

## Foreword

The U.S. Capitol Historical Society is pleased to continue its series of publications on the history of the U.S. Capitol with Gordon Brown's intriguing, revealing, and even tragic account of the role of the Capitol's original architect, William Thornton, in the social, cultural, and yes—political—development of the infant seat of the federal government. The reader should not expect to find here a detailed account of Thornton the architect and designer, for that, as the author states at the outset, is not his purpose. For Thornton's architecture one can turn to William C. Allen's *History of the United States Capitol* and the ongoing work of C. M. Harris. Rather, here, the reader will see Thornton as he possibly would have wanted to be seen—as a learned gentleman actively involved in all those cultural and economic pursuits that defined the landed gentry of the late eighteenth century, from horse racing to experimentation with steam powered navigation. His involvement in architecture was but one facet of his self-definition, not the principal profession it was for his nemesis, B. Henry Latrobe.

The reader will note a curious phenomenon as the author unwinds the intertwined stories of the man and the Federal City's cultural development: Thornton recedes from foreground to background as the city's cultural institutions grow and take life. In the process, Gordon Brown adds to the insights of Kenneth R. Bowling, Bob Arnebeck, Fergus Bordewich, and others whose writings have all made clear to us that the nation's capital did not spring Minerva-like fully grown from the Constitution. Washington, D.C.'s, success as the nation's capital was not foreordained by the principles of its inception but rather was the result of a slow, lengthy, and painful development in which men like Thornton contended with one another and with the intractable realities of the region's climate, geography, economy, and local and national politics. It was the latter that most marginalized William Thornton. In a story to be repeated many times in the city's history, a seismic shift in party fortunes pushed aside a whole set of elites. Thornton would remain a participant but not a force in the capital's cultural leadership, his decline made all the more poignant in that like the protagonist in a Greek tragedy, the qualities of his personality that brought success also bore the seeds of, if

not his destruction, at least his fading away. What emerges and what endures is the cultural and social vitality of the young city—not the thriving metropolis hoped for by its boosters but certainly far from the backward wilderness of its detractors. In Gordon Brown's dual accounts of an individual and his cultural setting, there is much to learn and much to ponder in the pages that follow.

DONALD R. KENNON

## Preface

In the many fine books and articles that have been written on the history of early Washington, D.C., most of the attention has been focused on two key aspects: the physical development of the new city and the growth of its political and social institutions. This is of course entirely fitting, as are not politics and real estate still prime topics of conversation in the modern city?

And yet, that record is somehow incomplete, lacking a sense of life as it really was. Construction of the Federal City, the debates in Congress, the prices of building lots, gossip from the latest official reception or diplomatic rumor—those were surely important. But residents of the new capital had more mundane concerns as well. Decent living quarters and food, of course, but beyond those needs lay the desire for a decent quality of life, including possibilities for cultural, educational, and spiritual enrichment. In the raw new town, what indeed was the everyday cultural environment of an average Washington resident family? What did they do with their leisure time? What were their cultural outlets? How did they reach for knowledge or inform themselves about the outside world? Even more specifically, how did the cultural institutions evolve that would serve the town's growing population?

This work aims to answer at least some of those questions, but it will inevitably leave as many unanswered. The written records on which it is based, for example, say virtually nothing about the cultural life of those residents who were outside the privileged class. The laborers, craftsmen, mechanics, slaves, and others who lived in the city surely had their pastimes, their music, weddings, dances, street theater, and amusements about which we have virtually no specific information, yet which were a vital part of the broader culture of the city's residents. Nor does the written record give us much detail about the primary vehicle for cultural education and even enjoyment of the time: the family circle. We have a good deal of anecdotal information in which we can see Washington families and their friends discussing books, learning foreign languages, painting, playing music, and singing together around the family hearth, and we realize how important a cultural vehicle the home could be and undoubtedly was. As part of

the cultural life of the period, the family was undoubtedly central, but our focus will be on the growth and evolution of the cultural facilities of the new community.

Early Washingtonians obviously lacked cultural institutions and opportunities like those of the established European capitals, or even those of the older, larger cities of the new republic. With no royal court or rich aristocracy to subsidize the fine arts, no American city could have hoped to mimic high European culture in any event. And Washington was a raw new settlement, with a cultural life which was of necessity that of a small town—albeit one with aspirations. What gave it particular reason for those aspirations were the facts that it was the seat of government, and that a sizable proportion of its new residents were individuals and families of talent and education. They had come to the capital to take part in the republican experiment and would enrich it culturally by their presence.

Dr. William Thornton was among the most urbane and brilliant of the early residents. A restless intellect, a prize-winning scholar and architect, a liberal enthusiast and an aesthete, he was also blessed with a talented and artistic wife and an important position in his adopted town. The couple would have made a mark in any American city, but in the new city of Washington, Thornton and his wife rapidly became prominent in the best social and intellectual circles. Since his arrival in 1795, Thornton's life effectively paralleled that of the new capital, and he was both an observer of, and an important actor in, the social and cultural development of the new city.

Through the prism of William and Anna Maria Thornton's lives, then, this work will explore the role and contributions of the new city's leading citizens to the local cultural and intellectual climate, and how they assisted in the gradual formation of new institutions. The focus will be on the new city of Washington, including to a large degree Georgetown, which was and still is a pole of the federal capital. Alexandria, which never integrated into the Federal City easily and eventually withdrew entirely, will mostly be ignored, as will the areas of the federal district that were outside the city limits—what was then known as Washington County.

The Thorntons undoubtedly would be amazed to see the cultural richness of today's city and its suburbs, with so many museums, theaters, concerts, nightclubs, intellectual institutions, and art galleries. And while they might well be shocked by some of today's offerings, they would certainly appreciate how much their little village and its cultural attractions have grown.

As someone who spent some years in childhood and many as an adult in Washington, I have reveled in the opportunity that this book has given me to travel in my mind back to the early village and then forward again to the city we know. I am grateful to the U.S. Capitol Historical Society for allowing me to embroider in this manner on the life of the Capitol's first architect, William Thornton, and am particularly thankful to Barbara Williamson for her invaluable help in researching the newspaper records.