patent office is Thornton's communication with Jacob Cist concerning a new type of pigment or paint. The letters suggest that Thornton wished to share in the credit for this new patent and that he also applied to the Navy office in an effort to get them to use the new material. Superintendent William Thornton did always seem to need additional personal income. In December of 1808 Thornton wrote to Secretary of State James Madison pointing out that he was in debt as the bail bondsman for Samuel Blodgett who had fled, leaving Thornton responsible for more than \$10,000. It was at this time that Thornton sold the house that he had inherited in Lancaster, England, and he also attempted to mortgage his farm in Maryland.

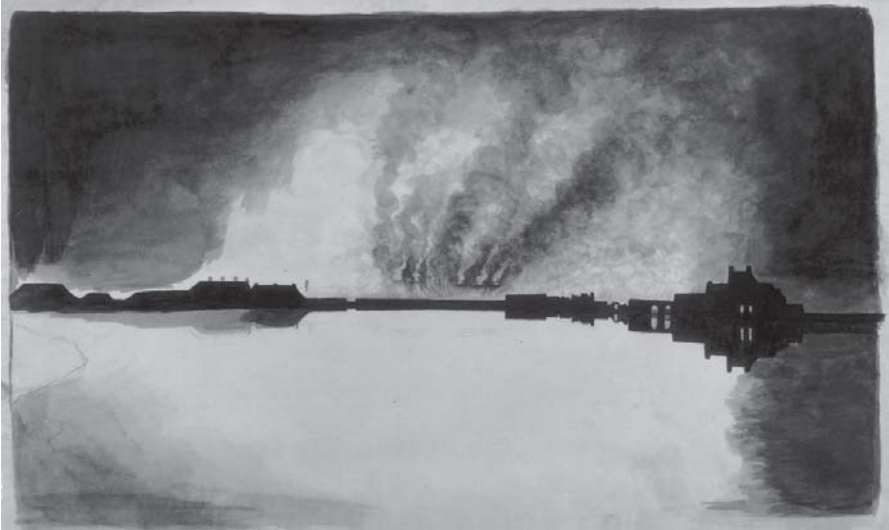
One of the most obvious areas that would be considered a conflict of interest for any Superintendent of the Patent Office in our day was the ongoing multiple-year feud between Thornton and Robert Fulton. Thornton tried to prevent Fulton from monopolizing the steamboat business and wrote several public memorials arguing that Fulton's work was far from original. On January 23, 1809, Thornton reported that Fulton had applied for some patents regarding the steamboat, and that he, Thornton, had taken out a similar patent of his own on January 16<sup>th</sup>. Thornton also negotiated the release of information to apparent

competitors of Fulton, but eventually Thornton did state publicly that he would not again release other person's patents to competitors without full permission.

Dobyns suggests that Thornton once tried to arrange for a business connection between himself and Fulton. We know that in 1810 Thornton intervened in both Ohio and Virginia with efforts to oppose the grant of exclusive steamboat navigational rights to Fulton. Thornton's correspondence in early 1811 emphasized that if the states had the right to make patents this would make larger federal goals impossible to achieve. Robert Fulton on February 13, 1812 wrote to Secretary of State James Monroe to complain formally of Thornton's efforts, and suggested that, because of such efforts, Thornton should be removed from the Patent Office. After additional communications, on December 27, 1814, Secretary of State Monroe proposed a regulation that would prevent the Superintendent from having any personal interest in patents.

Thornton replied that Fulton's threats had succeeded in preventing him from having a right that every other citizen of the United States had, the right to patent, and that at the time he was still limited to his formal salary of \$1400 per year. By 1815 Fulton had also written to complain about Thornton to the then Attorney General Richard Rush. Ultimately James Monroe in January 1815 refused to assign a patent to Thornton because of the new rules. Nevertheless Thornton did manage on one occasion to get a personal patent for the use of paddlewheels on steamboats. Some of the thorny ethical issues of the day were thus settled during the time of Thornton, even if not always with his approval and even if, in fact, they were actually settled in response to his personal actions on behalf of himself.

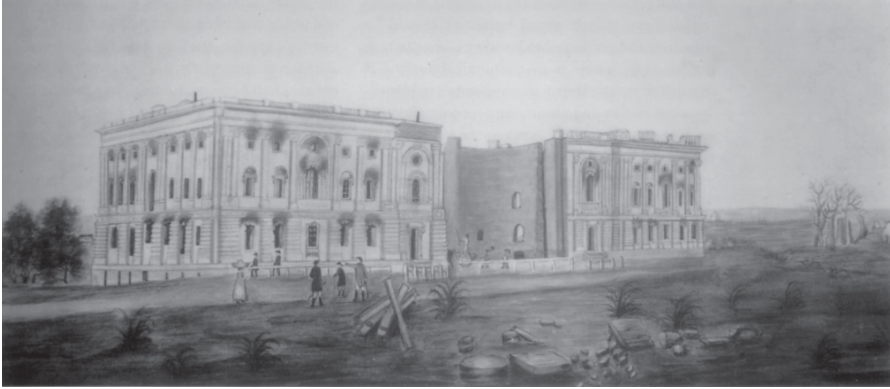
On April 28, 1810, Congress authorized the President to purchase a building that would be more suitable for use by the Patent Office, one close to but not part of the Post Office. President James Madison arranged to purchase the old Blodgett's Hotel that had finally been refinished. Since it was actually begun in 1793, surely that purchase was a relief to many. The hotel had never been completed, due to the collapse of Blodgett's varied financial enterprises. Benjamin Latrobe was called in to stabilize the partially completed building and he began by clearing out the squatter families who kept hogs on the ground floor. By 1810 Thornton finally arranged to get a bit of staff for the patent office, plus a purely "temporary" increase in his salary up to \$2000 per year. In March,



*Watercolor of the Naval yard burning by Thornton .(Library of Congress)*

1811, Thornton wrote a list of instructions for patents which his favorite newspaper, the *National Intelligencer*, then printed, and the new and now clear system for applications rapidly increased the number of patents that were submitted. Although Thornton had hoped for additional, preferably new, space he did move the patent office into one section of the former Blodgett's Hotel and was lucky at the time to obtain a skilled maker of models, Thomas Nicholson.

The most eventful occurrence during the second decade of Thornton's tenure as superintendent was surely in August of 1814, when the British landed in Maryland and marched on the capital. Thornton, along with his clerk George Lyon and his new model maker, rapidly made boxes for all the papers and books in the Patent Offices and carted them to the safety of the Thornton farm in Bethesda. There were also hundreds of models that were simply too bulky to be moved to safety. As the British approached, Thornton rode around the area acting in his role as Justice of the Peace, as de facto Mayor, and as a Captain of the Militia and during this time he sometimes accompanied Secretary of State James Monroe as he also rode around the city. The Secretary of War, John Armstrong, had to resign immediately after the British took Washington because of what many considered his cowardice, and all considered his incompetence, in confronting the invaders. By Thursday August 25, 1814, the British were in



*Capitol ruins after August 1814. (Munger, from Allen)*

Washington itself and considering burning Blodgett's Hotel. The exact details are not entirely clear, but Thornton always felt that he personally persuaded Major Waters that the patent office contained only private property, and that the entire building sheltered hundreds of models which would be useful for the whole world in future years. Major Waters presented Thornton's request for forbearance to Colonel Jones, the British officer who at that time was busily destroying the printing press and type of the *National Intelligencer*. If there was a more official mayor of D.C. he was nowhere to be found at the time, but he later did state that he gave Thornton full credit for saving the Patent Office building.

A sudden and devastatingly severe hurricane occurred later on the same day, and that storm succeeded in extinguishing the surrounding fires, fires that actually had already partially damaged both Blodgett's Hotel and its Patent Office. After the wanton destruction by the British of the Capitol, the President's home, as well as several other public buildings, there was discussion about moving the entire federal government to a larger city, one where there was greater population to protect the government. It is possible, however, that nothing so completely established the existence of the United States as a separate nation, or so confirmed Washington as our capital, as the British burning of the city, followed several months later by the yet still today amazing defeat of the Redcoats at New Orleans.

When Dolly Madison returned to Washington after three days as a refugee from the British she could see the blackened ruins of the "castle," the elegant



building which had been the President's home, and her personal home, for five years. Many trees had been cut down or injured, but the ones that Mr. Jefferson had planted ten years earlier, the Lombardy poplars, were apparently still beautiful now in late August of 1814. Close by the shell of the President's Palace, as it was called derisively by the British, were several houses that had been left unharmed, including the Octagon House designed by William Thornton, at the time occupied by Monsieur Jean Matthieu Philibert Serurier, the French ambassador. In the Octagon, still saddened, Dolly Madison held a civilized breakfast in the beautiful dining room of the house she knew so well from many prior visits. Her sister and brother-in-law, Mr. & Mrs. Cutts, occupied a house on F Street next to the Thornton's home and only a few blocks from The Octagon House. The house of the Cutts was offered to the President and his lady. Blodgett's Hotel also remained relatively intact although it, including the patent office, was soon was to be emptied, per orders from Secretary of State Monroe.

From the top of the Octagon House in the days immediately after the invasion the President and Mrs. Madison could look all the way down to the Potomac River and confirm that British sailors were no longer there. By mid-October Ambassador Serurier had moved to Philadelphia, and despite the fact that Tayloe was a confirmed Federalist, he agreed to offer the house to his President and this allowed the President and Mrs. Madison to move formally into the Octagon, which they referred to as "The Executive Annex". The most historical event that occurred while the Madisons lived in the Octagon was the Treaty of 1815, ratifying cessation of the war, a treaty that was signed on the 17<sup>th</sup> of February in the center of the beautiful circular room over the entrance hall. The desk is still there.

According to Anna Maria Thornton and others, Dolly Madison was the first public figure to come back after the initial conflagration, arriving at the Cutts' house where she found Mrs. Thornton and Margaret Smith, as well as Anna Cutts, all with tears in their eyes. Margaret Bayard Smith wrote: "*Mrs. M. seem'd much depressed, she could scarcely speak without tears She told me she had remained in the city until a few hours before the English enter'd. She was so confident of Victory that she was calmly listening to the roar of cannons and watching the rockets in the air, when she perceived our troops rushing into*



*Dolly Madison in the Octagon House. (Waddell)*

*the city, with the haste and dismay of a routed force. The friends with her then hurried her away, (her carriage being previously ready) and she with many other families among whom was Mrs. Thornton and Mrs. Cutting with her, retreated with the flying army.”* When Dolly was asked why she, Dolly, had stayed so long at the presidential mansion while the British rapidly approached she said: *“But I had a magnificent collation all prepared for 3:00 p.m. and felt confident of victory! We were to have a candle in every window!”* Soon Richard Rush, Colonel James Monroe, and Dr. Thornton also joined the women at the Octagon house. Colonel Monroe was at that time Secretary of War as well as

Secretary of State since Secretary Armstrong had already been forced to resign due to his lack of performance.

There was much discussion by the citizens of the town, particularly regarding “those people” who had interaction with the British at that troublesome time. Some had met with the British Colonel Jones, who had thoroughly wrecked the print type and machines at the *National Intelligencer*. He was the same Colonel Jones who agreed to spare Blodgett’s Hotel, since that was where the patent models were housed. Some citizens were criticized for even speaking to the British at all. More than once Thornton himself, and later his wife, had to insist that they dealt with the British only because the U. S. Patent Office was a world resource, rather than just a federal treasure. Monroe, who apparently never cared much for Thornton anyway, soon ordered Thornton to clear Blodgett’s building of all residual office files as well as of every single one of the patent models. That could not have been easy.

William and Anna Maria Thornton were able to return to their own home next door while President Madison and his wife were temporarily housed in the Cutts’ house until the French Ambassador left, and the President was able to move to the Octagon. Thornton apparently did interact freely with the British more than once while they occupied Washington, functioning well beyond

simply blocking destruction of the patent models. He located medicines and supplies that he brought to the doctors attending the wounded of both sides at Bladensburg, the location of the initial rout of the fledgling U. S. Army. One of the people that Thornton took particular care of at that time was a wounded British officer named William Thornton, not a direct relative. He was a man who participated heroically for the British, and was then severely wounded once again, in the Battle of New Orleans. The British William Thornton received from Thornton at least one letter after he returned to England to continue his distinguished military career, a career terminated at the end by suicide. Because of Thornton's act of mercy to the British officers who were wounded our William Thornton had to defend himself publicly in the newspapers of the time saying: "*When they are distressed and in misery, they are no longer our enemies.*" It is not as apparent in our time, but many of the upper class citizens could identify with the British men, even if not with their policies.

Immediately after the British withdrew, Thornton in his role as a Captain of the Columbia Militia rode around the lanes of Washington with his sword in place, circulating through the streets and setting guards wherever they should be located, and particularly guarding areas such as the Navy Yard where the gates had been left wide open. Late ignitions had been set in the Navy Yard, and as they went off with terrible explosions dozens of English soldiers were killed, some of whom at the time were rooting around the Yard looking for potential plunder. As the fires in Washington raged and then began to subside following the severe hurricane and rain, the British attempted to accelerate their planned withdrawal from Washington.

This time, during a temptingly slow withdrawal of the enemy back down into their ships, was not used by the Americans to strike at the now more vulnerable British army. The British were nevertheless destined to face a major rebuff in their attack on Baltimore a few weeks later, in the battle that made Francis Scott Key famous for the words of the national anthem. The same Francis Scott Key was Thornton's lawyer in the lawsuits with Latrobe. Several months after the Battle in Baltimore, there was a major thrust by the same British force at New Orleans, resulting in the biggest one sided loss ever for British soldiers, and leading to the ascendancy of Andrew Jackson.

In the days after Washington burned, Thornton helped British wounded leave the fields and roadsides to reach the shelter of homes and barns. He particularly praised the work of Dr. James Small, who was also attending the wounded patients of both sides. Pierre L'Enfant, the designer of the city who had retired in a bit of a sulk to a nearby Maryland plantation, also appeared on the scene to help the American wounded, and he urged Thornton to accelerate the mercy work. An English Sergeant named Sinclair suggested that Thornton assume control and order the horde of stragglers and looters, whether British or American, away from those who were wounded. It is likely that Thornton functioned both as an official and as a physician to the wounded. Over the several days after the battle Thornton found time to remove most of the rest of the patent models to the security of his personal farm, Park Grove, in Maryland. It was feared that the British would return. It apparently was during this feverish time that Thornton persuaded his dear friend, Colonel John Tayloe, to lease his home, the Octagon, to the federal government.

During his time as director of the Patent Office, Thornton often took time to write directly to the people who had submitted inventions that were not actually unique, and he usually attempted to explain why the idea was not novel, even though the law did not then actually state that patents would be refused on the basis of a lack of originality. John Quincy Adams, a friend and neighbor of Thornton, but one who probably became even closer to Mrs. Thornton after Thornton's death, was once given a tour of the model room and he wrote in his diary: *"I thought how useful and profitable an occupation might be for a young man with a competent fortune, and having no other necessary pursuit in life, to take up this collection of models, to examine them and make himself thoroughly master of the principles, and of the peculiar invention, or new idea, with its application, in each of them, then to classify them, to mark all those, if any there be, which contain a new principle, to examine the differences in the modifications of the same principle, then to observe and compare them with reference to the ultimate results – what effect they produced upon the enjoyment or conveniences of human life, distinguishing those of which the ends are comprehensive and important from those which terminate in trifles — would it not be worthwhile, among the public institutions of the nation, to have a school for the education of a certain number of civil engineers?"* John Quincy Adams

as Secretary of State was scientifically inclined and an inveterate writer, and even after his defeat for a second term he was in demand to open new scientific facilities, such as the observatory in Cincinnati, which he dedicated in 1843. Adams was, in fact, during some of the time the direct boss of Thornton, and occasionally people did intervene with Adams in an attempt to get Thornton to respond to their models or to act on a patent request that had languished on Thornton's desk.

In 1825 the Patent Office finally was finally assigned its own horse, and a real budget, having previously been totally dependent upon the State Department even for the loan of a horse to convey messages around town. In March, 1828, Secretary of State Henry Clay agreed that the Post Office Department had grown so much that it needed all of Blodgett's Hotel for its exclusive use and a totally new home for the patent office was required. Awareness of the lingering illness, and then death, of Thornton in 1828 may have prompted some of these needed changes. Henry Clay, the friend of the Thornton's, also urged a separate administrative department be established for the Patent Office.

The model room by that time, and well before Thornton's death, was a popular tourist attraction. It was also an annoying, even if instructive and amusing, distraction for those who worked nearby. The improvements in the Patent Office, so long overdue, did not prevent the devastating fire of 1836 that eliminated both records and models. Elliot wrote (page 237) in 1837: *"There lie the records of more than ten thousand inventions, with their beautiful models and drawings. There lie, also, smoldering in the same heap of ruins, the elegant and classic correspondence of Dr. Thornton with most of the ingenious and scientific men of this country and Europe for upwards of twenty three years."*

The Smithsonian Museums, possibly the greatest collection of scientific artifacts in the world, is more than just an adequate successor to the Patent Office Model Collection begun by Thornton. Thornton, the first Superintendent of the Patent Office, was indeed the man who established a popular model collection in the capital, but in a more substantial contribution he solidified the overall approach to patents in the United States of America. Thornton clearly alerted the entire American community to the need for sustained patents to reward the creative, the need for a time limit for such patents, and by his efforts he surely enhanced inventiveness in our youthful Republic. This man, scattered

in his efforts in so many areas, was probably the ideal person in Washington to enhance the significance, and to consolidate the rewards, of the inventive spirit in emerging America. Perhaps, for once, he failed to see how really useful he was in this position, a position that always seemed to him to be so much less than his dreams. He was in fact the right person in the right place at the right time.

CHAPTER 11

## Thornton's Business Ventures and His Legacy to His Wife

**Some sources of income were consistent: Plantation in Tortola, farming in the District.**

**Some sources of income were salary: Commissioner, Patent Office.**

**Some sources of income may have opened doors: Magistrate, Bankruptcy official.**

**Some sources of income must have been a disappointment: Inventions, racehorses, gold mines.**

**Some sources of income were a drain: Steam boats, investments with Blodgett and Fairfax.**

**Some sources of income were probably a wash: Fire Insurance Co., City Market efforts.**

Thornton's business ventures are so complex that it is difficult to separate one from another. Failures were not unique for his times, nor indeed for any time, and bankruptcy, near-bankruptcy, or debtor prison, faced prominent individuals as varied in skills as Robert Morris, Tobias Lear, and the wealthy poet and speculator Joel Barlow, our ambassador in Europe for over ten years. Individuals from some early American families such as the Corcorans, DuPonts, and Carrolls seemed to remain financially successful for their entire lives, and their philanthropic legacies are still a force for good in America. Some of their fortunes still offer direct support to their residual families. Thornton seemed to have lacked critical business acumen, but he did attempt agricultural experiments at his farm, and particularly enjoyed his racecourse and the care of his horses. He wrote at length about plants, transferred seeds and trees from and to Europe, and helped obtain prize Merino sheep from Europe. No substantial amount of money was made from any of those activities. His friend John Tayloe

was the leading breeder of horses in Virginia, and Thornton himself had one horse out of the line of Eclipse and Herod, the stallions considered the leading horses of the eighteenth century. It is doubtful that Thornton's business ventures with horses were productive, and after his death his wife complained of the expenses (gambling?) related to horses.

The major source for income during Thornton's life was the plantation in Tortola, although it apparently became less productive over time. In addition he had his farm, Park Grove, in what is now Bethesda and it had a frame dwelling of one and a half stories. Dobyns reports Thornton owned: *"a city garden located at the southeast corner of New York avenue and Eighteenth Street, including twelve city lots, near the present Corcoran Gallery, for growing food for the table. He also had a 56-acre farm at Kalorama, just south of the present site of the National Zoological Park, where the Belmont Apartments now stand, for grazing his horses. He needed grazing land because he and his next door neighbor after 1800, Secretary of State James Madison, maintained a large stock of race horses and once started a race track to practice their hobby."* But Thornton always sought other sources of income.

Both the Thorntons once visited Salem in North Carolina when Anna Maria had a chance to play the organ in the already antique Moravian chapel. The purpose of the visit was not to make music, however, nor to visit the picturesque old settlements, but to find gold. In Rowan County, North Carolina, in the mountains near a village called Gold Hill, Thornton invested his money in a major venture to seek gold. He succeeded in roping in as his business partners some of his prominent friends, men such as John Tayloe and Pastor John Weems. Thornton's Carolina gold mine did not succeed, however, perhaps due to a concurrent financial panic in England that ultimately severely depleted capital funds in the United States. In fact, Mrs. Thornton eventually had to struggle to seek full title to the over 30,000 acres that Thornton thought he had bought and which still remained undeveloped at his death. What was the story about a gold mine?

The North Carolina Gold Mine Company was established in 1805 and 1806, and the trustees originally included William Thornton, Daniel Carroll of Duddington, Philip Barton Key, Thomas Peter, John Tayloe, Thomas Tingey, and John Weems, D.D. These were exceptionally prominent citizens of the time and





*Map of North Carolina gold mine region.*

several had previously shared interests in one or another project, projects such as the failed steamboat, with Thornton. Thornton's writings about the potential mine included testimony from people who had studied the topography of the gold mine area, and he stated that he eventually planned to purchase as many as 35,000 acres, having already started with the purchase of several hundred acres. In his notes he described beautiful woods, the type of ground and gravel, and how much money might potentially be picked up from the streams by simply panning for gold. Thornton held out the expectation of thousands of dollars in profit for each shareholder. Apparently some people, in addition to the initial trustees, did subscribe in the purchase of this land near Concord, North

Carolina, but the paperwork was never ideal, as Mrs. Thornton discovered, painfully, after her husband's death. Included in his writings were comments by people who had noted other potentially valuable minerals.

First, just who were the trustees Thornton selected? Among the enlarged group of shareholders John Mercer had been the governor of Maryland, Thomas Tucker had been Treasurer of the United States, Phillip Key had been one of the district judges of the United States, Daniel Carroll was from the famous and wealthy Carroll family, John Van Ness was President of the Bank of the United States, City of Washington, and Teachle is listed simply as esquire. Daniel Carroll was chosen to be president of the North Carolina Gold Mine Company.

Janson reports that Thornton personally visited Mr. Reid's mine and reportedly found gold himself in a branch of a stream nearby, and Janson summarized: "*Mr. Thornton judges that some of the hills are rich in gold. He is of the opinion that it is not carried far by the currents, but only falls down into the small hollows and little branches, as it has been met with in considerable quantities in the smallest depressions on the hills, as well as in the deeper runs and branches. From the number of these runs, branches, springs, and depressions, in which gold has been found in the premises of the company, he is confident that it may be computed to possess 160 miles of gold land.*" Janson stated that an agent for the North Carolina Gold Mine Company, representing Thornton's group, purchased the 35,000 acres for a total of \$110,000. Thornton himself wrote he purchased more than 30,000 acres of land and developed a plan to form a company of 1100 shares of \$100 each. Thereby the group that owned the land would have obtained it at a cost of about \$3 an acre. The deed to the land belonged to Thornton and although shares were sold, even more clearly money was soon lost, and lost by some of these same prominent individuals. The gold turned out not as easy to locate as was initially expected - or as promised in the statements of Thornton.

Thornton himself describes his arrival at the little town of Concord, near present Davidson College, where he visited the local courthouse. He spent several days looking at the beds where gold had been initially discovered. He describes the soil, the riverbeds, and the areas around where "*the forests abound with the beautiful sourwood, (aesculus hypocastinum).*" He suggested that quicksilver (mercury) might make it possible to discover the thousands of small

grains that are otherwise lost. There is a statement that a planning meeting was held in the city of Washington in May 1806. It was at that meeting when Daniel Carroll of Duddington was unanimously chosen President of the Gold Mine Company, and the speculation was launched. After Thornton's death, Anna Maria did manage to sell the property but with less financial benefit than she had hoped.

Gold seeking was not the only business Thornton was interested in. He also was involved with several other business disasters at about the time Blodgett went bankrupt. One particular misadventure, the hotel, may have stemmed from Blodgett's and Thornton's shared interest in architecture but also from their joint urges for entrepreneurship. What was the end of the Blodgett Hotel story? First, there was a scandal involving Blodgett and his wife, not at first involving Thornton. Thornton found he had difficulty separating his own assets from those of Samuel Blodgett, especially when Blodgett went down in bankruptcy. Blodgett ultimately died in a charity hospital. Thornton's formal statement: "*I stood surety for the said Samuel Blodgett who had the keeping of certain pension funds. Mr. Blodgett was confined to jail on this, he broke bond and left me with eight or ten thousands of dollars in debts to pay, which I paid by degrees with interest and costs, and also paid taxes on an unfinished house for 20 years. I am an injured man.*" However, after Blodgett's death, when his properties were finally sold, the former Mrs. Blodgett came back to claim them all. She had deserted Blodgett in his period of disgrace and had traveled to Europe with another man, but as a widow she now demanded the equity. We don't know exactly what happened after this. Thornton, and particularly his wife, did not always preserve full records when various legal machinations went against him. It does seem that in this instance, at least, Thornton tangled with a scoundrel, and was almost ruined by the charming rogue.

The desire for profit from steamboating only represented another financial drain for Thornton, and also may have represented his greatest disappointment. For many years after his experiences with Fitch, Thornton was irritated by, perhaps even jealous of, the success and recognition that Robert Fulton received. Thornton may also have been understandably dismayed a decade after the work of Fitch when he discovered that the old competitor Robert Fulton was well backed by wealthy families. During these years Thornton resorted to repeated

statements regarding the clear priority of Fitch over Fulton. Some of these statements suggested that Fulton had usurped another's rights, and Thornton's comments do seem inflammatory, even when read in retrospect. It certainly can also be argued that Thornton was in a position with an automatic conflict of interest, since he was in charge of the Patent Office. In the process of official confusion about rights, priority, and patents for steamboats, we know that on January 28, 1811 Thornton wrote to Fulton: "*I object to your including in your patent the shaft and bevel gear, the cranks and shackle-rods that turn the wheels at the stern of the boat.*" The reason he objected is that he said these had all been used in Fitch's original model in 1791. During these years extensive correspondence also records financial planning deals by Thornton with Ferdinando Fairfax, a man who persuaded Thornton that a chance to obtain the patent rights for steamboats throughout South America would be worth at least \$100,000, if not \$200,000.

Thornton may have thought for a time that he could recoup money from lawsuits, and certainly he was not the only one ensnared in eventual legal problems regarding steamboats. The wealthy Roosevelt family, who had avoided significant personal sacrifice during the American Revolution, and Ferdinando Fairfax, member of a prominent Virginia family, also were involved. Thornton himself probably never really made a single cent of personal profit from the steamboats, nor from the lawsuits, and he clearly spent dollars and an immense amount of time trying to do so. Thornton, along with Fairfax, later pursued patents and steamboat rights in South America in another futile effort to make money, but by that time Robert Fulton, Nicholas Roosevelt, Robert Livingston, and others had already moved way ahead of everyone else. Perhaps it is no surprise that Thornton felt a bit of injured pride, but it probably was equally troublesome that money went from Thornton to Fairfax in their joint effort to recoup previous losses. These losses were severe enough that Thornton soon had to raise another £2000 in England. As Ms. Jenkins, in her personally printed biography of Thornton stated, the money could easily be raised in England due to the lasting good name of all the Thorntons in the area. Fairfax ultimately used up the money to buy 90 town lots, although some was possibly also used in an attempt to develop a steamboat passenger service up the Hudson.

Finally the battle lines over steam power, and who was entitled to collect for the boats, became very sharply drawn as Thornton insisted again and again that Livingston and Fulton were illegally forcing everyone else to pay royalties, although Fulton had not himself ever invented anything new. Before long several ex-governors of New Jersey became involved. The ultimate end of the hassle was that Livingston, who had been an original member of the committee to frame the Declaration of Independence, was covered by a cloud of lawsuits about steamboats during the last years of his life while Fulton during his later life still continued efforts to monopolize credit for steam transport. Fairfax eventually had to decide who was politically the most important, and he suggested to Thornton that all legal efforts against Fulton should be discontinued. In one of several letters he argued that Thornton should simply go ahead and recognize the strength of Robert Fulton's established accomplishments. Fulton died suddenly – and Fairfax then stated: *“In the unexpected death of Mr. Fulton in the face of certain lawsuits we were about to lodge upon his credit and character, I feel we would now be opposed by public sympathy, and I have much reluctance to disturb the ashes of the dead.”* Fairfax insisted: *“You must be cautious, be circumspect in discussing our rights, I am permitting no one to see my letters to you.”*

Fairfax reported that some people were already of the opinion that Thornton would claim from time to time to have invented anything that appeared to have had a great success. This complex and involved story regarding Thornton's finances and prospects, in retrospect has a simple bottom line, and that is that Thornton had again borrowed, this time at least \$10,000, to develop boats and obtain some of the credit for the invention. Yet he never fully succeeded. \$10,000 represented a great deal of money at the time, and Fairfax had spent the money, which he later told Mrs. Thornton he just considered *“risk capital”*. Fairfax seemed not too worried about the loss of the Thornton money, but Thornton clearly was. And he could do nothing about it.

Thornton also invented, and almost succeeded in patenting, a steam-driven gun that performed adequately but was never marketed. It could shoot 20 bullets in a minute. Thornton's design was a clear predecessor of the later machine gun. But, once again, there was no profit in the invention for Thornton. Inventions were the rage, and at the same time as Thornton struggled

a steam shovel had been patented by a man named Otis, a man whose name still appears on various types of moving equipment, including elevators. It was an exciting time for inventors, particularly with all the new possibilities offered by steam power. But neither steam engines nor any other invention ever made a fortune for Thornton.

Chapter 12

## Thornton, South America, Greece, and Liberty

**Thornton maintained a lifetime effort to return freed Blacks to Africa, and to obtain freedom for all.**

**He had intense interest in visitors from South America, including Baron von Humboldt, and various revolutionaries.**

**Thornton was in favor of the failed resettlement plan of Frances Wright.**

**Thornton made repeated efforts to be named minister to South or Central America. All of these efforts were rebuffed.**

**Thornton prepared city plans for capitals of new republics in Africa and in South America.**

**Thornton prepared a Constitution for a United Western Hemisphere.**

**Thornton organized support, and collected money, for freedom in Greece.**

Many Americans were eager to see total independence for all of Latin America after their own War of Independence. This interest preceded the near-conflict with France and extended past the real second war with England beginning in 1812. Who would control the two American continents; England, France, Spain, or the USA? It seemed evident at the time that Britain would be competing against Spain on the South American continent, just as she was active against France on the North American continent. John Quincy Adams, the friend and nearby neighbor of Thornton, was Secretary of State in 1817 under President Monroe. It was Adams who was the principal author of what later became known as the Monroe Doctrine. This dictum represented a policy of America reserved for the Americans, even if the Americans of the time lacked the power to enforce any such new policy. Just before 1820, Adams, on behalf of

the United States, was actively negotiating to obtain Florida from Spain and the Oregon territory from Britain. Adams and the Thornton family often visited socially, and must have discussed many of the issues of the times, including the approach of the United States to South America. Born in the British West Indies, Thornton was naturally interested in South America, and his informal visits with his distinguished neighbor Adams undoubtedly enhanced that interest. The men were very different, of course. The puritanical Adams did not, surely, share the doctor's fascination with racehorses, nor would Adams have encouraged gambling at the track. Once, even before he became president, Adams did join Thornton for a Quaker meeting and later complained in his diary: *"Two hours spent wearily in perfect silence, a waste of precious time. I asked the doctor what had been in his mind the while. His answer was, that he had been inclined to sleep! I am a Unitarian, and I consider social meditation an incongruity."*

Arthur Whitacre and Phillip Brooks are among those who reported a turn in attention of the United States southward, first to acquire clear sovereignty over the Florida region, secondly to confirm its possession of the Louisiana Purchase, and thirdly to stabilize the situation with what later became Mexico. There was a clear tendency of our citizens to spread control beyond our borders, and an overtly imperial America became a distinct possibility. Many individuals in the capital city had potential business and political interests that bypassed the efforts of England or France and involved the Spanish possessions to our south.

Luis de Onís was the Spanish minister to the United States from 1809 to 1819, and his efforts helped lead to the crucial Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819 that clarified once and for all the Florida situation. It is well that super patriots and busybodies such as Thornton had to allow the master diplomat, John Quincy Adams, a free hand at the time. It is probable that the United States had no justifiable title to west Florida simply through the Louisiana Purchase, but that certainly didn't mean there was lack of interest in possession of that beautiful land. John Quincy Adams, as Secretary of State, made an effort to steer a peaceful course between the aggressiveness of U. S. popular opinion about South America, legal rights, and proper international standards. Diplomat Onís for some years had worked privately to prevent the United States from grabbing all of Texas, but Onís as the Spanish Ambassador always had to cope with natural



sympathy of citizens of the United States for the rebellious subjects of Spain who lived in Central and South America. Onís himself had very limited ability to manipulate the events in Spain, the United States, or in South America. His native country, Spain, was unstable at the time, since during the years that Onís was in the United States, Napoleon was actively invading Spain.

Many Americans were beginning to discover Latin America for the first time in the years between 1810 and 1830. There were multiple economic reasons for heightened interest including, as Whitacre suggested, that it had become *“the happy hunting ground not only of businessmen, politicians, and statesmen, but also of natural and social scientists.”* By 1824 the State Department’s budget already included legations in five major cities in Europe, but in addition there were formal diplomats in Buenos Aires, Bogotá, Santiago de Chile, Mexico City, and Lima. The policies set up by Jefferson, Monroe, John Quincy Adams, and Henry Clay was the ones that shaped our eventual future with Latin America. It appears that Thornton’s primary personal interest was to obtain a position in one of the new countries, and as was usual for him he combined his desire to offer service with a wish to make money and to achieve public respect.

Thornton’s interest in Central and South America was already intense when he hosted Baron von Humboldt (1767-1835) in 1804 as that scientist began to publicize his recent expeditions to South America and Mexico. Thornton once wrote: *“I was born in America, between the tropics, and being a Carib by birth, I feel an unspeakable attachment to the whole race of Columbians.”* During his triumphant tour in the United States von Humboldt was honored by the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, the same group that earlier honored Thornton with a gold medal. Jefferson had been President of the American Philosophical Society at the time Thornton was also an active member. The Society had a collection of models and artifacts that may have inspired Thornton as he collected models when he ran the Patent Office. The recent Louisiana Purchase, credited to Jefferson, made von Humboldt’s explorations and research in South America quite obviously even more significant to the expanding United States of America. It is probable that Charles Willson Peale, founder of the Pennsylvania Academy, a natural history museum in Philadelphia, was one of the sponsors who initially encouraged von

Humboldt's visit to Philadelphia and North America. Thornton expressed the wish that von Humboldt would stay, ideally forever, in America, and later Thornton wrote John Vaughn of the Philosophical Society: *"I am sorry that this interesting Baron has so closely guarded his knowledge of South America. I would have wished that he would rest his limbs for a time, and then publish the treasures of his learning here. The insight which he has acquired would be worth more than the richest mines of gold in the world."* Baron von Humboldt used the information he acquired for all the rest of his life in research, writing, and teaching; and became recognized as the leading authority on South America on both sides of the Atlantic. After his return home, he remained in Europe for all his publications and never returned to the United States.

Thornton rejoiced in the word "*Columbian*" as a potential new generic name for all the inhabitants of the new world, North and South, and he proposed a constitutional model in 1815 for Southern Columbia, with the U.S.A. as a part of Northern Columbia. Simon Bolivar (1783-1830) had by that time united Venezuela and Granada as Grand Columbia, and three of Bolivar's men came for a visit to Washington. These were Pedro Gaul, Jose Ravena, and Lino de Clemente. While in the District of Columbia the revolutionaries visited several times with Thornton in his own home. It is possible that Thornton's concept of an "*Incan*" as the name for the leader of Columbia related to one of the other visitors, Vicente Kanki Pazos, who was perceived by Thornton as a representative of the Incan "*race*." Pazos, the presumed Incan, had been the editor of revolutionary tracts in Buenos Aires and was once captured by the Spanish and imprisoned in Amelia, an island off the shores of Florida. Thornton tried then to intercede to have him freed, but he failed. The State Department, headed by Adams, clearly blocked some of Thornton's international efforts during these times and Adams was particularly circumspect about offending other national powers. Gaul wrote several times to Thornton during these years, wanting an arrangement to appear as lawyer in Washington in order to urge greater freedom for all the countries south of the United States.

We sometimes forget there was also a great internal surge towards Mexican independence even before 1815, led by Jose Morelos. His envoy to the United States was Herrera, and in an effort to promote a conference to pull all the insurgents together and hoping to declare a joint policy, presumably one to

urge independence for all the countries south of the United States, Thornton wrote; *“If his excellency Don Herrera is still in New Orleans a letter would hasten his journey hither. We must proclaim that the present barbaric state of retaliation by the Spanish should cease, and the wives and children of our foes will bless you. When cruelty and barbarity become a system of gross impolicy, the plea for Peace will touch the stoniest of hearts by good and noble principals. I speak because I feel like one of you. A child of the sun is not a common man.”* For a time General Morelos, a former priest, had two-thirds of the Mexican nation in his power and proceeded to make a formal declaration of independence in 1813. Ambassador Herrera came to the Congress of the United States to seek encouragement, and to purchase arms, and he brought \$33,000 in Mexican money, funds which were quickly absorbed in New Orleans. Herrera lasted only a short time after the capture and execution of Morelos in Mexico City in 1816. Simon Bolivar had chosen not to become involved with Mexico, and perhaps partly because of the example of Bolivar, Thornton also looked further south, toward South America. Apparently even John Quincy Adams, not just Thornton, once felt that it was conceivable that Venezuela, Columbia, and Ecuador could be fused into a *“Grand Columbia.”*

For a time Thornton’s friend Pedro Gall held a position as a Secretary of State in South America, and he suggested that Thornton be appointed as the American Minister to Columbia. Reality and dreamy planning were intermixed during these heady days of potential freedom for all. It now seems not at all unrealistic for Thornton to have sought a post in South America, and his failure certainly did not reflect a lack of effort on his part. In fact his very zeal may have cooled his neighbor, the circumspect former diplomat John Quincy Adams.

Thornton used what he considered Incan terminology in his proposed constitution for a new confederation of all the Americas. He suggested that the Isthmus of Panama should be the site for a unifying capital city, one to be called America, and the new capital was to overlook a large canal with locks to link the two oceans. Apparently those involved in the revolutionary governments in countries in South America respected and liked Thornton’s efforts and plans, at least sufficiently to correspond with him for over a decade. On the other hand Thornton was meddlesome in the opinion of Secretary of State Adams, particularly when Thornton published his many views about what our nation

should do in South America, and when he personally corresponded with government officials in South America. Thornton's views were published in the *National Intelligencer*, first by Samuel Harrison Smith and later by the Gales brothers. Thornton in particular mentioned his respect for Bolivar who had freed 500 plantation slaves: "*He does not treat the Indians as some of our people treat the Cherokees.*" In this published note he signed the letter as "*a Columbian.*" Adams, however, felt that the concept of a formal summit meeting of the diplomats from the countries was completely out of place at the time, and he warned Thornton that President James Monroe had taken offense. The President wanted absolutely no informal meddling in the politics of South America. The water down there, with Spain, England, and France all involved, was not only crowded but also potentially very hot indeed.

Why did Thornton feel he could play a uniquely pivotal role in South America? Possibly his busybody idealism was once again mixed with his recurrent search for fame and money. One of the phrases that Thornton often used to describe himself was as a "*child of the sun*" from Tortola, and he felt he was "*not a common man.*" This personal history may have influenced his desire to help with the liberation of the South and Central American countries. In addition to his many private letters he also carried on an extensive public correspondence about South America. Most was printed in the *Intelligencer*. Thornton wrote to suggest to one of his enthusiastic liberator friends to the south a forceful takeover of the little island off Florida called Amelia, an island that he figured the British wished to acquire. "*Is it true? Otherwise we'll probably have to buy it back from Onis and Heredia, his son-in-law in Spain. You know I'm a child of the sun, and not one of those milk and water politicians who hesitate at trifles.*" John Quincy Adams and others at the time concluded, along with Richard Royce, the Acting Secretary of State, that Thornton had become far too personally involved in affairs in Central and South America. Thornton was thus officially approached, and asked whether he had had any conversations about Amelia that might jeopardize the interests of the United States. Thornton said: "*It is a question of this area's contiguity to the United States and some of our citizens are living there. The insurgents wish the United States' support of their seizure of it rather than to see any purchase of it from the Court of Spain.*" Pedro Gaul in particular interacted by mail and in person with Thornton, as well

as with Dr. Caspar Wistar, the famous naturalist in Philadelphia. In one of his letters to Thornton, Gaul states prophetically: *“The British favor the Emancipation of our country, for the raw materials and markets, and they have a similar interest in Mexico. I’m continually astonished at the indifference of the United States to a kindred state, Mexico. I repeat it is your obligation to see us free, independent, and flourishing, under the auspices of a mutual course pointed out by nature! We are destined to live in peace, growing rapidly to a pitch of power and wealth of which there is no memory in ancient or modern history.”*

Gaul became Secretary of State for the new state of Columbia and apparently it was he who most consistently encouraged Thornton to seek appointment as the American Minister to Columbia. The enthusiastic Thornton offered plans, drawings, for a new capitol city in Columbia, one to be called Bolivar. Thornton’s efforts to get his own government to endorse, please, his application for an official post in Columbia, or anywhere else in South America, was clearly and firmly forbidden by President Monroe. In fact, there are several plaintive letters for over a decade in the Thornton papers that recount this rebuff. At the time there was internal conflict going on in both Spain and in her colonies, and neither sailors nor soldiers of the United States wished to fight for, or in, South or Central America. Nor did our Presidents want a war.

In one reply to Adams, Thornton, as if to prove he was a citizen, mentioned that his naturalized citizenship in Delaware qualified him to attempt to obtain a seat in the United States Senate, but the repeated letters he sent pleading again and again that he was qualified to be an ambassador in South America were never successful. As he says: *“I was born in America, from the same region which produced Hamilton and Dallas! I am thought too partial to the sacred cause? Other countries have sent experts for years to woo the authorities emerging in the nascent empires, I have their friendship already! Nevertheless, if after all this, I should still be thought unworthy of representing this great republic, to which I have never ceased to show an unwearied attachment, I bow down in silence and submission.”* President Monroe replied, courteously, and refused to *“entertain any more requests for a conference on the subject”* but did express *“a favorable opinion of you, with the conviction that you possess many excellent qualities.”* It is probable that John Quincy Adams,

who knew Thornton very, very well, by that time did not think Thornton had the stability of temperament to be a good diplomat, and furthermore Thornton had clearly been partial to one or another side at various times during the ongoing struggle for freedom in Central America. On February 17, 1820, Adams recorded in his diary: *“Dr. Thornton came again to the office to re-urge his pretension for appointment as Agent of the United States to Venezuela or any other part of South America. Of all the official duties of my station, there is none that tries the temper so severely as that of conflicting with the stubborn perseverance of unsuccessful candidates for office. To persist in reiterated refusal without ever falling into harshness of manner is a labor more than herculean.”*

Pedro Gaul, Thornton’s friend in the South, continued to wonder about a place for Thornton in the administration of Grand Columbia, a potentially larger nation than it now is. Thornton stated: *“I would not know of any situation I might desire more than to be Protector of the Indians. Under the old regime you had such an office.”* By this time Thornton had arranged for his personal rights for the navigation of boats on the Magdalena River in Columbia, and he held a formal certification. He undoubtedly was as interested in pursuing riverboat issues and financial rewards in South America as he was in assuring protection and freedom for the Indians. Somehow Thornton could never let things rest or drop, and always could see the glimmer of a rainbow – often a golden one. He talked of boats on the Rio del Plata, on the Danube, and on the Amazon. By 1824 there was indeed a Treaty of Commercial Reciprocity between Columbia and the United States, but this occurred not through Thornton’s involvement, though it should have pleased him. He never, so far as we can tell, benefited at all from any of his efforts to reap profits from steamboats and he certainly never became an ambassador in South America; sadly, perhaps.

It was in March 1815 that Thornton published his *“Outlines of a Constitution for the United North and South Columbia.”* He first reviews the grand project of Henry IV of France for the regulation of Europe. Henry, as regent, had suggested a general linkage of European countries in a plan reminiscent of the suggestions of Winston Churchill over one hundred years later, plan for a United States of Europe. Queen Elizabeth I was verbally supportive of this original concept of a federation of nations to overlap all the

kingdoms of Europe. Thornton noted that King Henry's plan from France was in fact defective and could never succeed, because Henry intended to preserve all the governments as they were then in existence. Thornton felt that would act to prejudice the overall effort since standard national jealousies would be sure to continue unabated. In fact neither a totally changed national structure nor a total unification is likely to work smoothly at first, as can be sensed from the current European Union.

In his own treatise for a totally United Western Hemisphere Thornton offered in the articles of confederation several side comments, as he always did, including the statement that Indians have been eliminated from South America by "*heroic but rapacious*" Spaniards. He suggests a new race has arisen from intermixture of the two and that this new creature offers the "*combined virtues*" of both races. He states that Indians were once the natural proprietors of all the countries in the Western Hemisphere, that they had never really actually sold much of the land, nor did they ever profit significantly from that which had been taken from them by stealth or by arms. Thornton uses these arguments to strengthen his concept that all native and all immigrant peoples, all those who lived in North and South America, could and should benefit from a single united republic of the continent, one which he would call "*North and South Columbia.*" A new people had emerged, and a new linkage of the countries must be fashioned. His proposal was for a constitution that would basically combine all the countries to form the two new major republics, divided into various districts or commonwealths. The overall scheme of Thornton included the rather innovative idea that who ever was a citizen of one section was automatically a citizen of all other sections, and that equal rights and freedom for all the citizens would extend throughout the whole. Free trade, free borders, and common laws would characterize Thornton's brave new world. The issue that he had always faced in his personal life regarding the cause of the Blacks again came up in his proposal, and he now suggests that all governments should free all the Blacks now. Not he, the governments. In other writings, he outlines the geographical limits of the various sections, and suggested that the capital be near the Isthmus of Panama where he would plan excavation to link the two oceans. He chose interesting names for his new confederation, including Incan for the leader and Grand Sachem for each of the districts, of which there would

be 22. The Sachems were to function as Senators. Thornton mentions that the newly developed telegraph might make for ready communication within this new confederation.

It was during these heady times when he pushed for possible increased independence for South America that Thornton so riled up his former friend, President James Madison. Thornton continued his efforts in letter after letter and encouraged visits by leaders from the Southern hemisphere. The major Spanish figure of the day, in the Americas, was Ambassador Onís. Onís had already warned the Spanish court by 1815 that some people in the United States dreamed of “*a universal republic of the two Americas.*” It was in March of 1815 that Thornton prepared his plan for a voluntary federal union of North and South America under his “*Columbian, Inca, or Supreme Government .*” A year later Matthew Lyon wrote Monroe in 1816 that: “. . . *I have long considered that our mode of Government by states confederated for national purposes only, will fit a larger empire than ever yet existed, and I have long believed that such an empire will rise in America, and give quiet to the world.*” Perhaps his dream was for a Pax Americana. Lyon went further to state that much of the countryside south from New Orleans was ready to sit down under an American government. Both Lyon and Thornton contemplated a union of all the Americas under a broad new federal system. Thornton apparently thought in terms of a voluntary, not forced, linkage. His interest was enhanced by the revolutionary fervor in Spanish America that James Monroe, in December 1815, said: “*becomes daily more interesting to the United States.*” Thornton could see what could happen, even explain why it was desirable, but neither he nor anyone else could accomplish it all.

Since no position for Thornton was forthcoming in South America, Thornton also sought a post in Central America, particularly in Guatemala. The man from Tortola, still a property owner there, continued to look south and remained active in seeking such an official position well into his last years. His wife continued to discuss these disappointments for years, even after his death. Through all of Thornton’s dreams he was wise enough, however, to hold onto the position at the Patent Office where he was to work for 20 years.

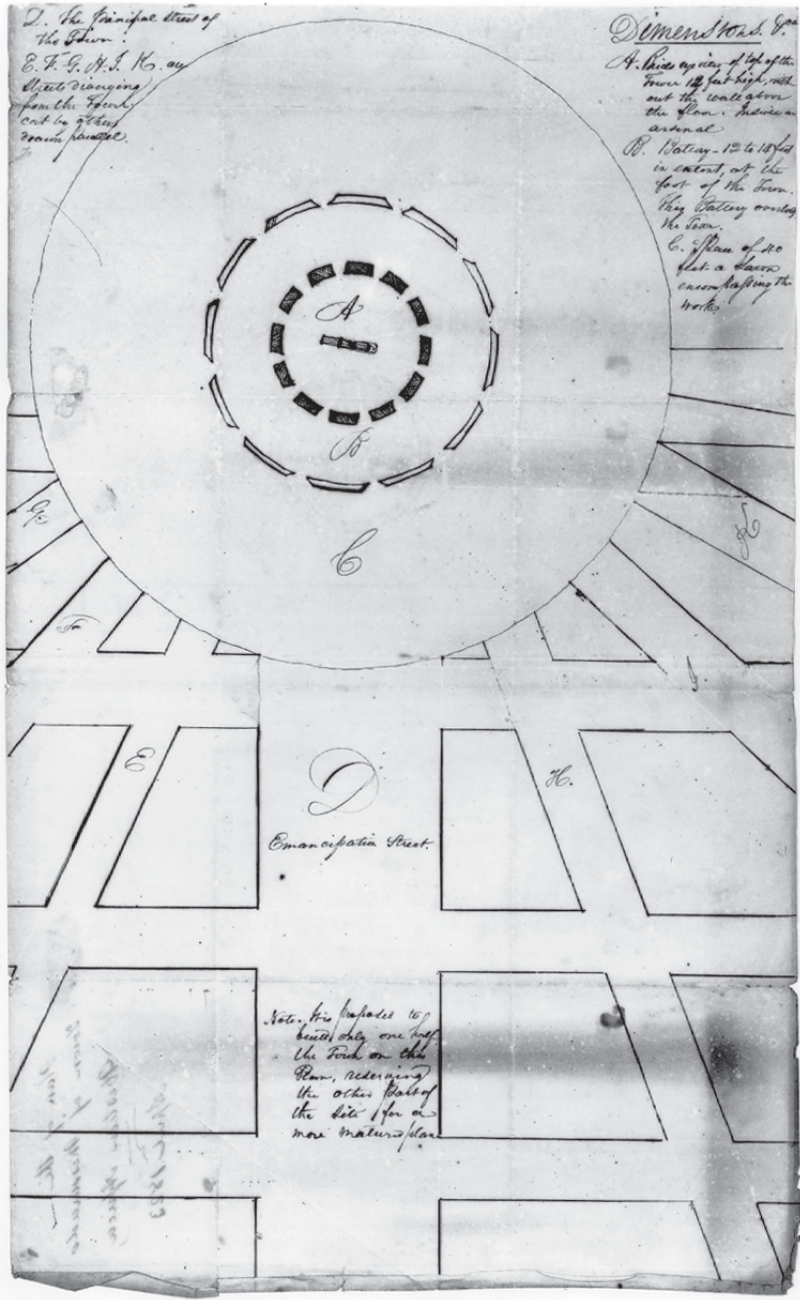
Thornton continued active in multiple social issues as long as he lived. He was involved in what were unabashedly liberal causes for his day. His



experience with Frances Wright is one example. Frances Wright was a feminist who dreamed of racial equality, and she visited the Thornton home repeatedly while she was in Washington. Wright and her sister accompanied Lafayette on his triumphal return to America when he returned as a symbol of the revolution, and Frances Wright settled freed Blacks along with Englishmen onto a model community at her property in the hills of Tennessee. She was not, nor was anyone else, able to manage this community successfully, and the settlement never flourished.

Frances Wright was keenly disappointed and angry when she finally had to give up her utopian dreams and return to England, as she had to do after her communal settlement completely failed. She was also disappointed in what she observed when she returned to England. She wrote back to Thornton that England had become a military state: *“It is no longer a limited monarchy, but a military despotism, people ground down between the soldiers, the princes, and the beggars. England is now, by retributive justice, fast approaching the state in which it has kept Ireland, where she has so long been a tyrant and is now, herself, a nation of slaves.”* Both Thornton and Wright, even if they would have welcomed the later establishment of Liberia, could not have foreseen that many of the plans of the Colonization Society of which Thornton had been such a conspicuous, and in fact an organizing, founder, were destined to fail. Just as surely as had the settlement organized by Wright in America.

Thornton did raise his voice, over and over, to object to continuation of the slave trade, an evil that he blamed primarily on the French and the Portuguese. Even though it was officially true that the slave trade had been stopped in the United States by the year 1807, and by 1808 in England, a decade later Thornton was still writing to the prime minister of England and to Lafayette in France in an effort to stop continuing illegal traffic in human chattel. Thornton seems to have glimpsed the fact that, in retrospect, slavery would be seen as the major human rights issue of his time. Liberation of, or reparation for, the Negroes never failed to interest Thornton, and this goal reached its partial fruition when the American Colonization Society helped establish the Liberia unit in Africa, in the 1820's. Perhaps it was fortunate that Thornton did not live to see all the later political battles, the Nat Turner massacre, the hardening of lines between North and South, and then the pivotal



Thornton's plan for a new city.

next step in our continuing American Revolution represented by the cleansing of the Civil War that finally, completely, freed all the slaves in America. Thornton also did not live to see an assault by one of his slaves on his wife, who fortunately was not seriously injured. That incident was reported to have produced counter aggression against the African-Americans living in the area.

Thornton could never resist becoming involved with the issue of freedom for those that were overtly suppressed. He organized citizens' committees and fund-raising as part of his total activity on behalf of Greece, and he wanted all the donors' names and money to be preserved in the Library of Congress. The main political newspaper in Washington was still the *National Intelligencer*, and in it on September 19, 1827, Thornton felt he must cover himself from potential charges of meddling by stating: "*The American people would be reluctant to interfere in the politics of Europe since the declaration of President Monroe, which does him great honor.*" The Chief of the National Congressional Library, Mr. Watterson, did not initially like Thornton's idea of channeling all contributions for the Greeks through the Library of Congress. Nor did John Quincy Adams, who recorded in his diary May 10, 1824: "*Dr. Thornton called upon me this morning, to say he had prepared a book to be deposited in the Congress Library, to contain the subscriptions of all persons in the service of the United States, at Washington, for the Greeks. His project was that every individual would subscribe one day's pay. ...I told him I would not subscribe for the Greeks nor advise the President to do so.*" Probably Thornton was attempting to use the Library of Congress to avoid being labeled as similar to Samuel Blodgett, a man accused of pocketing some of the subscriptions that had been gathered for the proposed national university. And perhaps the director of the Congressional Library and Adams were also just attempting to avoid charges of political meddling. Usually such concerns were not really paramount to Thornton. In one of Thornton's last public meetings, held just six months before he died, he spoke at a town meeting to challenge Director Watterson's reluctance for the Library to be involved in the collection of money for Greece. Thornton and the other participants, at the next meeting, succeeded in overcoming Watterson's reluctance and the collection duly proceeded.

Thornton was not totally healthy after 1825 and frequently felt overtly ill, having more than once had, as his wife suffered, "*a tedious confinement that he*

*bore with unruffled resignation.*” The remarkable event of the death of both John Adams and Thomas Jefferson on July 4, 1826, exactly 50 years to the day after signing the Declaration, despite any illness of his own triggered in Thornton the desire to organize a special memorial service in Alexandria the next month. He scheduled it for August 10<sup>th</sup>. A printed account of the event is available in the press of the American Philosophical Society, with Thornton as one of the major speakers. Although Thornton knew his neighbor John Quincy Adams very well, he actually knew the former second President, John Adams, much less well, but Thornton clearly had seen Jefferson many times and had worked closely with him.

Jenkins suggests that Thornton’s statements about Adams soften the idea that Thornton was a firm Federalist. The doctor did indeed sometimes seem variable in his political allegiances; but of Jefferson, the Republican, on this occasion Thornton said: *“He was endowed with an extraordinary power of intense reflection, a spirit of profound and patient investigation, and acuteness in the discovery of truth and of perspicuity in its development, of which the world has witnessed few examples. Possessing a mind well balanced in itself by the nice judgment and proportion of its faculties, he never inclined to the eccentricities, either of opinion or action, which are too often the lot of exalted genius. Free from all tincture of envy, hatred or malice, he delighted in the prosperity of his companions, and the fame, even of those in the world who were considered his rivals.”* The unbridled praise in Thornton’s speech does sound a bit honeyed, and was of course not totally true, since recent biographies of both Presidents Adams and Jefferson revealed chinks in the men’s own personal armor. Nevertheless, to reread Thornton’s words is to admire once again Jefferson the man, as well as Thornton the writer, as he praises the great President and fellow architect.

CHAPTER 13

## Scientific and Religious Interests

**Numerous small studies: Water filtration, paint, fibers, insects, Madeira wine.**

**Attempts to explain and predict hurricanes and volcanic eruptions.**

**Concepts of electricity, phlogistic diseases, and energy from the sun.**

**Documentation of the plants of Tortola Island.**

**Explanation of the sleep of animals, plants, and people.**

**A putative explanation for yellow fever.**

**Agricultural experiments, especially in breeding, sheep rearing, and fruit trees.**

**Observations of resuscitation, and case report of an injury in which the spinal cord is severed.**

William Thornton, M.D., during his entire life was fascinated by science, natural history, and invention. Some seem to have sprung as original, even if later proved false, ideas of his, many reflected the time, and several do reveal his remarkable creativity. This chapter reviews only a few of his many ideas, the ones most often mentioned in his letters and in the notes saved in the tapes. Several of his writings reflect his firm hypothesis that science would progress rapidly in the new world, and “*science like empire was traveling west and its principal seat is soon to be the United States.*” (Kennon)

(1) As early as 1789 Thornton made an effort to devise a machine to filter water, to purify it, and he suggested and sketched the use of a cask with a false bottom using coarse pebbles, fine sand, and other filters to remove “*all impurities.*” He also suggested use of a cock in the bottom of the barrel to facilitate cleaning, in order to flush and reuse the filtering material. He said that if one would add charcoal to the lower parts of the cask it would additionally

purify the water and make it as wholesome as spring water. This was before filtration plants appeared in American cities in an attempt to erase typhoid, cholera, and other water borne diseases that were transmitted from public water supplies. The plan was one of many suggested by the needs and diseases he had observed in Tortola.

(2) Living in Tortola also led to careful observations about the geography of the islands, as well as notes on hurricanes and on volcanic action. Charles Darwin suggested later that coral islands and coral reefs represented previous presence of an exposed area of land that slowly subsided or eroded, leaving the coral to multiply and then eventually appear isolated on the surface. Coral atolls or rings thus develop slowly, and are open around the middle where once land stood. Before Darwin, Thornton stated that: *“The universal deluge cannot be conceived to produce all affects . . . gradual changes have been observed in many countries, whereas one side of an island gains, the other side as gradually loses, but the changes are, in general, imperceptibly slow. In the West Indies we find beds of coral growing into islands. In other places currents wash away what connected these lands with each other, and the whole with the continent of America leaving masses of volcanic matter that like rocks of adamant have hid the two against the dashings of the sea, and that now surprise many by their appearing to have risen from amazing depths.”* In his studies of volcanoes and hurricanes Thornton suggested that volcanic countries are more subject to earthquakes than are any others. While the volcanoes are active they subject the earth to local pulsatory changes and dangerous earthquakes and when extinct the *“ferruginous matter still in a vivified state renders them capable of acting as general conductors to the passage of large bodies of electric fire and vibratory earthquakes succeed.”* Changes inside the earth thus lead to volcanic action on the surface.

(3) Thornton had significant experience observing the power of hurricanes, certainly he had personal information from his time in the Indies, including when he and his wife were there together. He mentions that the noise of one hurricane he witnessed resembled the roaring of a thousand furnace bellows. After the wind had blown *“from one quarter for a while, a short calm of a few minutes succeeded; it did change to an opposite point and blew with equal violence. Thus did hope and fear alternatively elevate and depress as the*

wind rose and fell. The sky was darkened and torrents poured. After a day and a half loud peals of thunder broke away the dark clouds and heaven resumed a mild look; but, how dreary was the aspect on earth. The vegetable world was blasted . . . I paid a visit to my friend Dr. John Ryan of St. Croix after the hurricane. Some shed rooms which he had prepared for library and where he had a valuable collection of books were blown away and his books all destroyed. The shingles of the roof were actually blown through planks, some entirely through, leaving open passages as from shots of guns, some struck in the middle, half the shingle having passed through, and I saw many in this situation. Some of his black people were killed with shingles, and in the island many lost their lives by shingles planks which were driven through them by the wind. Even strong stone houses were in some instances blown down.” Thornton, whose notes include many details about a peculiar appearance of the sun before a hurricane, and sudden changes in temperature that seem to predispose nature toward a hurricane, also made an effort to specifically predict them. He once noted: “three parallel lines of light (perhaps the electric field) coming from the Southwest across the zenith, and continuing for many hours, three days previous to a tremendous hurricane. A few hours before it came on the clouds began to gather in the Southwest, increasing in density and becoming a deep reddish purple.” He suggested that in earthquakes, in contrast to hurricanes, “the pulsations are more local and may be attributed to internal causes such as volcanic fire – but these are general causes in nature which the sagacity of man has never developed such as the galvanic fluid, the magnetic fluid, and others.”

A serious attempt to use some of the concepts of the Chaldeans regarding the “revolution” of the seasons in order to predict the occurrence of hurricanes was carefully reviewed by Thornton, and he decided such concepts failed to adequately predict the appearance of hurricanes. Despite the conventional and strongly held Biblical views of the age of the earth, Thornton held to his own concepts of a longer duration of the world. He returned in his writings more than once to what he termed the pulsatory feature of earthquakes and that of fluctuating volcanic activity and he felt that volcanic fires;...”have produced more variable changes on the surface of our globe than any agent we have yet observed but when we view the whole of the changes made by all the operations of the elements during the memory and traditions of man we find them very

*minute and trivial in comparison to the changes that must have been made since the primitive arrangement of matter in the world, and when we view the immense ranges of stupendous mountains that during the combined observation of eyes have scarcely lost or gained an atom, what are we to suppose when we presume to judge antiquities in the duration of the earth . . . Its origins seems to be removed back an inconceivable distance.”* This view is counter, certainly, to that of Bishop Ussher, the Prelate of Ireland, who calculated that the earth was created in 4004 BC.

(4) Living in the islands, Thornton was of course fascinated by lava, which he readily recognized as of volcanic origin and: *“While a student in the year 1784 I had the three first bottles made of lava, perhaps in the world. I showed one of them to Dr. Franklin. We tried its electric power, and he concluded it to be about thirty times more electric than common glass. These bottles though much lighter are also stronger than common green glass.”* Thornton seems to have been committed to try to document *“electric fire”* as a force in all of nature, after all he lived in the age that had just discovered electricity as a concept. Thornton felt all living things must have some internal fire or they would become flaccid. He noted that all plants expand in the presence of light and tend to close down after its loss. Thornton felt there was a connection between *“electric fire”* and light. He suggested that *“electric fire”* could be one of the several components of light and that presumably *“fire”* – but for us what might be called energy – is absorbed into different substances within plants and that the power is transmitted through sunlight.

(5) There was nothing truly original about Thornton’s attempts to explain natural phenomena in terms of the exciting new observations about electricity. The abstract concept of phlogiston, of an internal fire, meshed nicely with the still prevalent idea of disease as a disturbance in the humors, a disturbance in the internal balance. *“Phlogiston”*, once a common label, was once part of an accepted concept. It began to be discounted after the work of Antoine Lavoisier, who was killed during the French Revolution in 1794. It had been suggested that phlogiston was present in anything that could burn and after burning, combustion, residual ash or an incombustible material was left. In our time we might say this process represents oxidation. In Thornton’s day it was not unreasonable, however, to use the concept of phlogistic diseases, much as the



Greeks might have used “*homeostasis*,” for too much, too little, or changing too fast. Thornton offered one of his concepts of life forces as reflected in disease, which he labeled as the phlogistic diseases, “*when the powers are applied in excess*” and the asthenic diseases which occur “*when the powers are insufficiently applied, or given only in too sparing a manner.*” Thornton did recognize the role of the nerves as he stated: “*This principle of vitability may be considered as the sentient or vivifying principle, which resides in the nerves and capacitates them for communicating to the brain all the impressions derived from external objects, through the medium of the various senses.*”... “*the brain being the common receptacle of the different communicated impressions is the radical source of the will and of any voluntary motion; which will it communicates to every part for the general protection, regulation and support of the whole; through the medium of the nerves*”.

(6) In over 20 carefully prepared pages Thornton summarized the plants that he had observed growing in Tortola, using their scientific names, and he also described the botanical setting in the islands around Tortola. The report is full of data, and is a solid, even if unpublished, article. Thornton returned more than once to the issue of preparing poison from plant materials. He pointed out that arrow poison is developed in Sierra Leone as well as in Central and South America, but that in Sierra Leone it is prepared from the fruit of the plant rather than from the juices of the vine. Fascinated by the varied plants that could supply poisons, Thornton again identified several species that were new to him, and then discussed which were best used as poisons.

He defined some plant barks that can assist healing. These botanical notes included a list of approximately 20 different plant compounds of potential scientific value, plants that have either a toxic component or a healing property. These included plants for developing fibers, a wax-like gummy material that could be obtained from plants, leaves that could be used for incense, etc. There are also several letters to John Lettsom from Thornton regarding the botany in Lettsom’s own island of origin and its useful native plants, particularly the value of the ubiquitous aloe.

Here again, in discussing what plant life can be expected to grow in Tortola, the issue of slavery could not be ignored by the author. Thornton questioned that Whites are truly useful for the West Indies. “*If Whites were*

*really necessary for the cultivation of tropical productions it would not even be an argument of raising them but they are not necessary (the Whites) for many (persons) have black overseers and directors."*

Thornton reviews one of the arguments in favor of African slavery, the idea that Whites are incapable of laboring in the tropics. If the Whites truly can't work in the climate because their skin is white then what business do they have "*in a country intended by providence for the Black alone.*" Some apologists wondered what would become of the West Indian Islands without the Blacks or laborers, but Thornton believed it "*would be a much more significant question as what might be made of Africa? Could Whites ever exist there, if there are such biological differences?*" Thornton said the Indies "*are trifling spots of land, some of which do not contain a single spring of fresh water; the other (Africa) the richest country in the world.*"

(7) Among the floral and vegetable studies that Thornton, the scientist, performed was an evaluation of the rutabaga or "Swedish turnip." He reported that a friend had supported and adequately fed six mares on rutabaga during the severe frosts of 1794 and 1795, even though the English turnips had suffered from the frost and completely rotted due to the wet. The root held firm in the Swedish turnip and he suggested it would be an excellent addition for agriculture in America. In these botanical notes Thornton reported numerous things that were just beginning to be understood at the time, including his unique concepts for growing fruit. Jefferson, after all, once imported native Italians to help him grow grapes, for wine, but was still not very successful.

Thornton reports that he had found that by cutting a circle through the thicker bark around the principal branches of a fruit tree they would bear more fruit. He stated this tended to stop the growth of the wood and could alter the tendency toward excessive vegetation, and thereby force the tree into a tendency towards bearing fruit instead of making leaves and wood. In these agricultural notes there is also a suggested formula to turn honey into an alcohol as "*palatable as Madeira.*" "*Take new cider from the press, mix it with honey till it bears an egg, boil it gently for a quarter of an hour (but not in an iron pot), take off the serum as it rises let it set and then barrel it without filling the vessel quite full. Bottle it off in March. In six weeks after it will be ripe for use and strong as Madeira. The longer it is afterwards kept the better.*" He also

suggested that one could make good hard liquor from crab tree apples and a fair wine from gooseberries.

(8) There are numerous observations in his notes in which Thornton gives credit to the slaves of Tortola. For example, he observed a black man pounding the leaves of a native plant until only fibers remained. These then served adequately for twine and Thornton suggested that, as with papyrus, a serviceable paper could also be made from the same plant.

(9) There are hundreds of pages of notes left by Thornton, and retained by his widow, regarding dreams, sleep, and wakefulness. Even while traveling as a student in Scotland his colleagues noted that interest. His observations on sleep were linked to his lifetime interest in resuscitation, and he combines comments about sleep with observations about death or the Almighty. What were some of the ideas of his time about sleep, and was he in these areas different, even ahead, of his time?

In Thornton's discussions of sleep, he began his dozens of pages with a definition of the sleep of animals as "*a quiet but involuntary cessation of many of the powers of the body and mind, especially of the voluntary.*" He felt unable to attribute to plants "*this sentient principle, or soul,*" so he defined the sleep of plants as "*a partial cessation of many of the actions of their functions.*" He went on to say that sleep depends on neither heat nor light, at least not entirely. He suggests that the plants open to receive the rays of the sun, without them he knew the plant would lose color and fail to grow. He observed that domestic fowls roost, as if for sleep, during the dark of an eclipse. Insects sleep, or become torpid, during the dark days of winter. Even with regard to needs for sleep of fish and animals Thornton, with his obsession about slavery, may have felt compelled to record a disturbing comment. "*Fish of certain species we know sleep, but others appear capable of remaining awake for a long time; for sharks have been known to follow the slave ships from the coast of Africa to the West Indies even in quick passages; having been caught immediately on the arrival of the vessels in the harbors of the West Indies, and when these fish were cut open, various ornaments were found that had been worn by individuals who had died and were thrown overboard near the coast of Africa.*"

Thornton recorded at least one of his own dreams in which he discovered gunpowder was an effective medication. This may reflect his interest not just in

medicine but in the work he was doing with firearms at the time, and his endless desire to discover something new. His papers include numerous versions of a poem that may have come originally from Pindar or from Ovid:

*“Soft sleep, although the image of the dead,  
Yet I desire thee to partake my bed,  
For as tis sweet in lifeless life to lie,  
So is it pleasant without death to die.”*

One of the best summaries of concepts of sleep during the early 1800’s was that done by William Hammond, published in 1865 with revision in 1873. By this time Thornton was long dead, but the accepted concepts presented by Hammond were remarkably similar to those presented earlier by Thornton. Some of the same concepts were to be emphasized by Freud over 50 years later. What other similarities exist between the classic work of Hammond and the earlier concepts of Thornton, and was Thornton original in his postulations? What else is observed in the writings of the two men?

Hammond discussed semi-conscious cerebration when one is close to sleep, ideas and insights that appear during sleep, and the remarkable fact of the ubiquitous nature of sleep. Both Hammond and Thornton emphasized that animals and plants “*sleep*,” and this they attempted to document by the appearance of plants at night. Disorders of sleep, including narcolepsy, were already becoming known in the early 1800’s, and even vague awareness that something akin to the drowsy morning “*awakening*,” a semi-alert phenomena, can also occur as one goes to sleep, although it was 150 years later before that phenomenon was labeled “*sleepening*.” Thornton mentions, doesn’t name, that twilight or early morning phenomenon.

Hammond suggested that sleep is actually caused by congestion of the blood with resultant pressure of the blood on the brain, and that the choroid plexus of the brain is involved in some fundamental way. Not all would agree with that explanation, even in the 1870’s, and other observers as early as 1819, had witnessed the blood vessels of patients whose brain had been exposed by trauma and stated that less blood is present in the brain at times of sleep. Scattered physicians, including a “Dr. Brown” from North Carolina, suggested that during sleep the brain is actually bloodless and that it is the reduced availability of blood for the brain that leads to diminished attention. Sleep was

postulated to follow such changes in blood flow. Hammond, but even earlier Thornton, pointed out a clear sequence for the standard loss of sensations as we go to sleep, with touch being the last of the sensations to go.

Both Thornton and Hammond stated that as early as the time of Aristotle it had been pointed out that some people have ability, some of the time, to be aware during a dream that they are actually dreaming. Rationality is only partly suspended during dreams, at least for some. Mysticism has always clouded observations of dream and sleep phenomena and there has probably always been a belief in morbid, prodromal, or predictive dreams that suggest an early awareness of the onset of disease. Thornton discussed some of these, even the sense of a presence in the room while still in the awakened state; a phenomenon now called "*anwesen heit*," or "*the presence*." The phenomenon is common in conditions such as Parkinson's disease, and may occur during phases of the dream-wake state. Hammond emphasized differences between sleep and stupor and studied these by noting similarities between these and the effects of opium.

A small dose of opium can act as a stimulus to produce an apparent increase in the active cerebral circulation with a feeling of rapidity and brilliance of thought. A larger dose induces sleep and was claimed to reduce the amount of blood in the brain. This was more theory than scientific observation, of course, but was also the accepted concept about opium in Thornton's time. Thornton expressed similar views in his early writings, and specifically mentioned opium as a drug to study. From his journals as a student we know he had had personal experience with opium. With regard to alcohol there are statements by Thornton that alcohol also stimulated in small doses, but reduced cognition and induced sleep in larger doses.

Darwin described the phenomenon of "sleep paralysis," the peculiar phenomenon of a feeling of an awakened state with associated temporary paralysis. This syndrome was not reviewed by either Hammond or Thornton, but variants of coma certainly were discussed by both men. Thornton collected cases of apparent recovery from suspended animation.

(10) Thornton recorded numerous instances of apparent resuscitation or recovery from the dead, "*suspended animation*" he called it, in both humans and animals, including that of Arabella Churchill, the sister of the Duke of Marlborough. These interests surely reflected his interest in resuscitation and

his earlier membership in the Humane Society of England. He was alert to any case reports that offered support to his views and included several specific cases with his papers. A letter from William Knight to Commodore William Bainbridge is included in the files as of July 19, 1826, the report of a sailor named Robert Clarke who became “*seriously affected with the yellow fever, and was sent out to the hospital tents, situated in the woods, about half a mile westward of the town.*” A few days afterwards the surgeons reported that Clarke was dead and preparation was made for an immediate internment. The loblolly boy, whose name was also Clarke and who had come from the same hometown in New Jersey, begged that the burial be postponed until morning. The request was granted and the supposedly dead man was placed in a coffin with the lid laid partly on. In the morning the lid had been moved, and life had been restored. The sailor eventually returned to active duty. Thornton recorded at the end of the letter: “*Reflection. This case furnishes the proof that the poor sailor would have been buried alive, if his friend had not been gratified by the delay of the funeral till morning. So numerous indeed are the instances of the dangerous precipitance of hurrying the apparent dead to the grave, that common humanity calls for legislative interference, for the horribly appalling circumstance of being buried alive ought not to be permitted through ignorance, through inattention, or brutality.*” He gives several other examples of people who appeared dead but were not. The fear of being buried alive was common, and the concept of waiting to be sure decomposition has begun before internment was widespread enough that George Washington left orders requiring several days to pass before his own burial.

Thornton sustained interest in resuscitation all his life. Included in the papers there is preserved a letter to him from William Turk, a surgeon in the Navy, reporting a seaman named Kimball who had been declared dead and who seemed to have awakened out of death, as if from sleep. Kimball may have had a condition like tuberculosis, since he had bled from his lungs on several occasions. Weeping shipmates were already making preparation for burial when Kimball awakened and discussed in an eloquent fashion “*the necessity of reaffirmation and penitence. His language seemed scholarly, not at all in his normal fashion, and the surgeon felt it was necessary ‘to admit the supernatural agency.’*” However, Kimball went ahead and did unequivocally die within 24

hours, although when committed to the ocean the body “*rose perpendicularly from the water, breast high, two or three times.*”

Thornton included clippings in his papers of various reports of resuscitation of fish following freezing and of course again comments regarding the death of Washington and the efforts that could, and should, have been made for resuscitation at that point. In his notes he mentions that Franklin, in Paris, showed him frogs that had been entombed in rocks “*for a long period of time.*” Really?

(11) The medical man in Thornton was intrigued by the relative roles of the brain and of the spinal cord. In 1822 Thornton wrote to John Thornton, no apparent kin, who was stated to be living near Fredericksburg, Virginia. William Thornton was engaged in writing a philosophical paper, “*in which I wish to show that the mind resides in the brain, and remains perfect when even deprived of all the aids of the nervous system and the rest of the body and I remember a case which will completely lucidate my position.*” Thornton was referring to “*your excellent lady’s first husband,*” who was reported to have lived for several years in a “*state wherein there was a complete separation between the nervous system of the brain or head and the rest of his body while he retained his senses perfectly. Every part of his body below the neck was perfectly insensible and he continued in this state for many years.*” Thornton seemed fascinated by the fact that the “*involuntary motions of the body,*” including the digestion of food and evacuation, continued as usual, even though the rest of the body was insensitive to heat, cold, pressure, or even cuts. Thornton requested information regarding the accident which may have “*deranged the spinal marrow or nerves of the neck and whether it was produced suddenly or gradually, whether the body wasted, whether the memory remained good and also one or more details about his age, constitution, etc.*” There is no record that this case was ever summarized back in response to the letter from Dr. Thornton, but it sounds like an early case of paraplegia secondary to injury since a fall was mentioned in the letter. It probably was not the even more severe “*locked in*” syndrome seen with brainstem damage.

(12) Thornton experimented with sheep on his farms, and he was a scientific farmer who wrote extensively about the cultivation of crops, but he received no public notice for these efforts. He was elected into the Physiological

Society in recognition of his early work on language. Near the end of his life Thornton received another honor that Mrs. Thornton acknowledged by sending a copy of this work, *Cadmus*. On November 4, 1826, Thornton received a letter from H.B. Latrobe that the Board of Managers of the Maryland Institute for the Promotion of the Mechanic Arts had unanimously made him an honorary member of the institute in view of his scientific achievements. It seems possible that the Latrobe family, once his adversaries and now reconciled, initiated the award.

For some gentlemen of the time, including luminaries such as Sir Isaac Newton, religious ideas were just as worthy of scientific study as were plants, humans, or nature. Was this also true of Thornton? Probably it was not. Mrs. Thornton felt obliged to defend her husband's religious views, however, and it is clear from his papers in the Library of Congress that he did review and copied many religious texts and wrote extensively of God, and manifested at least verbal reverence. In his last year he did attend church often. She stated after his death: *"He had some religious opinions peculiar to himself and many, in consequence of not having his doctrine fully explained which it was his intention to have done in a work he had begun and for which he had collected many interesting documents, thought him most erroneously an unbeliever, but never was there a greater mistake! He was a Christian and a pious man – and a will written in haste in 1814 he says 'First I recommend my soul to God in great humility, and hope through the merits of Jesus Christ for salvation'. He seldom laid his head on his pillow without addressing his prayers to the Almighty, and often entreated me not to neglect to do so, saying that if I did I should repent it on my deathbed. The reverence for the works of the deity was unbounded and his love of knowledge so great, that his expansive mind sought it in the bowels of the earth and the heavens above as may be seen in many essays left behind him. The smallest insect, the noblest animals were objects of his research, and his philanthropy led him to try for all the good he tried to do during his life of trial and disappointments."*

What were the trials and disappointments Anna Maria might have listed along with his accomplishments? This clever man had produced an *"accumulation of interest of debts,"* and we know he had problems with Blodgett and others regarding money. There was controversy after his death



regarding financial decisions he may have influenced while commissioner, chief of patents, or as member of the bankruptcy commission. She also commented on his involvement with Mr. Laws, and the trouble generated by his attempts to be impartial, and his refusal to approve improvements requested for an area near Mr. Laws' property. She comments that he had to sell a *"beautiful little estate"* in Lancaster, England, to pay for the debts incurred by the deception of others, including by Blodgett, and the loss of lawsuits in which *"contrary to all equity"...* *"justice was decided against him."* A patch of land near the current Watergate apartments she felt was rightfully his, he had planted over a hundred saplings on that plot of land. Others in Washington disagreed, and the land was awarded to the Government.

In these writings after his death Mrs. Thornton sustains her unbounded enthusiasm for her husband's creativity. *"He was told by a member of congress 'that he lived a hundred years too soon' – his views being too extended, his plans too vast to be embraced by men generally – a few, very few, meeting and esteeming his liberal ideas and noble plans. This search after knowledge was perhaps too general, as it embraced almost every subject, had his genius been confined to fewer objects, had he concentrated his study to some particular science, he would have obtained greater celebrity by becoming more deeply learned in some particular branch, where he could have obtained perfection in any art of science had he given up his mind solely to one pursuit."*

It is hard with this man, this "good doctor" neighbor of Adams, to be certain exactly what among his many projects did interest him the most. Science and writing would clearly be high on the list. His marriage was a success. He obviously had a devoted wife and he was always an active participant in the good marriage despite the fact that he had to live with his mother-in-law almost all his married life. There is no evidence in the papers that he had children, nor indeed that he had dealt much with children. There is, however, one remarkable letter in Thornton's papers addressed to Thornton's wife from her neighbor, Louisa C. Adams, the wife of John Quincy Adams: *"Permit me my dear madam to congratulate you on the birth of your infant and at the same time to request you to accept a small testimony of esteem and regard from she who has ever felt honored by the friendship of your family. Allow me to subscribe myself as your friend, Louisa C. Adams."* Was there a child who didn't survive, or one that was

handicapped and placed in a home such as the one Anna Maria often supported? That seems very unlikely. Was the child that of a servant? Was this a part of their personal history, sorrow or even shame, erased from the tapes by Mrs. Thornton herself? She was devoted to the local orphanage, and for her entire life was a regular contributor to it. It seems most likely that this baby was a godchild, one of her women friend's children. One of the young Bayard Smith girls was named Anna Maria, and the initials A. M. S. appears often in later years as a visitor to Mrs. Anna Maria Thornton.

Thornton grew, in his marriage and in his views of the world. His views on women underwent change in his lifetime, as is true of many, and he was able to write such things as: *"The most rigorous dispatch of all tribunals not only sanctions the extension of the sphere of duty, but invites woman to enter the corridors of literature and science. The needle is no longer the only implement by which she can beguile her leisure or sustain her family. The pencil, the brush, the pen have become familiar to her hands."*

The desire to patent, to invent, and to discover was integral to Thornton throughout his lifetime. Surely some of his inventions were potentially useful, even if none were ever to be successfully exploited. For example he patented a new boiler and a working still on October 18, 1802, one that was further improved in 1807. He patented additional improvements in boilers on January 16, 1809. These may reflect a particular interest in *"ameliorating spirits"* and wine, and he did patent a new concept about how to produce both of these on September 7, 1809. He developed an improvement in firearms, with loading at the breech, patented jointly with John S. Hull of Harper's Ferry, on May 21, 1811. He patented an application of steam for powerboats on December 23, 1814, and later offered improvements for cooling water on July 31, 1827, plus a plan to shape glasses for telescopes. He drew pictures and then tested a gun powered by steam, a variety of machine gun, efforts that are a bit reminiscent of similar efforts of Fulton at about the same time.

Thornton naturally gravitated toward scholars and innovators, not just toward politicians. Mrs. Thornton said: *"He was a sincere friend, and as far as his means would allow a patron to all artists, and could he have gratified his wishes would always have had one or more under his roof; several have at different times made his house their home for weeks and months together. He had a great taste for*

*paintings as the beautiful specimens of drawings and painting he has left will testify.”* But then, again, she felt she had to dispose of most of them.

Thornton had the farm where he performed agricultural experiments, and he possessed part ownership of a racetrack, house, and numerous lots, and he had once prepared a design for a garden for the front of the President’s house. He clearly cared a great deal about the district as a whole and was probably the Commissioner who saved L’Enfant’s concept of sweeping avenues and petit parks. Thornton was one of many who noticed changes in the Potomac, “*The banks of the Tiber and Potomack 30 years ago afforded the most delightful and umbrageous walks.*” As mentioned earlier, in one of his novels he quotes a character in several different ways: “*I never wander over the beautiful environs of our infant metropolis and mark the changes which its extension and improvement occasion, without feelings of poignant regret.*”... “*He grieved as much as anyone about the depredations of nature that seemed necessary to build the new Federal City.*”

Thornton adds elsewhere: “*These hard improvements, as some romantic tourist calls them, are fast sweeping away the natural and picturesque beauties of the scene; no spot in our widely extended country is secure from the intrusion of business and all its turmoil and disorder. Majestic and solitary forests are leveled before the march of improvement. Rugged rocks and roaring cataracts, robbed of all their beauty, are made subservient to the cupidity of man. Winding streams are diverted from their wandering, through grassy plains or shady valleys into straight canals, and go where we will, from the western mountains to the Atlantic shores, we find the most sacred haunts of nature disturbed and deformed by this progress of civilization as it is called. Cannot this be affected without the destruction of the noblest and loveliest work of nature? My heart aches when I recall the needless destruction of woodland scenery which has taken place around Washington. The capital hill was covered with majestic and venerable forestries which had they been preserved would have made a more beautiful park than any city in Europe can boast.*”

What finally happened to William Thornton and to his beloved and trusted Anna Maria? Even the reason for the death of William Thornton is a bit confused. The doctor that he contacted suggested the use of calomel, opium, bleeding, plus a mercury administration, all to be given for possible gallstones.

We assume that in his last illness Thornton was not foolish enough to try all of that, nor to use the “*lancet*” that was also suggested. The physician to whom Thornton wrote, a Dr. Barber, seemed primarily interested in help from Thornton at the Patent Office for his own invention regarding speech training, and the doctor even requested secretarial help to prepare the patent request.

When Thornton died in March of 1828, Anna Maria still had her mother left to comfort her, as well as to attend to, and numerous friends that she mentioned in the following decades. At the time of his death there were memorial tributes from the Colonization Society and the Colombian Institute and William Thornton, M.D., was honored with burial in the Congressional Cemetery. We don't know, however, exactly why he died. He had had repeated fevers on Tortola. It is suggested in several of his letters that he had a painful illness. On several occasions there was chest pain recorded, so cardiovascular disease may have played a role in his decline and death. Leukemia and cancer was mentioned by earlier biographers, but certainty is lacking; and we cannot ignore the possibility of a chronic infection such as malaria, perhaps dating from his time in Tortola.

After Thornton's death there were possessions that could be sold. Henry Clay bought one of Thornton's horses. A horse named Duchess of Marlborough brought Anna Maria \$2500, “\$1000 less than I expected” she wrote. She sent engraved portraits of Washington, Hamilton, and Adams to exhibition rooms to be sold and expended much note paper, money, and energy trying to recoup a reward from the deeds to the North Carolina lands which dated back to the ill fated gold mining times. At his death there were 20,000 bricks left over for some unknown cause, bricks she could sell for only a few dollars. She carefully inventoried all her possessions, which included much silver and nice pieces of furniture. Already during the year William died, 1828, she tried to rent or sell Park Grove, the farm in Maryland.

By 1831 she was clearly lonely, “*Three years since William's passing. We are particularly forlorn at Christmas, when families unite together at this time, as we have no family to unite . . . Christmas is only a festivity for children and servants it seems to me. I resume the church history which I was reading with my poor husband and have not had the resolution to begin again . . . and did not now, without tears. Mama remembered it and spoke of it as appropriate to the day. I got it and read all evening.*”

She commented wistfully that Thornton would ordinarily write a small verse for his newsboy for the holidays, one the newsboy could offer at the doors of his patrons, in hopes of a Christmas gift. For years she copied down, in her beautiful handwriting, published poems and recorded a few of her own original poems. She made formal efforts to get the authorities to install a memorial bust of William Thornton in the Patent Office, or at least a plaque, but President Van Buren and others would not act on her request. She filed a lawsuit to reclaim Kidwell's Flats, now known as the Kennedy Center area, but the property was ultimately held to belong to the United States, which may even be what Thornton, as Commissioner, would have considered the correct decision. She wrote complaints about her husband's always inadequate salary, thwarted dreams, etc.



*Anna Maria Thornton.*

What about the papers? Admiral Henley was a man praised by Thornton for his acquisition of Amelia Island for the United States. Miss Margaret Bayard Smith, Anna Maria Thornton's particular friend, watched her son marry the daughter of Admiral Henley and in turn their son, J. Henley Smith, became the final executor of Anna Maria's estate and the custodian of the Thornton papers. It is from him and the Library of Congress that we have what we do have, perhaps through him we also lost some of the more controversial material. Even more certainly, Mrs. Thornton had already culled a great deal of material. She said so repeatedly in her own notes.

She remained in her home at 1331 F Street for years, but eventually a Dr. Miller, who attended her, was using the largest part of the home with a rental arrangement of \$50 a month. Wharton (page 304) records the house: "... afterwards was the residence of Dr. Thomas Miller, a distinguished physician, who attended so many Presidents that he well deserved the title of 'court physician' laughingly accorded him by his friends." Mrs. Thornton continued for years to live in the house, however, while she still survived as a social arbiter and friend in the women's circles. In the 1840's Anna Maria attended a memorial service at St. John's Church, Lafayette Square, for the widows of

exceptional men. The women were Mrs. James Madison, Mrs. Alexander Hamilton, Mrs. Steven Decatur, and Mrs. William Thornton.

## CHAPTER 14

## Anna Maria Thornton

**Her interests: Friends, society, church, orphanage, literature.**

**Her fierce defense, and help, of her husband as recorded in her notes and diary.**

**Her support, and respect, for her mother, and her description of her mother's decline.**

**Her relationship with the slaves, good and frightening times.**

Anna Maria Thornton was a participant and an observer in the time referred to as “Parlour Politics” by Catherine Allgor. Her neighbors and particular friends included John Quincy and Louisa Catherine Adams, the Richard Cutts family, whose own Anna was referred to by Dolly Madison as her “*sister-child*,” the Madisons themselves, the Smiths, Bayards, Thomas Gallaudet and family, and the Tayloes of the Octagon house, as well as the families of presidents, publishers, military offices, superintendents, and educators. She visited with, and shared tea daily with, the cluster of women so important in Washington society. She knew the Laws and Custis family well, and the Tayloes were particular friends. The family of Tobias Lear, a man who was once her husband’s patient, included her friends. Her ledgers record purchases ranging from coal to shoes for her “*servants*” and her record is meticulous, kept as a diary which mentions “*tea or visit*”, but rarely records conversational topics. She faithfully, if briefly, noted each day’s activity, usually starting with a report of the weather and often just the names or initials of visitors to her, plus a record of the visits she made. She vowed more than once in her diary to stop her recordings. “*Our lives pass one day so much like another, that there is little use in recording its daily events – to myself it is sometimes gratifying to refer to days past – but to others useless – I have for*

*many years kept these memorandums and it has become a habit that I can hardly resign – but why do what will not gratify or serve any one? – notwithstanding I go on!”*

“*Taking tea*” seemed ubiquitous and regular, but she also frequently records the purchase of ale and whiskey. In addition to Colonel Bomford, her advisor and agent, the most frequently recorded visitors in her later years were Ann and Bayard Smith, often to play chess, backgammon, or whist. Walking on “*the avenue*” and church attendance at St. Johns, as well as at the Catholic Church, not uncommonly both visited on the same day, is faithfully recorded each Sunday. When Dr. Thornton was alive she also mentioned his occasional attendance at church with her. Some of the pastors, Bishop Evander Chase for example, seemed to be a favorite although this bishop from Illinois seemed to Mrs. Thornton to have overstepped his bounds when he pleaded for money for religious programs in Illinois.

Mrs. Thornton read a great deal, often aloud to her mother, and favored travel books. Numerous popular novels of the day are mentioned, almost weekly, but they are rarely analyzed in her notes. Indeed, conspicuously absent are her personal feelings about national events, events that were sometimes recorded by her, until the time of her overt anguish in her last years as the Civil War overtook Washington. She details several major trips, twice to North Carolina where she beautifully describes the topography of places such as Pilot Mountain and the beauties of the Yadkin River. She played the organ at the Moravian settlement in Winston Salem, and admired the devotion of the Sisters of the faith. On the other hand, after they visited the area of the potential gold mines in Rowan County, N.C., she stated the Carolina farm fields were untended, the food poor, and she suggested that any future visitors to that part of the South should bring their own sheets - if they desired clean ones. After her husband was dead she went on at least one extensive trip to New England and mentioned her pleasure in visiting with the Adams family and her respectful visit to the gravesite of John Adams.

It is now hard to imagine that she actually visited with all the dignitaries she mentions, but clearly she saw notables such as the Monroes, Madisons, Generals Jackson and Taylor, and saw them almost weekly. Earlier she joined her husband in extended visits to Mt. Vernon, to Monticello, and to Madison’s



home at Montpelier. The drawings Thornton did of Monticello and of Montpelier were given to the Smith family as Mrs. Thornton liquidated her possessions, but she also later sold a remarkable list of his painting and artifacts. She maintained her keen interest in some events, from a meteor shower one night, to the legendary large cheese at Jackson's inaugural party. She described the crowd at that near riot, her outrage at that behavior, and she did sample the cheese that weighed 1,400 pounds. She fails to tell us just how it tasted.

As with any successful widow of the time, of any time perhaps, there were numerous social events she was interested in, but often chose not to attend. She enjoyed plays and pageants and usually commented on the actors. She cared less for the famous Fanny Kemble than for Mrs. Wilnot, who was in the same production. Perhaps Fanny Kemble's strong abolitionist views influenced Mrs. Thornton just a bit. National events, inauguration parties, and her visit to the opening of Corcoran House and its Art Gallery are documented. She found two of the rooms in the Corcoran Mansion to be "*splendid.*"

Unfortunately, and reflecting her age, as well as both her circle of friends and her personal interest, deaths and funerals appear almost weekly. Babies and young women died, several of the "*Marys*" she visited with regularity died young, of consumption. Cholera killed quickly and was always feared, and pneumonia and influenza were common. In her time children died of chicken pox, and deaths from obscure "*fevers*" were common. She often attended the funerals, but when she couldn't, or wouldn't, she might send her empty carriage as a sign of respect to the deceased. She herself often visited with her ill friends, and records these times, and both she and her mother received regular visitors when they themselves were ill.

*"Wed 12<sup>th</sup> Drizzley Col. B called a moment- Mrs. Chew of Phila – whom we have not seen for many years, called with Miss C. Mason – She was here when we knew her a very pretty girl – she is now a plain old lady! – after dinner rode out – called at Mrs. Thompson's - I went to Mrs. Cottinges a few minutes - read – Maria in one of her airs again – she made me so nervous I could not sleep until quite late.*

*Thursday 13<sup>th</sup> Cloudy Mr. Griffin called and closed the sale of S. Eclipse to Mr. J. Enster. Paid \$400 and a note at 15 months for \$400 – I ought to have had 1000\$ for him. I wrote to Mr. Bails - and to Mr. Gould – sent the carriage*

*to the funeral of poor Mrs. Rankins daughter – Her son and daughter and old nurse all died within a few weeks – The daughter of consumption – Rode afterwards – returned to tea – a gust in the evening”*

Another representative note: *“Received a letter yesterday saying that the Horse Richmond is dead – I had sold him for 300\$ but the man would not give his notes as he said the horse died before the contract was completed – This is a great loss – but I try not to think or care for these primary vexations – great losses make us not feel small ones so severely – I hope and trust we shall have enough, notwithstanding the great debts that we are to pay, to make us independent – or not dependent. I hope in time I shall become quite a philosopher – or rather – a resigned Christian.”*

The next day she says:

*“Sat 26<sup>th</sup> Fine day – Mrs. Seaton sent us some fine pears in return for some figs – I went to see Mrs. Tayloe, Custis, Rush, - & Adams. Mrs. Adams showed me how to do the border of the Quilt – she looks better than I expected.”*

Then follow comments regarding troublesome debts and a report of a visit by Col. Bomford, her formal advisor.

Having rejoiced in the recent marriage of one of the Peter girls to Captain Beverly Kennon, Anna Maria grieved with others only a short time later when the “Peacemaker” gun exploded on board the USS Princeton and killed him, as well as the Secretary of State and the Secretary of the Navy. Her notes were, as usual, brief, and what follows are several typical ones:

*“Dec 9, 1843 We were invited to the marriage of Miss Britannia Peter with Capt. Kennon last night – but were prevented from going by the rain - it had rained all day – and poured in the evening. It was a great disappointment.*

*Dec 10 We went to visit the Bride (Mrs. Kennon), a fair day and made another visit. General Harrison (president), Mr. Fountain, Vice Pres Gen Macomb – Mrs. Tyler wife of president Tyler. Mrs. Webster’s father – Mrs. F. Webster’s father – all died.*

*Mr. Spencer (Sect of War) son was hung for mutiny on board the Somers. Mr. La Gris (Sect of State) . . . General died at Boston. Mr. Wickcliffe stabbed (but not killed) by Mr. Gardner’s son (supposed to be deranged) . . . .*

*1844 Wed the 28<sup>th</sup> of February. A large company of Ladies and Gentleman collected on board the steam frigate Princeton, by the invitation of*

*Capt. Stockton. On returning from their sail down the river the Great gun (which he had called Peace Maker) on being fired the third time burst – and killed Mr. Upsher Sect of State, Mr. Gilmer Sec of the Navy, Capt. Kennon (head of a bureau), Mr. Maxey late a minister; Mr. Gardner a gentleman of New York who had come with his admired daughter on a short visit to the city and a colored man in the Presidents service besides wounding several sailors very seriously, and giving a severe concussion to Mr. Senator Beaton and Capt. S – who are both unwell in consequence – The President (Mr. Tyler) and Mrs. Madison were of the party. – The particulars are stated in so many various ways that it is impossible to give them all – the fatal event is however certain – and the grief of the foundlings (all were married) and friends very great - Their bodies were all taken to the Congress burying ground on Saturday the 1<sup>st</sup> – The march attended by military companies and persons of all ranks and degrees.*

*Tho there were five hearses, followed by mourners and pallbearers, the distraction of mind produced by the general procession and crowd of people witnessing it, prevented the deep feeling that is produced by a single funeral from a great house and conducted with solemnity.*

*One hearse was empty, Mr. Maxeys remains having been taken to his home at West River Maryland”.*

The biggest anguish, other than deaths of her husband and then the lingering illness and death of her mother, was undoubtedly the tangle of debts, lawsuits, and property rights she discovered after her husband died. Because of these, and in order to survive financially, she had to sell lots, pay unexpected taxes, and get help wherever she could. She rented homes, struggled to collect the rent, and she also hired out her slaves for income and in her effort to keep them busy. At times it was hard to keep warm, coal was expensive, and water froze in the house. Several of her favorite horses, including Eclipse and Richmond, are mentioned specifically along with her sorrow at their loss.

Her mother is a major figure on essentially every page of her diary. She described her mother as still “*remarkably beautiful*” at age 80. Nevertheless, Mrs. Brodeau appears for over 18 years in the notes largely as “*Mama not well*” or “*Mama with a headache,*” or just “*Mama ill.*” Even when she was “ill”, mother did bake cakes and tarts, and for years she served, or read, or joined in the card games. Finally, however, Mrs. Thornton had to read to her mother,

rearrange rooms for her mother's comfort, and finally began to leave parties early "*since mother feels unwell.*" The two usually traveled together, and visitor's letters, for example the published letters of Margaret Bayard Smith, usually mention them both. Eventually, however, the frequent headaches and then the dizziness of February 27, 1835 was followed on February 28<sup>th</sup> by a cerebral vascular accident that produced paralysis of Mrs. Brodeau's right arm along with difficulty with speech and problems with swallowing. After this, Mrs. Thornton would still occasionally "*walk on the avenue,*" but she always assured that someone remained with her mother. Mrs. Brodeau died quietly in her sleep on July the 4<sup>th</sup>, and her daughter never failed on each of her subsequent notes for every July 4<sup>th</sup> to mention her pain at the loss. Despite Dr. Thornton's strictures against bleeding, after his death both Mama and Mrs. Thornton were bled, leached, and cupped repeatedly for their numerous illnesses.

Visiting was a remarkably large part of the activities of the women's group, so it is no surprise to read of a "*call*" on Mrs. Thornton by judges, generals, and even by presidents. Jacob reports: "*She described visits to and from the local Law, Peter, and Dorsey families as well as most members of official society. Between bouts of baking (during which she seemed continually to run out of raisins) and attending funerals, Mrs. Thornton gave dinner parties or dined out sometimes every night of the week. Guests and hosts included members of all three branches of the government, foreign ministers, the Smiths, The Tayloes, and the Ogles. In one week in 1803, the Thorntons were the guests of President Jefferson, Vice President Burr, and Secretary of the Treasury Albert Gallatin.*"

Even in her later years, while boarding at Kalorama, she recorded visits with General Winfield Scott who had briefly rented from her, and whose campaign for the presidency keenly interested her. So many of her friends died young, and she herself lived so long, that it perhaps is no surprise that death of acquaintances does appear over and over in her notes. Several wistful poems are included in her papers, particularly one about three young women named Mary who died about the same time from consumption. She also recorded the deaths of "*my oldest friends,*" and of Mr. Peter at over 95, as well as the deaths of Hoban and Fulton, both old competitors of her husband. In her diary she records a few current events she witnessed, such as her one time neighbor John Quincy

Adams turning, with difficulty, the first spade full of dirt to inaugurate the Ohio and Chesapeake canal. The canal never reached the Ohio River as Washington had dreamed, but remains as a much beloved park and jogging path for later presidents and residents to enjoy.

Her account books in later years still recorded purchases, even of a piano – but far more the diary in later years recorded the release of horses, sale of lots in the city, a few dollars obtained by sale of paintings and medals, desks or furniture, and the various mementos she turned into cash. She occasionally recorded losses – twice a gold pin is missing. Her female servant, presumably Maria, discovered it outside at the front door. A bird that was given to her escapes, but was returned a few days later by “*a little black boy*” and she even records her small reward to the young slave in her account ledgers. She sent off parlor tables to auctions, but also attended many sales and enjoyed visiting shops in the city she always recorded as George Town. Even until her last days she was interested in the Catholic Orphanage and Asylum, and she regularly contributed her widow’s “*mite*” to the poor, and at the same time she quite obviously also worried a great deal about all manner of things, especially her own financial solvency. She probably also helped with support for the Washington Female Orphan asylum, established by her friend Marcia Van Ness after the depredations of the British. (Earman)

*“Col and Mrs B came to tea late – He brought a plan for making a small house for us at Kalorama – I don’t know what to think of it – I should like it – and not like it – everything has its pro and con. My feelings are all alive – and I do not know what to do or what to wish – Every thought of change tho’ I desire it – distresses me – what should I care – where we pass the remnant of our days – if free from want – if in independence we ought to be satisfied. I ought to be and am thankful – protect and direct me, oh my God!” . . .*

*“I find I shall have a great deal more to pay than expected to Mr. Binns - I am very much harassed with all the dreadful suits but what are my troubles to poor Mrs. Rankin who has just lost her only son and her daughter dying in a decline – and she without any resources – and once affluent – her father the late Gustavus Scott one of the Commissioners of the City with my dear husband – he came here rich – bought Kalorama and built the house then in ease and plenty –*

*now his children are poor – and some quite destitute! Oh how thankful ought those to be who are not dependent.”*

Finally, after she discovered she can't sell her own home since her deceased husband had promised it away, but she can rent it, she decides to move. She looks at a house, finds it cramped and damp; and then chooses to spend her last days as a boarder at Kalorama, the estate she had visited so often when it was the elegant property of Joel Barlow, and also when it was the home of Gustavus Scott, the Commissioner with her husband. *“Nov 19, 1844 I went to Kalorama and staid late Saturday Morning – I have given up housekeeping and let the House to Mrs. Talbot, I remain with her this winter – what the Spring will produce – who knows – whether I have done right or wrong I can't tell – but I am at any rate relieved from the trouble of providing - Maria and Nelly I have let to go themselves. I gave them some articles to begin housekeeping.”* Her writing in her last years became more and more illegible, but she continued to record some of her concerns. Finally in her last weeks her diary is silent.

The notes, and those of her husband that she chose to keep as well as some she once wished to publish, are not complete and there are particularly obvious omissions between 1816 and 1827. It seems probable that those days of turmoil for her husband produced notes she preferred not to leave us. Later, as a healthy younger widow, she always retained what she called “worries.”

*“Jan 1, 1842 This year commences auspiciously as regards the weather- a beautiful bright day and all the people are gay and stirring – The president's house overflowing – many not able to gain entrance, and those that do in fear of being crushed to death – or of losing a limb. Mr. & Mrs. Adams, Mrs. Madison, some of the Secretaries and many private families receive company –and provide ample refreshments. We hope this will be a propitious year – tho the prospect in some respects is a little gloomy, as it is said we have an empty treasury to begin with . . .” . . .*

It is impossible to avoid the issue of slavery in her notes, certainly impossible for us in our own time. When the innumerable fires are recorded we can assume that wooden structures and open fires were most often the cause, but she, and even more her mother, usually feared “incendiaries,” possibly black ones, had deliberately set fires. *“Four fires this week - two stables and a carriage making shop with all its contents – and an alarm at Col Kearnes – but*

*soon extinguished – These are supposed to be the work of incendiaries except the last . . . another fire this afternoon and two more alarms.*” Occasionally a slave she acquired on trial didn’t work out, as when a young girl who had “*dirty habits*” was quickly sent elsewhere. Mrs. Thornton did hire out her own slaves, and she awarded to them a portion of the pay received. George, in particular, was valuable to her for many years. He repaired cornices and the frames of doors. He also replaced gravel that had been dug out of the lots and in the process she noted that George received no help from a man she calls “*an impudent Irishman.*” George also repaired the carriage that often needed attention, and ran errands back to their farm to pick up produce, wood for fires, etc.

Mrs. Thornton called George “*invaluable,*” but there was a rocky time for her even with the one she called “*good George,*” particularly when his wife was set free by another master and the wife came to live in Georgetown. There was renewed stress when two of his children died. He seemed “*overly slow*” to return back from Georgetown on those occasions. George was, as she put it, unable or unwilling “*to work immediately after the deaths.*”

The terrible year of 1835, the year of her mother’s death, saw her facing another problem. Jefferson Morley in an article in the *Washington Post* entitled “The Snow Riot” discussed the incident vividly. His fascinating article related the violent public disturbance to the actions of Anna Maria’s servant Arthur, with turmoil inflamed by frustrated white manual laborers who had lost potential jobs to slaves. Morley suggested the 18 year old slave, Arthur, that even Anna Maria wrote had been spoiled and who was the mulatto son of Maria, her cherished woman servant, may have been the child of William Thornton. Certainly Anna Maria’s mother, who carefully kept details of her own husband’s fate in Europe obscured, also protected Arthur. Arthur had been a difficult youth, even without the alcohol he came to enjoy, and the “good” George once had a physical argument with him. “*Arthur came home this evening from the races with his head cut and much hurt and bruised - sent for Dr. Gauscin who came at last - not being at home - trouble - trouble - trouble.*” On another occasion, and in brief snatches, the notes record “*great excitement...again thinking there is a plot among the negroes.*” In the diary she recorded: “*George putting in panes of glass – he is Jack of all trades. A great storm with*

*him and Nelly and Maria about Arthur – They are violent and unreasonable when in a passion – and who is not ... Mrs. Talbot has a party tonight.” August 1835 Arthur, after alcohol and discussion outside the home about freedom and his rights as a human being, stormed into Anna Maria Thornton’s bedroom, axe in hand. He was restrained by his mother Maria. Arthur was arrested, the riot occurred, and Arthur spent months in jail while scheduled for the gallows. Maria, his mother, was of course extremely distressed, but so was Anna Maria Thornton, who tried to hide the details of the incident from her own mother. Mrs. Thornton offered repeated petitions for his freedom to the court, including to the district attorney, Francis Scott Key. Apparently at Key’s suggestion she wrote a note to request a personal visit with President Jackson. Jackson met with her the next morning, and the President initially stated that he had no authority to pardon Arthur, that she needed to obtain more petitions and signatures from judges suggesting leniency. Finally, and perhaps related, on the same day as the death of Mrs. Brodeau, who had been incapacitated by a stroke, President Jackson did fully pardon Arthur. Mrs. Brodeau died on July 4, 1836, and on July 6<sup>th</sup> Anna Maria wrote: “When my friend returned from the funeral, they brought me word that the president had pardoned Arthur - which certainly was grateful news – but how much more thankful should I have been - had he done so earlier – now I have the painful task of selling him – oh my poor heart – how it has been pained - for months past. Dr. Miller is trying to find some gentleman to purchase Arthur – Maria had a violent fit of crying about his being sold away.”*

What happened to Arthur? Anna Maria Thornton, always a good business woman, wanted to collect \$750 for him, settled for less, and he probably became a servant on a steamboat. And what of Maria, his mother? On Tuesday November 19, 1844, Mrs. Thornton wrote: “*I went to Kalorama and staid till Saturday morning – I have given up housekeeping and let the house to Mrs. Talbot, and remain with her this winter – what the spring will produce – who knows – whether I have done right or wrong I can’t tell – but I am at any rate relieved from the trouble of providing – Maria and Nellie I have let go – to themselves. I gave them articles to begin housekeeping.*”

Mrs. Thornton, who tried to keep her slaves busy and fretted when they were not, noted the death of one of her slaves who was killed by explosives at a



job he was hired out to perform destroyed him. She commented she was unaware of the risks when she sent him.

Her last years were marked by continued uncertainty and loss. She gave up rights to the home she had lived in, for a time did join the Talbot family, and then moved permanently into Kalorama. By that time Barlows' Kalorama had become more of a genteel boarding home than an elegant mansion. She rented there until her last days, and she died there as the Civil War was underway. Kalorama served as an infirmary during the War and Mrs. Thornton mentioned the wounded often in her last irregular notes. She did not live long enough to see Kalorama burn down in 1865. Many of her last, almost illegible, notes express grief about the war, concern for the wounded, and uncertainty for the country. And she never failed to mention her fear of personal indebtedness.



## Chapter 15

## Last Days

William Thornton died on March 28, 1828. Excerpts of his death notice:

*DIED,*

*“At his residence in F Street, after a tedious confinement, by malady, which he bore with unruffled resignation, the high - gifted Doct. WILLIAM THORNTON, one of the oldest and most respectable inhabitants of this City, and who, for many years past, presided at the head of the Patent Office, in the Department of State.*

*Office of Colonization Society,  
Washington, March 29, 1828*

*At a meeting of the Board of Managers of the American Colonization Society, called for the purpose of paying an honorable and merited tribute of repent to the memory of Dr. WILLIAM THORNTON, late one of its zealous and much esteemed members, the following preamble and resolutions were unanimously adopted:*

*This Board having heard with very deep regret of the death of Dr. William Thornton, one of its earliest and most highly valued members, and whose loss must be severely felt by the friends of Africa and mankind:*

*Therefore, Resolved, That, as a tribute of respect to the memory of the deceased the members of this Board will attend his funeral, and that they will wear crape on the left arm for thirty days.”*

**“THE LATE DOCTOR WILLIAM THORNTON**

*The funeral of the late Doctor THORNTON took place last Sunday; and, on that occasion, every honor that could be shown, either by citizens or strangers, to sooth his amiable and bereaved family, and evince the sincerity of public regard for his merits and memory, was manifested. His body was*

*accompanied to the place of interment by the President of the United States, the Heads of Departments, members of Congress, and functionaries of the Corporation. And, on this melancholy occasion, the associates of the Colombian Institute having voted to wear badges of mourning for him, were joined by the medical and other learned societies to which he belonged, and by other respectable citizens, who all discovered unusual sympathy, in paying this last tribute of respect to his remains.*

*Dr. WILLIAM THORNTON was an adopted American citizen. He was born in the British West Indies, in a family affluent and respectable. He was educated in classical learning, and for his profession, in the best schools in Edinburg. Here, after a residence of some years, he took his medical degrees, extolled for gifts and attainments. After traveling subsequently for several years in Europe, he returned in the bloom of manhood, to America; and, having happily married in Philadelphia, this country thenceforth became the land of his choice. During the first Administration, he was introduced to President Washington, whose regard he conciliated, and by whom having been appointed a Commissioner for laying out this Metropolis, and fixing his future residence here, he may be considered one of its founders. As soon as the Patent Office in the State Department became established in Washington, he was invited to preside over its important duties, a function, which, during four successive Administrations, he has ably fulfilled. Dr. THORNTON was distinguished by a clear understanding, a tenacious memory, and exuberant imagination. Highly gifted by nature, those gifts were exalted by an excellent education. His benevolence expanded into philanthropy, was active and boundless. Witness the early, eager, and disinterested efforts of argument and eloquence which are embodied in his memorials, some of which preceded public opinion, and probably contributed to incline its tardy prudence in favor of Greek liberty, and South American Independence. To try, indeed, to do great good to great numbers of unhappy men, constituted the ruling effort of his life. His temperament was highly sensitive, and of course, his character was not exempt from those alloys that are blended with genius, and which we must take with it, or be content to live without it. He was constant and warm in his friendships, open and decided in his enmities. His love of knowledge was great; his love of liberty greater; but his greatest love was that of truth. Truth he incessantly*

*sought, through every avenue of science or literature, and fearlessly pursued through the whole course of his career with unabated ardor. In every relation of social life, and emphatically in all its endearing charities, he was exemplary. In fine, a more fervent patriot and philanthropist never existed; nor a kinder kinsman, more devoted husband, or truer friend.”*

Information about Thornton’s fatal final illness rests largely on the reports of his wife. Thornton sought help from physicians outside of Washington, and was prescribed medicines that included calomel, opium, warm water, bleeding, etc. All of these failed. The long letter from one physician offers little clear insight into the cause of death. At his funeral in March of 1828, Anna Maria was comforted by tributes from distinguished persons representing both the Colonization Society and the Columbian Institute, and Dr. Thornton was assigned an honored place in the Congressional Cemetery, buried under a tombstone designed by his architectural competitor, Benjamin Latrobe. Members of the Colonization Society wore black for a month. Mrs. Thornton summarized her view of why her husband was not more appreciated as she wrote: *“His views were too extended, his plans too vast to be embraced by men generally.”* To survive financially she had to sell beloved statues, engraved portraits of Washington, Hamilton, and Adams, Thornton’s drawings, and all the racehorses. She had to totally discontinue all relationships with the gold mining company, but did get a small amount of money from that venture. Her records were meticulous, and she mentions several times the puzzling bits of property left behind by Thornton that undoubtedly she had to cleaned up, including the 20,000 bricks. In 1828 she tried to rent, then to sell their farm, Park Grove.



William Thornton. (from Stuart)



Mrs. Thornton. (from painting by Wm. Thornton)

Thornton had retained some interest in several separate houses in addition to his own, and for a time Anna Maria rented these to others.

Mrs. Thornton stayed in the same home for almost 35 years after her husband died, even though he had willed it to the Colonization Society. At Kalorama she had many visitors, even prominent ones such as General Winfield Scott, but she was often lonely. She died at Kalorama, and is buried beside her husband in the Congressional Cemetery. Anna Maria and William Thornton left no descendants, but for decades after his death she tried to preserve his memory. She campaigned for her departed husband, proposing one or another honor or recognition, and often restated in her diary the old grievances about his meager salary.

They were a devoted couple for their lifetime together. She was helpful with his writings and his art, and he was loyal to her and to her mother. They were a complex couple for the time, he possibly identified by some as an aristocrat, a gentleman, from another culture, and she as only a social being, but both were sincerely interested in knowledge and deeply committed to the progress of America. Both were talented with words and drawing, and she with music. They were generous to their friends, and consistent in their enmities. For decades the Thorntons, William, and then after he was gone, Anna Maria and Mrs. Brodeau, were fixtures in the heart of Washington as it evolved from muddy streets and marshes toward classical architecture and scholarly attainment. He was a man, and they a couple, that were pleasant to remember, and it is a privilege to have glimpsed the times they experienced through their eyes.

All right, now tell us why he was not more successful. He was a gentleman of the type that valued versatility, and intellectual endeavors. Architect, medical man, scientist, pamphleteer - all of this and more - so why is he not more famous? Lack of focus, perhaps? The same could be said of many similarly cultivated men of the age, even of Jefferson. He had no children to celebrate his name, but neither did Washington. Thornton did contribute to the establishment of an intellectual elite in Washington, but that amorphous contribution is not one that is likely to assure later fame.

Thornton was ahead of his time in multiple areas, but was remarkably thin skinned when he was criticized. His battles with Latrobe and Fulton, in



Kalorama.

particular, may have seemed distasteful to some then, as they do now. Thornton could almost anticipate disagreement, and clearly reacted vigorously when he felt himself attacked. To this physician writer, Thornton's lack of commitment to medicine is a puzzle, even a disappointment. Along with his design for a machine gun, sent to the Secretary of the Navy, Thornton wrote: "*It might indeed appear surprising that a person educated as a Physician, should presume to instruct a soldier in the art of killing - unless it were recollected that a modern Esculapius kills more men than a modern Mars.*" That statement is one more clue. Although he was an exceptionally educated doctor of medicine he never wished to be identified as a physician in the time so many medicines did so little good. Indeed, often did more harm than good.

Thornton was not a native born American, and to some seemed French, overly intellectual, and perhaps aristocratic, or even arrogant. He was often at odds with the ones he needed most to work with, such as other architects, inventors, and government servants. He did become personally aligned with several important politicians, but was insensitive to the political realities they faced, as with his efforts for South America. Thornton was passionate about freedom for slaves, yet depended on them, and freed not a single one. No slaves were freed even at his death, in contrast to even the conservative John Randolph.



*Thornton's tomb. (Courtesy Congressional Cemetery)*

John Quincy Adams and others may have considered Thornton a bit of a hypocrite, as some considered true of Jefferson and Clay, slave owners who wrote ever so eloquently about freedom, and who enthusiastically endorsed Thornton's colonization scheme for freed African - Americans.

Anna Maria Thornton said her beloved husband had an “*unfortunate passion for raising horses.*” Perhaps he also perceived the virtue of drink too much, and not only in his writings. O.K., we can overlook his weaknesses, and



all people do have defects. Thornton was still one of the most creative men of his time. Thornton, with his interest in science, the arts, and inventions, was one of the small band of individuals, men and women such as his wife, who established the infant city of Washington's tradition of learned discourse and public service. He well deserves to be remembered.

He was a lot of fun to read about, and I am glad to have spent time with him. But I do wish it could have been in person, perhaps even sipping some of his homemade Madeira wine, and discussing the day in August 1914 when the British advanced on Washington and he was the only United States official who successfully prevented depredation.

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**About the author**

George W. Paulson, M.D. is Emeritus Professor of neurology at The Ohio State Medical Center. A graduate of Yale and Duke, author of several books about movement disorders and of over 250 medical articles, he is particularly proud of five children, their spouses, and of twelve grandchildren. He is uncertain why William Thornton interested him, but had hoped review of tapes from the Library of Congress, and reports of the times Thornton lived, would make clear who Thornton really was. Perhaps the author should not be surprized that mystery remains.

