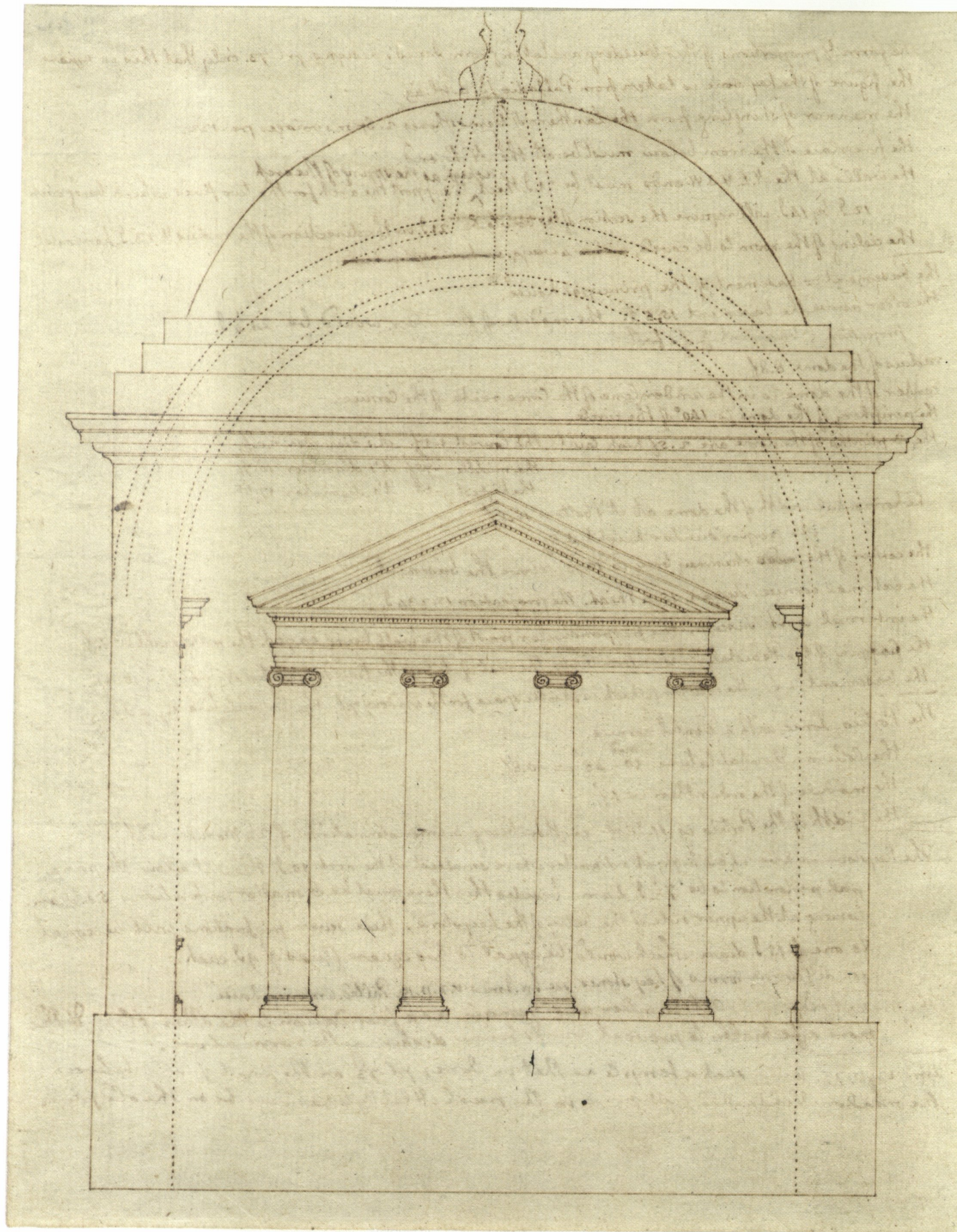




THOMAS JEFFERSON ARCHITECT

Palladian Models,
Democratic Principles,
and the Conflict of Ideals

Lloyd DeWitt
and Corey Piper

CHRYSLER MUSEUM OF ART, NORFOLK

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Jacket illustrations: (*front*) Benjamin Tanner, engraver, *University of Virginia* (detail), 1826 (from an 1824 drawing) (see Nelson, fig. 1); (*back*) Benjamin Henry Latrobe, *View of Richmond from South Side of James River Showing Capitol from Bushrod, Washington*, 1796 (see M. Wilson, fig. 17)

Frontispiece: Thomas Jefferson (American, 1743–1826), Ionic portico and dome, Monticello, probably 1778. Pen and ink. Coolidge Collection of Thomas Jefferson Manuscripts, Massachusetts Historical Society, N91; K62

Page 8: Jacob Caleb Ward, *View of the Natural Bridge, Virginia* (detail), c. 1835 (see plate 13)

Pages 118–19: Benjamin Henry Latrobe, *View of the City of Richmond from the Bank of the James River* (detail), 1798 (see M. Wilson, fig. 1)

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RACE, REASON, AND THE ARCHITECTURE OF JEFFERSON'S VIRGINIA STATEHOUSE

MABEL O. WILSON

While visiting Richmond, Virginia, in 1796–98, newly immigrated British architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe painted two watercolors of the state's new capitol building. His translucent hues in one of the watercolors depicted the stately white stucco-covered brick temple sitting nobly atop Shockoe Hill and overlooking the town's sparsely populated pastoral landscape (fig. 1). One of the earliest examples of American civic architecture, the capitol building was designed by statesman, architect, planter, and slave owner Thomas Jefferson, modeled in part on the *Maison Carrée*, a first-century Roman temple in Nîmes, France. The new capitol building Jefferson envisioned to house Virginia's governmental functions needed to both symbolize and enable the power of "the people" to govern and adjudicate the laws of the new state. Virginia had drafted and ratified its state constitution in 1776, and Jefferson had been a key author. The Virginia document's organization of various governmental functions would become a model for the organization of the United States government. The self-trained architect intended the Neoclassical state capitol to also serve as a model for civic architecture throughout the thirteen states.

In discussing this period of revolutionary action and postrevolutionary planning, it is important to trace the various rationales conceived to identify who comprised "the people" of Virginia, and by extension "the people" of the United States of America. In other words, who were Virginians or American citizens, endowed with constitutional rights, and which people were noncitizens? A survey of the population of the small bustling port town of Richmond reveals the racial contours of this division. The city's white residents, who were America's newly minted citizenry, staffed and served its government seat, patronized its taverns, shops, stables, and inns, profited from its docks along the James River and its warehouses trading in tobacco and slaves, and lived in the wood-frame houses shown in the foreground of Latrobe's watercolor. Among the several thousand white Americans labored



Fig. 1. Benjamin Henry Latrobe (British, 1764–1820), *View of the City of Richmond from the Bank of the James River*, 1798. Pen, pencil, ink, and watercolor. Maryland Historical Society, 1960.108.12.34

an almost equal population of noncitizens, free and enslaved African men, women, and children. Legally defined as "property," the enslaved served their masters and mistresses to produce the region's great wealth that filled the coffers of the burgeoning nation. A depiction of this slave economy can be found among a later series of watercolors painted by Latrobe, produced while the Englishman traveled north to Fredericksburg. One scene documents a white overseer keeping dutiful watch over two enslaved women, who with hoes raised in mid-air tamed the soil and burned tree stumps to clear the land for either cultivation or new construction (fig. 2). Chattel slavery—believed by some to be a necessary evil—clung as the dark underbelly of America's civilized values of freedom, liberty, and equality, which eventually split the United States in half when the Civil War erupted in 1861.

It is critical to consider that enslaved black people, humans classified as property who lacked the proper political subjectivity to be literally (and legally) self-possessed, built several of the nation's important civic buildings—the Virginia Capitol, the White House, and the US Capitol. Designed by white architects, these edifices stand today as Enlightenment monuments to the power of reason and the virtues of equality, justice, and freedom. One astute deliberation about the moral peril of slavery measured against an exegesis on the natural inferiority of the Negro's mind and body can be found in Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), a lengthy assessment of the state's geography, geology, wildlife, human inhabitants,



Fig. 2. Benjamin Henry Latrobe (British, 1764–1820), *An Overseer Doing His Duty near Fredericksburg, Virginia*, c. 1798. Ink on paper. Maryland Historical Society, 1960.108.1.3.21

and political economy. Jefferson wrote and revised *Notes on the State of Virginia* in the same years that he designed Virginia's capitol building.

Born into the wealthy British planter class of colonial Virginia, Jefferson epitomized the consummate humanist polymath. Because his oeuvre encompasses the aesthetic and technical domain of architecture, the political realm of government, and the rational sphere of natural philosophy and history, his works offer an ideal lens through which to understand the intersections of the emerging modern discourses of architecture, nationalism, and racial difference as they coalesced in the late eighteenth century. Analyzing Jefferson's architecture and his writings together with correspondence in this period broadens the social, economic, cultural, and political context in which the first work of American civic architecture—the Virginia State Capitol—was conceived and realized.

RACE, REASON, AND ARCHITECTURE

In the later eighteenth century, slavery was not an odious institution rooted in the remote confines of backwoods plantations. In truth slavery and the slave trade were integral to the formation of the economy, government, and national character of the United States. To be sure many white Americans recognized the enslavement of Negroes, to use a term common of the period, to be undeniably contrary to the nation's founding creed: the "self-evident" truths that "all men are created equal." That equality originated in nature and was necessary for liberty to be achieved were moral principles Jefferson enshrined in the Declaration of Independence (1776). There is, however, an inherent contradiction—some might argue a disavowal—in how the

founding fathers constituted a new nation that ensured liberalism's "unalienable rights" to "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness," while continuing to violently enslave other humans for personal gain.

With nationalism growing in the West in the closing decades of the eighteenth century, Europeans, typically men, continued to conceptualize the racial paradigm of human difference that had emerged from centuries of contact with and colonial expansion into Asia, Africa, and the New World. The inauguration of the transatlantic slave trade in the fifteenth century was critical to the invention of racial hierarchies. During the Revolutionary period and shortly thereafter, "race" had not yet been categorized in terms of biologically verified variations in the human type organized on a hierarchy of mental and physical evolution, as would happen under the disciplines of modern science in the mid-nineteenth century.

As the West shifted from a Judeo-Christian cosmology of heavens and the earth to a humanist worldview, philosophers deployed universal reason to imagine a self-determined and self-conscious moral subject—political Man—who perceived and conceived "the nature of things," including his social relations.¹ Natural rights became foundational for new social formations—nation-states—whose governments, guided by historically derived ideas of democracy, guaranteed freedom for their citizens. At the same time Europeans also invented, to borrow scholar Denise da Silva's term, the "Others of Europe," who were not modern, not rational, not free, not white, and not citizens. These subhumans, often characterized as weak and submissive, labored in the colonies and dwelled in yet to be charted territories.² Europeans consigned the moral and physical character of nonwhite people to the bottom of the repurposed Great Chain of Being. Natural historians and scientists developed representations of time and space in the emerging discourses of history and science that placed nonwhite people in prehistory and in regions unexplored on colonial maps. The rendering of nonwhite people as primitive and uncivilized in turn rationalized the conquest of their territories, the expropriation of their land and labor, or their mortal elimination by war or disease. This racial inferiority, particularly the "Others of Europe's" lack of culture, dialectically elevated and affirmed the universality of Man and whiteness as the ideal representation of the human in the West's own imagination.³

It is important to keep in mind that from the fifteenth century onward, secular reason also had an impact on European "arts of building," on building's transformation from a medieval trade guild to the modern discipline of architecture.⁴ With the rise of academies and learned societies, architectural treatises circulated debates on architecture's appropriate use and proportions of classical elements and the ideal configuration of different building types. New techniques of geometry and cartography influenced modes of architectural representation. The archaeological inspection through drawings of Roman, Greek, and Egyptian ruins and other locales conveyed documentation to amateur architects who could not travel to far-away destinations. A growing interest in mechanics, documented at length

in dictionaries and encyclopedias, advanced new construction methods that separated architecture from engineering. In other arenas, natural philosophers explored Man's capacity for aesthetic judgment to assess what ideal forms were visually pleasing. The taxonomic organizational methods used by natural historians to discern speciation, in particular racial differences, were applied to the study of the historical transformation of buildings to determine character and organization. To begin to chart a history of architecture, architects made comparative archeological, ethnographic, and aesthetic evaluations of how far Europe's architecture had advanced beyond the rest of the world's ancient building practices.⁵

These technical and aesthetic developments gave rise to the figure of the modern architect. At first self-taught elites like Jefferson and eventually European apprentice-trained architects like Latrobe were employed by the state and by private citizens to design the government buildings, offices, banks, customs houses, storehouses, libraries, museums, prisons, great houses, and plantations that symbolized regimes of power and organized the territorial dynamic between the metropole and colony. Jefferson's designs for the Virginia State Capitol reveal the mutually constitutive relationship between race, reason, and architecture.

A PERFECT MORSEL OF GOOD TASTE

In 1776, shortly after the newly formed United States had officially declared independence from the British Crown, Jefferson proposed a bill to the Virginia House of Delegates to move its state capital from Williamsburg, the colonial seat since 1699, to Richmond, a fledgling settlement farther up the James River. The bill to move the capital was passed by the House of Delegates in 1779 shortly before Jefferson became governor of Virginia, a post he held for two years.⁶ Richmond would be more centrally accessible to the state's citizens and representatives, safe from enemy incursion, and navigable by waterway.⁷

Home to a wealthy planter class who eagerly sought independence in stewarding their own affairs, Virginia was one of the most powerful and prosperous of the thirteen colonies. The growing ranks of the English planter class began assembling large tracts of fertile territory in the late 1600s for the cultivation of the colony's main cash crop and export, tobacco. This territorial expansion, a system of land privatization enabled by patents and headrights awarded by the crown, further encroached upon the communal lands of indigenous people—the tribes of the Powhatan confederacy—and pushed them westward into the lands of the Monacan and Manahoac. By the time the Second Continental Congress met in Philadelphia to declare independence from Great Britain in July 1776, Virginia's free white population had grown substantially, along with its population of enslaved black laborers. The latter had been purchased and imported as a labor force to tend the tobacco fields, and, unlike the earlier colonial workforce of indentured Europeans, could be held in perpetuity.

One criterion for choosing the location of the new capital was that it be along a river. Access to the ports and private plantation docks along Virginia's various rivers—the James, York, Rappahannock, and Potomac—were key for the sale of hogsheads of tobacco and their transport to European markets. These and other raw materials fed manufacturers in the North and Europe, forming the backbone of industrialization, which in turn fed the growing European and American demand for luxury commodities. The waterways were also essential for the importation of goods such as salt, fine cloth, coffee, tea, wine, furniture, books, and black slaves from ports in Europe, the West Indies, Asia, and Africa. This mercantile trade, streams in the transatlantic slave trade, created the wealth of the great eighteenth-century Virginia planter families, the Wayles, Byrds, and Randolphs, as well as more modest families like the Jeffersons, Washingtons, and Custises (fig. 3).

The bill to move the capital from Williamsburg to Richmond laid out a plan for the new seat of government. Jefferson's scheme for the civic district of Richmond subdivided several blocks into plots, which were sold at auction (fig. 4). To determine the configuration of the governmental buildings, Jefferson executed the first designs for the Virginia state capitol in 1776, the same year that he drafted the state constitution. He revised the drawings in the period from 1779 to 1780.⁸ In Jefferson's estimation, to adequately house Virginia's government and growing white population, construction practices needed to evolve beyond the erection of crude wooden structures and awkwardly proportioned brick buildings such as those found in the former colonial seat of Williamsburg. "Architecture," he lamented, "seems to have shed its maledictions over this land."⁹ Virginia, however, lacked highly skilled craftsmen and workmen trained to correctly draw and execute the classical orders of entablatures, pediments, and columns. This lack of skilled labor was perhaps an outcome of the fact that one segment of the construction workforce was enslaved. Literacy, especially the ability to write, among the enslaved was discouraged in the pre- and postrevolutionary eras in order to maintain subjugation and suppress revolt.¹⁰

All the components of the new civic order—executive, legislative, and judicial branches—were accounted for in Jefferson's bill and organized in his initial drawings that placed each branch in its own building on Shockoe Hill. In possession of several key folios of Palladio and other volumes on Greek and Roman antiquities, Jefferson had experimented with Palladian

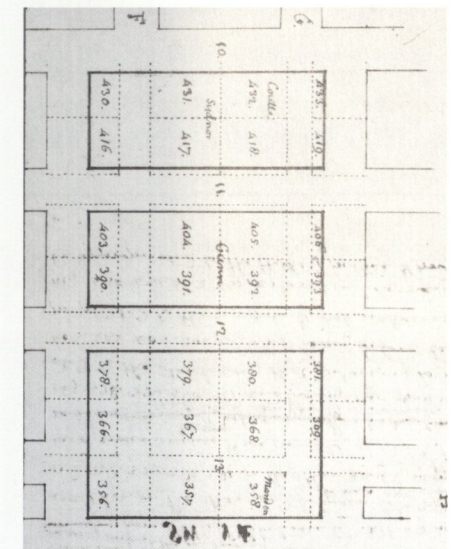
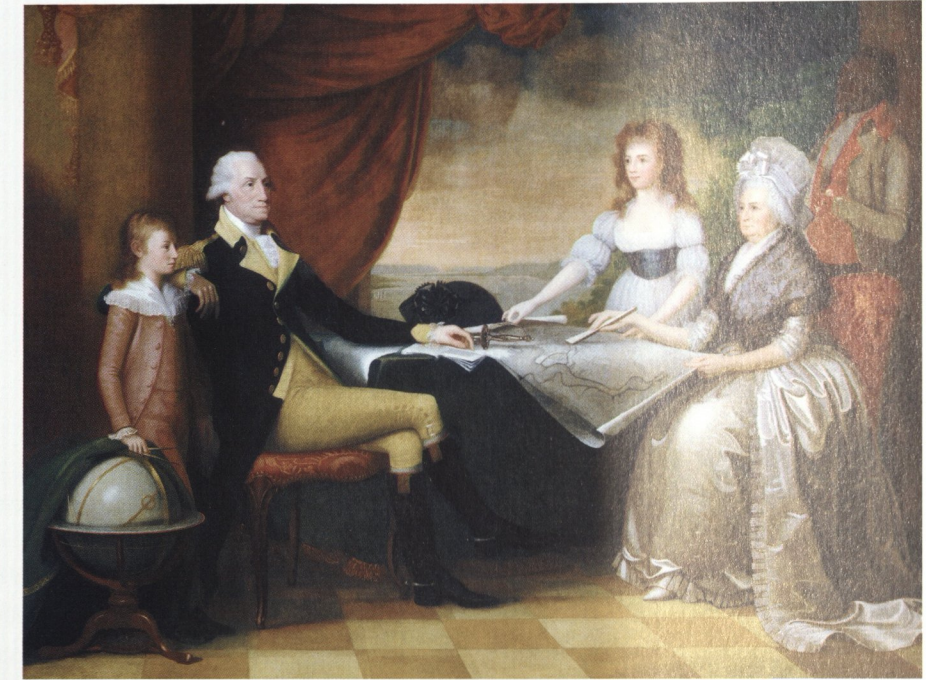


Fig. 3. Edward Savage (American, 1764–1820), *The Washington Family*, 1789–96. Oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Andrew Mellon Collection, 1940.1.2

Fig. 4. Thomas Jefferson (American, 1743–1826), plan of the town, showing 28 lots from which "shall be appropriated ground for the State House, Capitol, halls of Justice, and Prison," 1780. Ink on paper. Huntington Library, CSmH9372

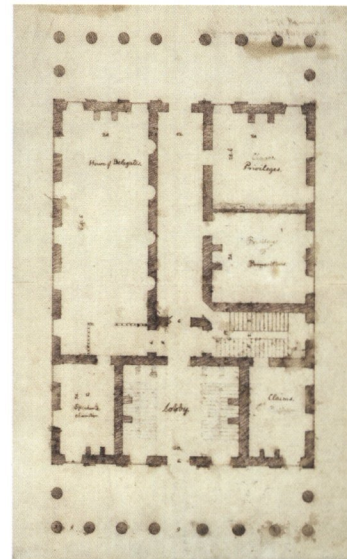


Fig. 5. Thomas Jefferson (American, 1743–1826), first floor of the Virginia State Capitol, 1780. Ink on paper. Huntington Library, CSMH9372

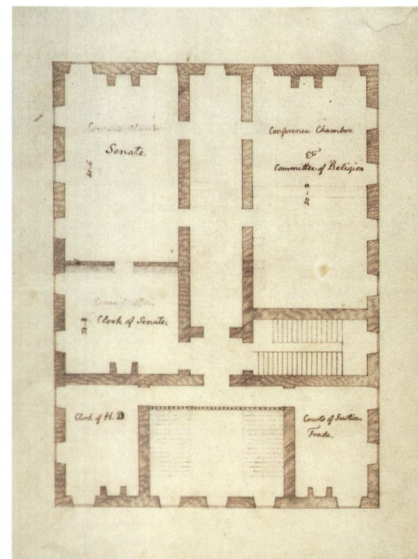


Fig. 6. Thomas Jefferson (American, 1743–1826), second floor of the Virginia State Capitol, 1780. Ink on paper. Huntington Library, CSMH9372

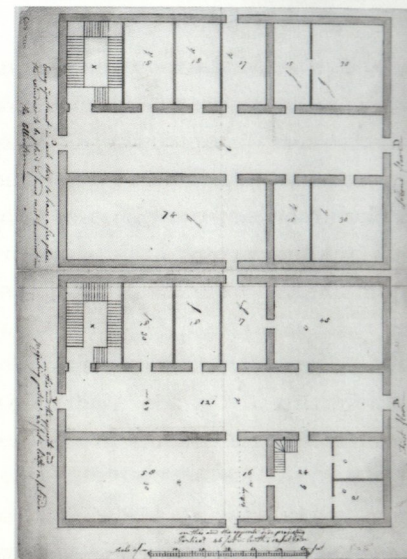


Fig. 7. Capitol, as proposed by the directors, 1785. Ink on paper. Coolidge Collection of Thomas Jefferson Manuscripts, Massachusetts Historical Society, N272; K109

Fig. 8. Charles-Louis Clérissseau (French, 1722–1820), plan of Maison Carrée, Nîmes, in *Antiquités de la France, première parti: Monumens de Nîmes* (Paris: Pierres, 1778), plate 3. University of Zürich

Fig. 9. Charles-Louis Clérissseau (French, 1722–1820), Maison Carrée, Nîmes, perspective view, in *Antiquités de la France, première parti: Monumens de Nîmes*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Pierres, 1804), plate 2. Bibliothèque Nationale de France

Neoclassicism mainly at Monticello, his plantation house under construction in the Piedmont and in unbuilt designs for his alma mater, the College of William & Mary.¹¹ For the state capitol, Jefferson placed the House of Delegates and other offices on the lower level. The Senate chambers, associated clerks, and other legislative functions were located on the upper level (figs. 5, 6). Astutely aware of architecture's ability to project the longevity and stability of the state, Jefferson believed that the new capitol and courthouse buildings should be "built in a handsome manner with walls of Brick, and Porticos."¹² To achieve that desire, he designed Neoclassical exteriors that echoed the Roman republicanism and Athenian democracy that best spoke to the values of liberty and justice.

In 1784 Jefferson was appointed minister plenipotentiary, and the following year he succeeded Benjamin Franklin as ambassador to France, a post he held for four years. During his diplomatic assignment in Paris, where he lived with his two daughters, along with several enslaved Africans he had brought along to tend to their needs, Jefferson was charged with finally completing the plans for the capitol once the land on Shockoe Hill had been claimed by eminent domain.¹³ In the spring of 1785 two of the state government's directors of public buildings—James Buchanan and William Hay—sent for review revised plans for the layout of the foundations, as a means of quelling legislative discontent with the choice of the capitol's site (fig. 7). Buchanan and Hay's pragmatic scheme of a series of rooms divided by a long central hallway lacked the aesthetic vision of Jefferson's skillful plans.¹⁴ They informed Jefferson that to limit the expenditure of public monies, the Virginia assembly wanted all of the government departments housed in one building.¹⁵ Governor Patrick Henry wrote to Jefferson in the late summer of 1785 that a cornerstone had been laid and that foundations of brick, their construction overseen by Hay and Buchanan, were out of the ground, based on his earlier drawings.¹⁶

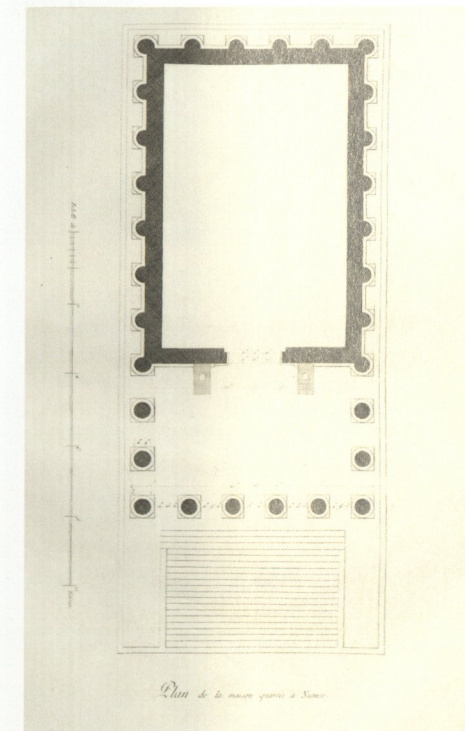
With construction commencing, Jefferson needed to act quickly to refine and complete his designs. To assist with the preparation of drawings

and a model, he secured the talents of French architect Charles-Louis Clérissseau.¹⁷ Jefferson had reviewed drawings of the perfectly preserved Maison Carrée in books and greatly admired Clérissseau's publication *Antiquités de la France, première parti: Monumens de Nîmes* (1778), which he eventually purchased from Clérissseau while in Paris (fig. 8).¹⁸ A skilled draftsman and archaeologist, Clérissseau, with his meticulous orthographic documentation of the temple's details, proportions, and layout, suited Jefferson, who possessed not only the eye of an architect but also the fastidious gaze of a naturalist (fig. 9).

Because the legislators desired to conduct all of the state's business in one structure, Jefferson with Clérissseau revised the earlier plans to place the General Court across from the state's lower chamber of the House of Delegates on the first floor. At the center of the elegantly proportioned two-story court that connected the two chambers, Virginians planned to erect a statue to General George Washington, a former member of the House of Burgesses, which would aesthetically enhance and elevate the environment for civil debate (fig. 10).¹⁹ The second floor housed the Senate chambers and auxiliary spaces for clerks. The new design took advantage of the basilica form, so that the protocols of assembly, deliberation, and adjudication, adapted from the colonial government, operated smoothly.

In a letter to James Madison, Jefferson expressed his desire that Virginia's new capitol building would become a model of architecture worth emulating throughout the new nation: "How is a taste in this beautiful art to be formed in our countrymen, unless we avail ourselves of every occasion when public buildings are to be erected, of presenting to them models for their study and imitation?"²⁰ Jefferson told his friend that for many the Maison Carrée was "one of the most beautiful, if not the most beautiful and precious morsel of architecture left us by antiquity" (fig. 11).²¹ The monuments of antiquity offered Americans perfectly preserved examples of Greco-Roman classicism, an architecture emblematic of truth, justice, and democracy, one that for Jefferson had not been corrupted by the capricious flourishes of the Rococo that suited the tastes of the French aristocracy. He commissioned model maker Jean-Pierre Fouquet to complete a plaster maquette based on his design (figs. 12, 13). In June 1786, he shipped the model along with Clérissseau's drawings to Hay and Buchanan in Richmond.²²

The didactic purpose of this novel design for the capitol building, Jefferson wrote to Madison, was "to improve the taste of my countrymen, to increase their reputation, to reconcile to them the



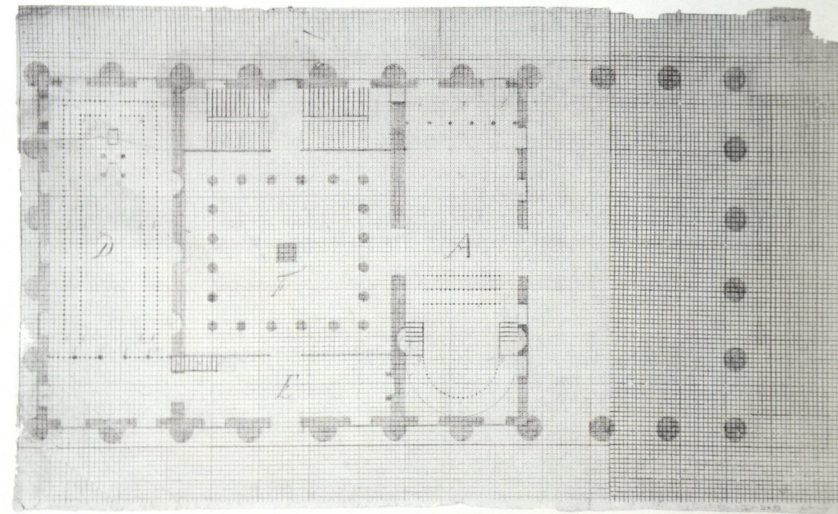


Fig. 10. Thomas Jefferson (American, 1743–1826), plan of Virginia State Capitol, Richmond, 1785. Ink on ruled paper. Coolidge Collection of Thomas Jefferson Manuscripts, Massachusetts Historical Society, N272; K109

Fig. 11. Édouard-Denis Baldus (French, 1812–1889), *Maison Carrée à Nîmes*, 1853. Salted paper print. Chrysler Museum of Art, Museum purchase in memory of Alice R. and Sol B. Frank, 98.9

respect of the world and procure them it's [*sic*] praise."²³ In return for erecting a beautiful work of civic architecture, Americans would gain the regard of the world, which for Jefferson meant it would win the admiration of Europeans. The rationale for replicating historical buildings held in high regard was that it was "very simple, but it is noble beyond expression, and would have done honour to our country as presenting to travellers a morsel of taste in our infancy promising much for our maturer age."²⁴ What he feared most was the prospect of erecting a tasteless "monument to our Barbarism."²⁵ Jefferson hoped that the new capitol building would be a transformative exercise that would seed a new culture and society in the New World, a fecund American civilization. His proposed designs for the Virginia State Capitol would offer an invaluable public primer on how architecture could represent the virtues of durability, utility, and beauty.

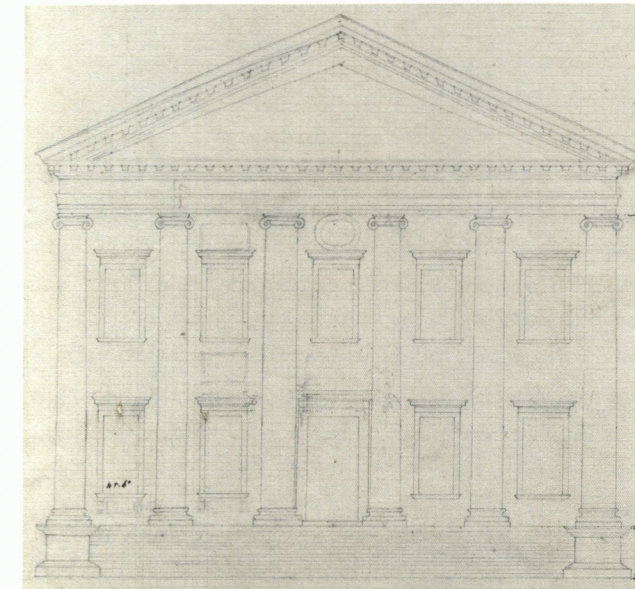


Fig. 12. Thomas Jefferson (American, 1743–1826), Virginia State Capitol, Richmond, end elevation, 1785. Ink on paper. Coolidge Collection of Thomas Jefferson Manuscripts, Massachusetts Historical Society, N279; K116

Fig. 13. Designed by Simone Baldissini, constructed by Ivan Simonato, scale model of the Virginia State Capitol, Richmond (1:66), 2015. Wood, resin, and tempera. Palladio Museum, Vicenza

One challenge faced by Virginians and the new union of thirteen states alike was how to cultivate the character of their new political subjects, "the people." In eighteenth-century Europe and its colonies, refined taste, as in a "morsel of taste," in art, dress, architecture, and even food (fueled by the growing appetite for sugar, coffee, and tobacco), became a marker of elevated intellectual and economic status. But this "culture of taste," writes Simon Gikandi, also harbored "repressive tendencies—namely, the attempt to use *culture* to conceal the intimate connection between modern subjectivity and the political economy of slavery."²⁶ That interdependence between the formation of a new white American culture, one that included the arts of building, and the enslavement of African peoples, justified by their presumed innate mental and physical inferiority, can be found in Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, which he wrote in the same period in which he conceived the designs for Virginia's capitol building.

THE STATE OF VIRGINIA

An esteemed member of the American Philosophical Society and deeply invested in the philosophical tenets and methods of the period, Jefferson took great interest in scientific principles drawn from the careful observation of facts and by the meticulous study of things and phenomena. His command of natural history and natural philosophy birthed *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson's only published book-length manuscript. He printed a private edition in Paris in 1785 that he gave to friends. A public edition was printed in London two years later.

Notes on the State of Virginia originated as a report prepared in response to twenty-three queries sent to Jefferson in 1780 by French diplomat François Barbé-Marbois, who circulated the survey to gain a better understanding of the geographic and historic character of the newly formed United States. Like his surveyor and plantation owner father Peter

Jefferson, Thomas Jefferson was well versed in the geography, natural resources, populations, and history of the state. Unlike standard European accounts that speculated on the New World based on secondhand observations, Jefferson's book was a comprehensive compendium of life in the Americas that originated in the colonies. *Notes on the State of Virginia* contributed to current debates on political and scientific thought.

In *Notes on the State of Virginia* Jefferson took stock of the state's natural features and human inhabitants. In the first part, his taxonomic assessment of plants, animals, minerals, climate, rivers, mountains, and caves highlighted the state's bountiful resources. He noted that natural laws governed the human species residing within the state's boundaries and divided them into the racial taxonomies: *Homo sapiens europaeus*, *Homo sapiens americanus*, and *Homo sapiens afer*. Concerned with the current state of Virginia, the book also reviewed the state's systems and institutions that organized its society, namely its commerce, manufacturing, government, religion, and civil society. Intimately familiar with Virginia's Constitution, Jefferson outlined the government's branches and duties, noting in detail the rights and laws that adjudicated the legal status and relationships, albeit unequally, between the aforementioned races of Europeans, aboriginals, and Africans.

Jefferson provided evidence in philosophy, war, government, oratory, painting, and the plastic arts to show that "America, though but a child of yesterday, has already given hopeful proofs of genius."²⁷ America—its politics and culture—as Jefferson had also assessed in his letter to Madison, was still in its infancy. He was confident that the United States would evolve to rival if not surpass Europe, if the minds and tastes of its white citizenry were properly nurtured, for instance, by exposure to tasteful, aesthetically pleasing architecture of the kind exemplified by the Virginia capitol building. Even though he sought to sever ties with what he believed to be a calcifying European aristocratic culture, Jefferson nonetheless preserved its aesthetic values as a means to foster American culture.

One central tenet espoused by the Enlightenment's natural philosophers was that in nature, all races of the human species had been born equal, a view cherished by natural rights advocates such as John Locke, Montesquieu, and the nation's founding patriarchs, who had constituted the new republic according to principles of equality. What mattered most, however, was the difference in how far each race had advanced to become liberal subjects capable of self-governance, a state of enlightenment dependent upon innate faculties of mind and body. Jefferson countered European philosophes like Georges-Louis Leclerc, the comte de Buffon, by arguing that "before we condemn the Indians of this continent as wanting genius . . . we must consider that letters have not been introduced among them." In other words, American Indians had not yet evolved to a rationalized state of civilization.²⁸ Regardless, almost all philosophers agreed that white Europeans were by far the superior race. They did not agree, however, on Jefferson's rationale that indigenous Americans were superior to enslaved Africans.

The transatlantic slave trade had transported another race to the Americas—*Homo sapiens afer*, Africans or Negroes. For Jefferson, Negroes, because of their naturally inferior faculties, could not be incorporated into the new nation state as citizens.²⁹ In Query 14, "The Administration of Justice and the Description of the Laws," Jefferson sought a political solution to the problem of what to do with the Negro population living in Virginia, the majority of whom were enslaved. On several occasions Jefferson had proposed language in state legislation and in early drafts of the Declaration of Independence that terminated the importation of slaves into Virginia and the United States. (During his presidency he would succeed in 1808 in abolishing the international slave trade, but not its lucrative domestic market.)

Along with political concerns, Jefferson held "physical and moral objections" to the Negro based on a lifetime of observations of their comportment and character.³⁰ Because universal reason relied upon experimentation and observation for the validation of truth, Jefferson's conceptualization of the racial paradigm of human difference found one promising register in skin color. He rationalized that what counted as beautiful could be applied to the breeding of animals and also to the human species—where variations in physiognomy, hair texture, and skin color were visible. Out of all these markers, skin color was the most obvious indicator of racial difference. The origins of the skin's coloration for Jefferson, however, could not be discerned by dissection of the epidermal layers or a chemical analysis of blood or bile. He determined skin color as "fixed in nature" and therefore of divine causation. The aesthetics of blackness, the state of being black, both informed the rationalization of the variations in the human species that divided peoples living on the continents of Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas and affirmed the superiority of Europeans through their whiteness.

Under Jefferson's probing gaze, the features of the black body were seen as less beautiful in comparison to the symmetry and flowing hair of the white physiognomy. The overall lack of beauty in blackness visually and viscerally appalled Jefferson. He verified this by suggesting that even Native Americans had a preference for whites, much like "the preference of the Oranootan [*sic*] for the black women [*sic*] over those of his own species."³¹ To posit black women as subhuman, closer to apes, was based on an early racial theory of polygenesis in natural history, which posited that each race was a different species. This degrading concept had circulated ten years earlier in Edward Long's epic *History of Jamaica*.³² Blackness signified the Negro's subhumanity and validated her ruthless exploitation.

The Negro's inability to appreciate beauty, except in the most sensual manner, or to create works of true aesthetic value, except out of mimicry, also provided Jefferson with additional evidence of their natural mental inferiority. In Query 14 Jefferson surmised that in their ability to remember, blacks were equal to whites, but in their ability to reason and to comprehend mathematics and sciences, they were certainly inferior. "In their



Fig. 14. Thomas Gainsborough (British, 1727–1788), *Portrait of Ignatius Sancho*, 1768. Oil on canvas. National Gallery of Canada, Acc. 58

imagination,” he wrote, blacks were “dull, tasteless, and anomalous.”³³ To affirm the truth of his observations on the inferior minds of the Negro race, Jefferson offered the examples of composer/writer Ignatius Sancho and poet Phillis Wheatley.

Jefferson held nothing but contempt for Sancho, whose “letters do more to honour the heart than the head.”³⁴ Sancho was born on a slave ship en route to the Caribbean and at age two migrated to England with his master. There he cleverly escaped enslavement by entering into domestic service in the households of several aristocratic families. Self-educated, he advocated for the abolition of slavery in a series of letters exchanged with a highly regarded abolitionist that brought him praise. Sancho leveraged his fame to become a well-known actor, playwright, and composer and an acquaintance to many of Europe’s political and aristocratic elites. A celebrity in his right, Sancho sat for a portrait by the great painter Thomas Gainsborough (fig. 14). But in Query 14, Jefferson ranked Sancho, who was the first black person to vote in a British election, at the bottom in comparison to contemporary white men of letters. Jefferson suggested that if Sancho’s works had any merit at all, it was most likely attributable to a white collaborator rather than to Sancho’s own genius.

In Jefferson’s mind, Wheatley possessed the inferior traits of both her race and gender. Wheatley was enslaved to a Boston family at age eight. Her owners named her Phillis after the slave ship that had transported her from the Senegambia to the port of Boston. Yet despite her appalling plight as an enslaved servant, she like Sancho learned to read and write at a young age. She was well read in ancient history and, inspired by the verses of Homer and John Milton, she began to write poetry, publishing a collection in 1773 (fig. 15). One of the few eighteenth-century American women to have been published, Wheatley used her public stature to advocate for American independence and for the natural rights of slaves. She was eventually freed by her owners after her first and only volume was published. Despite Wheatley’s remarkable achievements under the harshest of circumstances, Jefferson believed her incapable of writing poetry, since love for the Negro could only stimulate the senses but not the imagination. He wrote that her poems were “below the dignity of criticism.”³⁵

To answer if the Negro, whether enslaved or freed, had a place in America, Jefferson put forward an emancipation scheme in Query 14. He proposed that enslaved children “should continue with their parents to a certain age, then be brought up, at the public expence [*sic*], to tillage, arts or sciences, according to their geniuses.”³⁶ Once adults, women at age eighteen and men at age twenty-three, they should be colonized to African, Caribbean, or western US territories and supported until they grew in strength.³⁷ To replace the now absent labor force, Jefferson proposed to send “vessels at the same time to other parts of the world for an equal number of white inhabitants.”³⁸ The arrival of European immigrants would realize Jefferson’s vision of a nation composed of white freeholders whose homesteads would expand the nation’s boundaries westward.

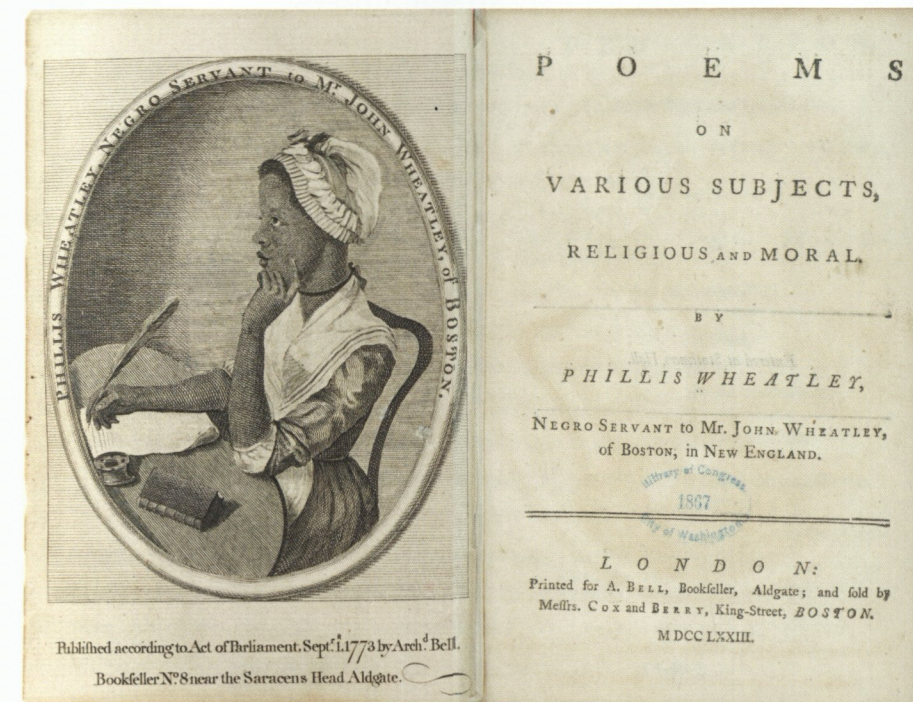


Fig. 15. Engraving after Scipio Moorehead (attributed; American, c. 1750–after 1775), frontispiece to Phillis Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (London: A. Bell, 1773). Library of Congress, PS866.W5 1773

Pragmatically, Jefferson believed that Virginia’s history of chattel slavery would prevent black and white races living peacefully together, citing those “deep rooted prejudices entertained by whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they sustained.”³⁹ Emancipation and citizenship for the enslaved could only result in “convulsions which will probably never end but in the extermination of one or the other race.”⁴⁰ American civilization therefore could not thrive with a free black population. The undesirability of blackness, the “unfortunate difference of color, and perhaps faculty, is a powerful obstacle to emancipation of their people,” argued Jefferson in *Notes on the State of Virginia*.⁴¹

Once enslaved blacks were freed, Jefferson required them to be “removed beyond the reach of mixture.”⁴² Thus Jefferson feared not only revenge but also miscegenation.⁴³ These sentiments on the abolition of slavery and the slave trade as well as the resettlement of freed Africans were beginning to circulate widely on both sides of the Atlantic, eventually leading to the formation of the African colonies of Sierra Leone (1808) and Liberia (1822). The conservation of whiteness—symbolically and biologically—was paramount to the formation of the United States’ cultural identity.

While emancipation might be desirable for political and moral reasons, the economic realities of how chattel slavery fueled the wealth and maintained the well-being of white Americans made it difficult to terminate an already two-century-long reliance. The enlightened white men who “liberated” the nation espoused the humanistic values of natural rights—Lockean “life, liberty, and property”—yet many were unwilling to part with their human property. Some of Jefferson’s generation did manumit their slaves either during their lifetime or upon death, as did George Washington and his heirs. However, Jefferson, who owned up to two hundred slaves



Fig. 16. Isaac Jefferson, 1847. Daguerreotype, photographer unknown. University of Virginia Library, Special Collections, Tracy W. McGregor Library, MSS2041

at one time, more than six hundred over his lifetime, freed only seven slaves—two during his lifetime and five upon his death (fig. 16).⁴⁴

In later editions of *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson records that by 1792 there was almost an equal number of enslaved blacks and free whites living in Virginia. The population of free blacks had grown substantially as slaveholders liberated slaves after the Revolutionary War. But those manumissions began to taper off as the value of slaves increased, with the domestic slave trade prospering as new states and territories in the west opened up due to the demand for vast swathes of land to establish large plantation operations. Slave labor was indispensable for cultivating crops like wheat and cotton, which were becoming more popular because tobacco farming had exhausted the soil in the Tidewater. Slave owners profited from hiring out enslaved blacks to other plantations or to perform unskilled and skilled work in towns and cities. Places like Richmond, where the capitol building was under construction, teemed with enslaved and free black artisans and laborers.⁴⁵

In 1785 Jefferson wrote from Paris to directors Hay and Buchanan that given the scarcity of talented craftsmen in Virginia, it might be wise to hire European craftsmen well versed in wood, stone, and plaster construction techniques. Securing the services of a skillful stone-cutter, for example, was desirable because, according to Jefferson, “under his direction, negroes who never saw a tool, will be able to prepare the work for him to finish.”⁴⁶

Once construction of the capitol building was under way, enslaved laborers joined the teams of workers that cleared the land, dug foundations, hauled wood, cut lumber, molded and fired bricks, laid bricks, transported stone, painted walls and trim, and removed the waste from Shockoe Hill. While those of Virginia’s planter class like Jefferson possessed hundreds of slaves to work their agricultural holdings and small-scale industries like nail manufacturing, it was also common for free white Virginians engaged in business and trade, including construction, to possess a small number of enslaved Africans. While director of public buildings in Richmond, Hay, for example, owned six slaves over the age of sixteen (tax records only make note of those who were taxable, so there could have been others under age twelve).⁴⁷ Samuel Dobie, a skilled Richmond builder with working knowledge of classical architecture who executed Jefferson’s designs, though not always faithful to the statesman’s intent, owned two adult slaves during the time of construction.⁴⁸ Enslaved laborers were rented from slave owners such as a Mr. Elliot who loaned his “Negro man” for five days in September 1788 to assist in mixing mortar.⁴⁹

Many of the tradesmen—plasterers, plumbers, and painters—owned several slaves. Edward Voss of Culpeper, a subcontractor and the supplier of the four hundred thousand bricks for the foundations, for example, owned

seven slaves. In October 1788 Voss sent an invoice to the directors to pay Robert Goode “the sum of ten pounds 20 shillings for the hire of Negroes to oblige.”⁵⁰ To perform numerous rough carpentry and woodworking tasks for several years through 1795, Dobie subcontracted Dabney Minor, who lived on a farm in Woodlawn, in nearby Orange, Virginia, where he owned seven slaves and kept ten slaves in Richmond.⁵¹ Minor’s arrangement exemplifies the connection between rural regions where raw materials were cultivated and towns where commodities and goods, including slaves, circulated in and out of markets. During the busy year of 1789, Minor’s workers erected the interior framing of the courtroom and doorways, laid tongue-and-groove flooring in the courtroom, mounted scaffolding for workers to install pediments and cornices, moved bricks, and cut the wooden templates Voss used to erect the exterior columns—all part of a long list of tasks for which Minor was paid £154 (in 1788 Minor earned £1,004 for work on the site).⁵² An advertisement Minor placed in Richmond and Hanover newspapers in 1794 explained that runaway slave Lewis or Lewy had been “employed at the whip-saw, and in rough plaining [*sic*],” which shows how Minor deployed enslaved workers in the various facets of his construction business.⁵³

Because Richmond was a port town, freed black men also worked on the capitol building. A laborer named Fortune, who was known to Hay and Dobie, worked on the construction site for several months in 1788. His tasks included clearing away timber, planks, and rubbish from the yard. Fortune was paid directly, indicating that he might be either a freedman or an enslaved laborer who had some modicum of control over his time.⁵⁴ It is unclear from records whether enslaved Africans were rented for long periods of time and hence lived onsite. But given that Richmond was already a busy port town, the enslaved population, including women and children, provided a range of services from cooking to laundering to stabling. Enslaved blacks provided a significant portion of the labor necessary to erect Jefferson’s monument to American civic life.

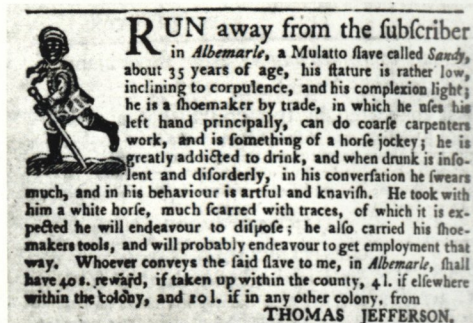
IMMOVABLE VEIL OF BLACK

The second of Latrobe’s watercolors of the Virginia State Capitol, whose perspective is taken from across the James River, similarly depicts the civic temple dominating the rustic landscape, much in the same way that Jefferson’s Monticello and the University of Virginia (1817–26) commanded their respective sites (fig. 17). In these two other designs, the high ground, both natural and man-made, provided Jefferson with the opportunity to architecturally reconcile the paradox between freedom and slavery by placing the slave dependencies beneath the main living spaces in rooms and passages hidden from view. That way the white-columned Neoclassical buildings appeared to Jefferson and to visitors as idyllic beacons of democratic values overlooking sublime nature, unsullied by the presence of those spaces where unsightly slaves toiled to make the land fertile and the lives of white citizens comfortable.



Fig. 17. Benjamin Henry Latrobe (British, 1764–1820), *View of Richmond from South Side of James River Showing Capitol from Bushrod*, Washington, 1796. Pencil, pen and ink, and watercolor on paper. Maryland Historical Society, 1960.108.1.1.36

Fig. 18. Advertisement for runaway slave, the *Virginia Gazette*, Williamsburg, September 14, 1769. Courtesy of the Virginia Historical Society, Richmond



Blackness was seen as a sublime “eternal monotony,” an “immovable veil of black which covers all the emotions of the other race,” wrote Jefferson in Query 14.⁵⁵ Black bodies and blackness for Jefferson, as for others of his era, proved an impenetrable threshold to reason. They were distasteful. Wielding the tools of enlightenment, Jefferson rationalized the Negro to the back end of the social and political forces that would advance American civilization, in the same manner he designed their spaces of interminable servitude to be placed belowground (fig. 18). While all men were born equal, as natural rights proponents advocated, to Jefferson, the Negro possessed neither the aptitude to reason nor the faculties to appreciate beauty or liberty. “The people” did not include Negroes. The prospect of a free black American was both unreasonable and unimaginable to the sage of Monticello. ❧

NOTES

1. Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).
2. Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
3. See Mignolo, *Darker Side*, 264; Alexander Weheliye, *Habeus Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 24; and Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom,” *New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 310.
4. Barry Bergdoll, *European Architecture, 1750–1890* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 1–5.

5. For early examples, see Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach, *A Plan of Civil and Historical Architecture, in the Representation of the Most Noted Buildings of Foreign Nations, Both Ancient and Modern*, 2nd ed. (London: privately printed, 1737); and Julien David Le Roy, *The Ruins of the Most Beautiful Monuments of Greece*, intro. Robin Middleton, trans. David Britt (Los Angeles: Getty, 2004).
6. Fiske Kimball, “Jefferson and the Public Buildings of Virginia, II: Richmond, 1779–1780,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 12, no. 3 (May 1949): 303.
7. Da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, 97.
8. Mark Wenger, “Thomas Jefferson and the Virginia State Capitol,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 101, no. 1 (Jan. 1993): 82.
9. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Richmond, VA: J. W. Randolph, 1853), 164.
10. Birgit Brander Rasmussen, “‘Attended with Great Inconveniences’: Slave Literacy and the 1740 South Carolina Negro Act,” *PMLA* 125, no. 1 (Jan. 2010): 201–5.
11. Fiske Kimball, “Jefferson and the Public Buildings of Virginia, I: Williamsburg, 1770–1776,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (Feb. 1949): 115.
12. Wenger, “Thomas Jefferson,” 88.
13. William Hay and James Buchanan to Thomas Jefferson, 20 March 1785, folder 12, box 7, Capitol Square Data, vol. 2, Grounds (Original), 1776–1931, Archives and Maps Research Rooms, Library of Virginia (henceforth Library of Virginia Archives).

14. James Buchanan and William Hay to Thomas Jefferson, 18 October 1785, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson Digital Edition*, ed. Barbara B. Oberg and J. Jefferson Looney (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008–16), <https://www.upress.virginia.edu/content/papers-thomas-jefferson-digital-edition>.
15. Hay and Buchanan to Jefferson, 20 March 1785.
16. Patrick Henry to Thomas Jefferson, 10 September 1785, in Oberg and Looney, *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*.
17. Richard Guy Wilson, “Thomas Jefferson’s Classical Architecture,” in *Thomas Jefferson, the Classical World, and Early America*, ed. Peter S. Onuf and Nicholas Cole (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 102–3.
18. William Bainter O’Neal, *Jefferson’s Fine Arts Library for the University of Virginia, with Additional Notes on Architectural Volumes Known to Have Been Owned by Jefferson, Issue 1* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1956), 71–78.
19. Wenger, “Thomas Jefferson,” 96–99.
20. Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, 20 September 1785, in Oberg and Looney, *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*.
21. Ibid.
22. Thomas Jefferson to James Buchanan and William Hay, 13 June 1786, in Oberg and Looney, *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*.
23. Jefferson to Madison, 20 September 1785.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Simon Gikandi, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 17.
27. Ibid.
28. Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 68.
29. I use the terms *Negro* or *black* rather than *African American* to encompass their ambiguous status at this historical moment, particularly since blacks were neither citizens nor were many of them Africans. Many blacks had descended from African and European families, who had lived in Virginia for two centuries; in many instances they were the product of white masters raping enslaved women. Additionally, there was a minority of freed blacks whose numbers had increased after the American Revolution.
30. Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 149.
31. Ibid., 145.
32. Suman Seth, *Difference and Disease: Medicine, Race and Eighteenth-Century British Empire* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 218), 212.
33. Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 151.
34. Ibid., 152.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid., 148.
37. Ibid., 149.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid., 155.
42. Ibid.
43. An ironic statement to make, since Jefferson would father six mixed-raced children (four survived to adulthood) with his enslaved concubine Sally Hemings, whom he took with him to Paris when she was fourteen years of age. Annette Gordon Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998).
44. Jefferson officially freed Robert and James Hemings before he died. After his death John Hemings, Burwell Colbert, and Joseph Fossett, along with his sons with Sally Hemings, Madison and Eston Hemings, were set free. His two other surviving enslaved children with Sally Hemings, his son Beverly Hemings and daughter Harriet Hemings, left Monticello in 1822 without pursuit. See Lucia Stanton, “*Those Who Labor for My Happiness*”: *Slavery at Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012).
45. Marie Tyler-McGraw, *At the Falls: Richmond, Virginia and Its People* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 65.
46. Thomas Jefferson to James Buchanan and William Hay, 13 August 1785, in Oberg and Looney, *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*.
47. Virginia Census and Tax List, Richmond, 1791, <http://www.binnsgenealogy.com/VirginiaTaxListCensuses/CityRichmond/1791Personal/05.jpg>.
48. Virginia Census and Tax List, Richmond, 1791, <http://www.binnsgenealogy.com/VirginiaTaxListCensuses/CityRichmond/1791Personal/05.jpg>.
49. “Sir there is due to Mr. Elliot,” 12 September 1788, folder 1, Capitol Building and Receipts, 1786–1790, box 1, Capital Square Data Records, Library of Virginia Archives.
50. “Gentlmn, Please Pay to Robt Goode,” 9 October 1788, folder 1, Capitol Building Vouchers, box 2, Capitol Square Data Records, Library of Virginia Archives.
51. Virginia Census and Tax List, Richmond, 1791, <http://www.binnsgenealogy.com/VirginiaTaxListCensuses/CityRichmond/1791Personal/12.jpg>. Virginia Census and Tax List, Orange, 1790, <http://www.binnsgenealogy.com/VirginiaTaxListCensuses/Orange/1790PersonalB/16.jpg>.
52. “The Directors of the Capitol to Dabney Minor,” 27 February 1790, and “State of contracts made and executed in 1788 by the undertakers of work on the Capitol and paid for by the Directors viz.,” n.d., folder 1, Capitol Building and Receipts, 1786–1790, box 1, Capital Square Data Records, Library of Virginia Archives.
53. “Explore Advertisements, Geography of Slavery” accessed 13 June 2017, http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/gos/browse/browse_ads.php?year=1794&month=9&page=0.
54. “Laborer Fortune waits for you,” 2 July 1788, folder 15, box 1, “Dr. W. Samuel Dobie in Account,” n.d., folder 1, box 1, and “Labr. Fortune work’d at clearing,” October 1788, folder 1, box 1, Capital Square Data Records, Library of Virginia Archives.
55. Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 149.