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BENJAMIN LATROBE AND DOLLEY MADISON
DECORATE THE WHITE HOUSE, 1809-1811

Margaret Brown Klapthor



FIGURE 1.—DIORAMA OF THE OVAL DRAWING ROOM of the White House, as displayed in the First Ladies Hall of the Museum of History and Technology. The incident depicted is the removal of the White House furnishings by Dolley Madison in August 1814, as the British advance to burn Washington.

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BENJAMIN LATROBE AND DOLLEY MADISON

DECORATE THE WHITE HOUSE

1809–1811

In 1809 the Madisons moved into a White House which was beginning to present a dignified outside appearance to the world. With Dolley Madison's able help, Benjamin Latrobe, architect and engineer, began to create an interior decor in keeping with the building's basic architectural elegance. Yet the task, which occupied the years from 1809 to 1811, proved quite in-expensive by today's standards.

The descriptions of the rooms in this article give the reader a glimpse into the Ladies' Drawing Room (the present Red Room) and the Oval Drawing Room (the present Blue Room) of the Madison era. Only part of the White House had been decorated when the British marched on Washington and the Mansion was burned.

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WHEN THOMAS JEFFERSON assumed his duties as President in 1801 most of the public buildings which were being constructed for the new government were in deplorable condition. The Capitol and the White House were only partially finished and work was at a standstill. Perhaps as a result of Jefferson's own personal interest in architecture, one of his first actions was to get Congress to appropriate \$50,000 for use "in repairs and alterations in the Capitol and

other public buildings as may be necessary for the accommodation of Congress in their future sessions." On the strength of his bill, Jefferson then created the position of Surveyor of Public Buildings and offered the position to Benjamin Henry Latrobe.

Latrobe, a native of England, was at that time living in Philadelphia where he was successfully practicing his profession as an architect and engineer. He was a man of ability and had a wide range of interests

in all phases of the cultural arts. His merits had been recognized almost as soon as he arrived in the United States and, within a few years, he had established himself not only in his governmental work on the state level, but in the many important private enterprises with which he was connected.

When Latrobe was appointed Surveyor of Public Buildings the White House was in much the same condition as it was in 1800 when Abigail Adams complained so feelingly that "there was not one apartment" in what she considered a "finished" condition. The walls of the apartments of the eastern section were still unplastered, the grounds were rough and neglected, temporary wooden steps were at all the principal entrances, and the roof leaked badly. None of the outbuildings so necessary for storage had ever been constructed, and the house lacked most of the conveniences then looked upon as essential.

During the last six years of the Jefferson administration, the President and Latrobe worked together to make the house structurally habitable, to supply the missing conveniences, and to improve the exterior appearance of the building. No work seems to have been done on the interior of the house during this period, probably because so much was required on the exterior that neither funds nor time were available. Thus, President James Madison and his charming wife Dolley¹ in 1809 moved into a house (fig. 3) which was at last beginning to present to the world a dignified outside appearance. And it was a house which had been supplied with many of the necessities for comfortable living, such as water closets and a roof which did not leak. But it was a house with an interior not yet developed to the degree promised by its architectural elegance, a condition soon to be corrected.

The election of James Madison to the Presidency must have given Benjamin Latrobe great pleasure. To his brother Christian, in England, he wrote shortly after the election "I have for many years been on an intimate footing with him. Mary [Latrobe's wife] has known his very excellent and amiable wife from a child."² Indeed the friendship of Dolley



FIGURE 2.—BENJAMIN HENRY LATROBE—Surveyor of Public Buildings, administrations of Presidents Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. (Photo courtesy Maryland Historical Society.)

Madison and Mary Hazellurst Latrobe dated from the days in Philadelphia when Dolley was a young matron and Mary Hazellurst was a child in the same social circle.

The newly elected President, even before his inauguration, turned over the entire direction of the work to be done on the interior of the Executive Mansion to his capable wife (fig. 4). In February, he directed Latrobe to take his instructions from Dolley and present his accounts to her. Together Dolley and Latrobe were to assemble a stage setting singularly appropriate to her outstanding performance in the role of First Lady.

The first glimpse given to the public of the results of this successful collaboration came almost three months after Mrs. Madison became First Lady. On May 31, 1809, she gave the first of weekly "drawing rooms" which she held each Wednesday night when she was in residence. No written invitations were issued and none were needed. For social Washington, Wednesday night at the White House became the focal point

¹ The fact that Mrs. Madison spelled her name Dolley is well documented by her personal signature on letters which survive in the Library of Congress and other manuscript collections. The sale catalog of her estate, sold in 1899, is entitled "Important Sale—Estate of Dolley P. Madison." The spelling "Dolley" seems to be a 20th-century simplification.

² TALBOT HAMLIN, *Benjamin Henry Latrobe* (New York, 1955), p. 333.

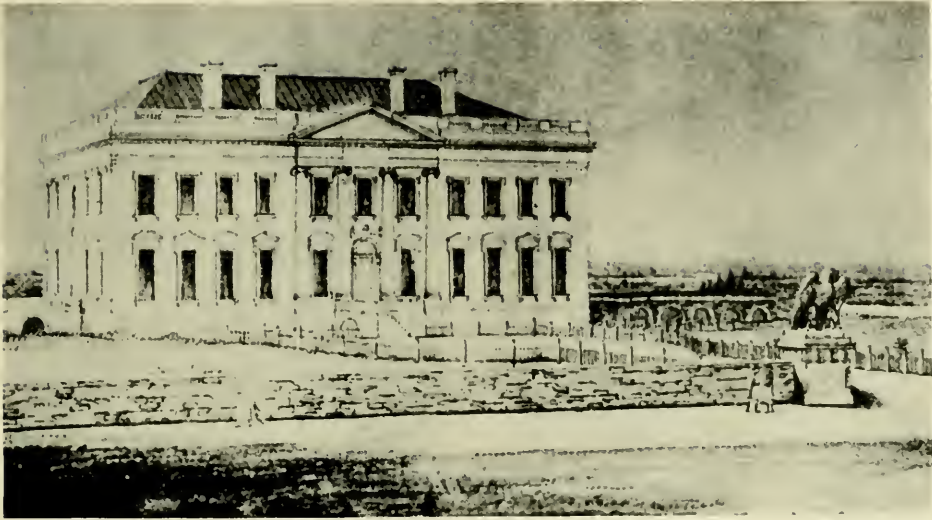


FIGURE 3.—EXTERIOR OF THE WHITE HOUSE, ca. 1810, showing the stone wall, fence, and ornamental gate posts designed by Latrobe during the time he served as Surveyor of Public Buildings in the Jefferson administration. (Photo courtesy Library of Congress.)

around which all of the city's official society revolved.

On that first evening, the Oval Drawing Room was not yet ready to be opened to the public and guests were received in the room, called the "Ladies Drawing Room" or "Mrs. Madison's Parlor," that is today known as the Red Room. Contemporaries have left us graphic descriptions of the room, which was said to be done in the "very latest Sheraton style." Latrobe's architectural talents are suggested in the treatment of the draperies. The curtains in the room were made of sunflower yellow damask with a valance of swags and draperies topping each window. This valance continued all around the top of the room, the stiff festoons looping up to a pole placed near the ceiling line. The fringe with which all the draperies and valances were trimmed caused a mild furor; it was made of long and short drops, silk over bits of wood, and must have enhanced the elegance of the room.

In front of the fireplace, "on a fireboard" beneath the mantle the same yellow damask was arranged in a fluted pattern known as a "rising sun." The furni-

ture of the room was upholstered in bright yellow satin; the high-backed sofas and stiff chairs were elegant with no pretense of comfort. The room's furnishings were completed with a new carpet, a few pier tables and card tables, plus a "piano forte" and a fine guitar ordered expressly by Mrs. Madison.³ In this setting the First Lady received, often dressed in blending buff or yellow satin, or in a contrasting crimson.⁴

A number of letters have survived that give details of the so-called "domestic arrangements" and attest to close collaboration between the First Lady and Latrobe on every phase of the interior work done at the White House. Most of these letters date from the spring and summer of 1809. They were written to Dolley Madison by Latrobe when he was in Philadelphia or New York on official business acquiring material for the White House.

³ National Archives, Account of Benjamin Henry Latrobe, Furniture of President's House (May 29, 1809).

⁴ ETHEL LEWIS, *The White House* (New York, 1937), p. 69.

One such letter, now unfortunately lost, is referred to in a letter from Latrobe to Madison on July 7, 1809, in which he states that he has taken "the liberty to write to Mrs. Madison" since the President had "formerly referred me to her for the domestic arrangements of the house."⁵

The room that Latrobe wished to make his masterpiece was the handsome Oval Room, which James Hoban had designed to be the most elegant of the formal rooms in the White House. It had not been furnished during the Adams or the Jefferson administrations, and up to this time had been used as an anteroom or vestibule. Work on the Oval Room continued all that first summer, as Latrobe proceeded to design not only the architectural features and the decoration, but even the furniture, in order to insure the effect he wished to create. (Fortunately, Latrobe's drawings for the furniture have been found among the Maryland Historical Society's Latrobe papers by Robert Raley, whose article about them appeared in *Antiques Magazine*, June 1959.) The furniture was in the Greek style so admired by Latrobe and follows closely designs which had appeared in Hope's *Household Furniture and Interior Decoration*, published in London in 1807. On the back of one of the drawings, Latrobe wrote: "Within are drawings of the chairs [see figs. 5 and 6]. I hope you will be able to bend your whole force to them immediately. They come a few days later than I could have wished but my time is so occupied that I could not send them sooner. The drawings of the sofas [see fig. 7] will follow in a day or two." The letter is addressed to Mr. Finlay, renowned for making the handsome painted furniture for which Baltimore was then famous.⁶

The National Archives contain a record of the account of Benjamin Latrobe with John and Hugh

⁵ No copy of the missing letter is in the Maryland Historical Society's large collection of Latrobe papers (where the one just quoted is located), but a clue to its continuing existence is to be found in the catalog of a sale of Madison documents, held in Philadelphia by Stan V. Henkels, Jr., in 1933. Item 34 is an autograph letter signed by Latrobe and addressed to Mrs. Madison, described as "His proposals to arrange the various rooms of the White House to suit the new occupants. Also detailed accounts of expenditures for china, paperhanging, changes, etc." The priced sale catalog notes that the letter was sold for \$25 to someone who used the name "Tom" as his identification.

⁶ Benjamin Henry Latrobe Collection of Papers and Drawings (MSS, Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore). Hereinafter cited as Latrobe papers.



FIGURE 4.—DOLLEY PAYNE TODD MADISON (Mrs. James Madison) by Ezra Ames. (Photo courtesy New-York Historical Society, New York City.)

Finlay of Baltimore.⁷ A bill dated September 16, 1809, requests payment as follows:

To 36 Cane Seat Chairs made to a Grecian Model, painted, gilded & varnished, with the United States arms painted on each @ 20	720.
To packing the same	6.
To 2 Sofas to match the same, double fronted, 4 extra large casters to each, @ 80	160.
To 4 Settees as above, double fronted, 4 extra large casters to each, @ 40	160.
To packing Sofas & Settees	16. 50
To transporting the same by land from Baltimore to Washington in a waggon & cart	22.
To freight of the Chairs by water [remainder of entry obliterated by tear in manuscript; as is charge for this service]	[18.]
To insurance of the same	8. 50

1111.

⁷ National Archives, record group 217, General Accounting Office, Miscellaneous Treasury Accounts, account 28.634, voucher 2.

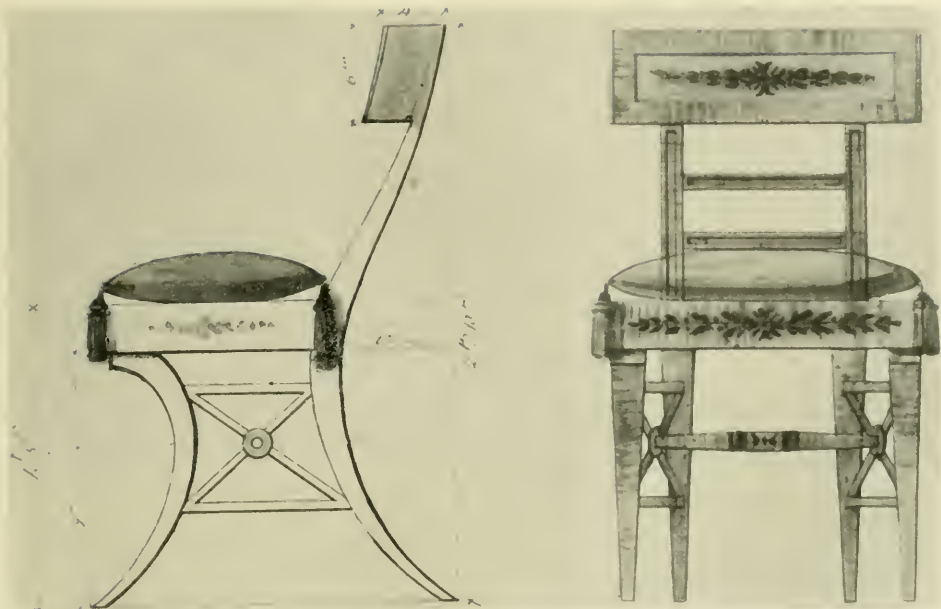


FIGURE 5.—CHAIR DESIGNED BY BENJAMIN LATROBE for the Oval Drawing Room of the White House. (Photo courtesy Maryland Historical Society.)

The Finlays advised Latrobe in a letter dated September 20, 1809, that they were sending the sofas and settees by the bearer, John Richardson. At the same time Latrobe was notified that “there had been shipped in good order and well conditioned by John and Hugh Finlay in and upon the good sloop called the *Alice Branon* whereof Bede Clements is master, now in the harbour of Baltimore and bound for Georgetown three dozen chairs.”⁸

The success of the appearance of this furniture is attested in several contemporary descriptions of the room, among which is the notation in the diary of William Preston that “the furniture of the room with the brilliant mirrors was very magnificent.”⁹ An oblique tribute, from the design standpoint, is found in a letter from Latrobe to Finlay dated April

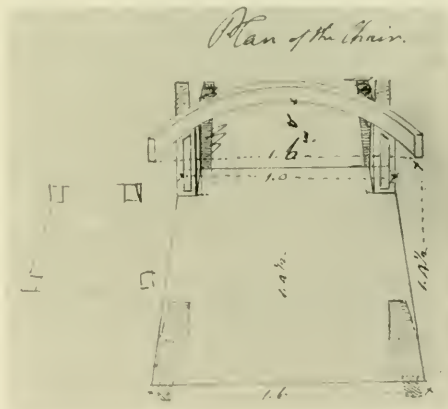


FIGURE 6.—DETAIL OF CHAIR DESIGNED BY LATROBE. (Photo courtesy Maryland Historical Society.)

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ ALLEN C. CLARK, *Life and Letters of Dolley Madison* (Washington, 1914), p. 140.

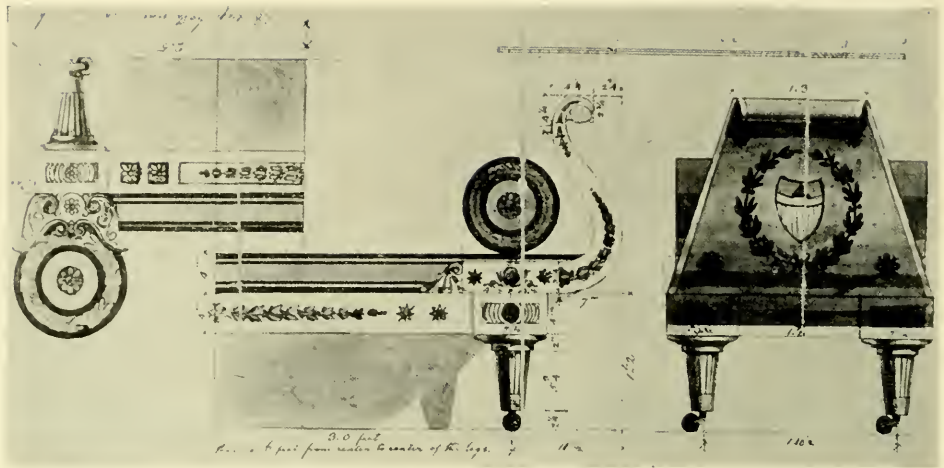


FIGURE 7.—SOFA AND SETTEE DESIGNED BY LATROBE FOR THE OVAL DRAWING ROOM.
(Photo courtesy Maryland Historical Society.)

26, 1810, just four months after the room was opened to the public, in which he says that “three chairs were broken by a man weighing 3 cwt. leaning back in them,”¹⁰ presumably one at a time.

We know that the walls of the room were painted, because Latrobe’s letter book for June 6, 1809, mentions that the “President’s Drawing Room was painted by Mr. Bridgeport.”¹¹ The same Mr. Bridgeport, a craftsman from Philadelphia, had decorated the ceiling of the new chamber for the House of Representatives.

The curtains for the room had been a cause for concern. On March 22, 1809, Benjamin Latrobe wrote to Dolley Madison: “There is no Silk Damask to be had either in New York or Philadelphia & I am therefore forced to give you crimson velvet curtains of which I can get plenty and which to my astonishment will not be dearer than Damask.”¹² On April 12, Mrs. Latrobe advised Dolley that “Mr. Rea has been fortunate in procuring a sufficient quantity of velvet for the Drawing room curtains, sofas, chairs & etc. and they will certainly be very

elegant.”¹³ Latrobe, when he saw the velvet obtained by Rea, wrote Dolley Madison on April 21: “The curtains! Oh the terrible velvet curtains! Their effect will ruin me entirely so brilliant will they be.”¹⁴ And on June 6, Latrobe wrote to Captain John Meany in Philadelphia:

It is true that I have been very much at a loss for materials for curtains for the President’s Drawing Room. The quantity wanted is, however, so unusually large that I have been obliged to have recourse to plain velvet. There are five windows—6 yards high. Five breadth in each is 30 yards and five windows therefore require 150 yards exclusive of draperies, chairs, and sofas—Your six pieces contain only 108 yards.¹⁵

Latrobe’s specification of five windows in the room is evidence that the two alcoves on the inside of the Oval Room were to be treated as windows. Four of the sets of curtains and the four window seats, or settees, were placed in the two windows overlooking the south terrace and in the two alcoves on the north wall. The fifth set of curtains was for the double door, which opened onto the south portico.

¹⁰ Latrobe papers, letter no. 149.

¹¹ Latrobe papers, letter no. 135.

¹² MS, in New-York Historical Society.

¹³ MS, in Virginia Historical Society.

¹⁴ MS, in New York Public Library.

¹⁵ Latrobe papers, letter no. 138.

The material having been found by John Rea of Philadelphia, Latrobe had him make it up. His bill records the following services under the date of October 1, 1809:¹⁶

To making, lining, and trimming 5 Drawing Room curtains & draperies at \$40 Each		\$200. 00
To 2 Sophas	8	16. 00
To making & stuffing 36 Chairs	2	72. 00
" " " 5 Settees	4	20. 00
" " " 12 Bolsters	2	24. 00
" " " 57 muslin cases including the muslin	80 100	45. 60

It has been thought that the crimson velvet curtains were made by Mrs. Sweeney, a fashionable lady who was the proprietress of the most elegant upholstery shop in Washington, but the account with Rea indicates clearly that the curtains he made and the upholstery done by him were for the Oval Drawing Room. Moreover, there is no account with Mrs. Sweeney that can be identified with this room, although she was doubtless doing work at the Executive Mansion at this time, as she was the source of gossip concerning Latrobe's extravagances and Mrs. Madison's disapproval of his absence from Washington. It is reported that when Latrobe heard the gossip, in several anonymous letters, he wrote immediately to Mrs. Madison concerning it. Mrs. Madison's reply to Latrobe was reassuring on every point. She called the gossip "a variety of falsehoods framed but to play on his sensibilities" and assured him that among other things "My affection for Mrs. Latrobe would in itself prevent my doing injustice to her husband," and added that she supposed Mrs. Sweeney was offended at being left but little to do in the house.¹⁷ Perhaps Mrs. Sweeney's chief grievance had been the fact that she was not employed to do the curtains for a drawing room which could hardly fail to be much discussed in Washington.

By fall the room began to assume its final appearance. Unfortunately, the glass for the great overmantel mirror, ordered from Jacob Mark in New York, was broken in transit. It could not be replaced, so two smaller mirrors had to be substituted in the frame (see fig. 8).

¹⁶ National Archives, record group 217, General Accounting Office, Miscellaneous Treasury Accounts, account 29,494, voucher 11.

¹⁷ HAMELIN, *op. cit.* (footnote 2), pp. 328-329.

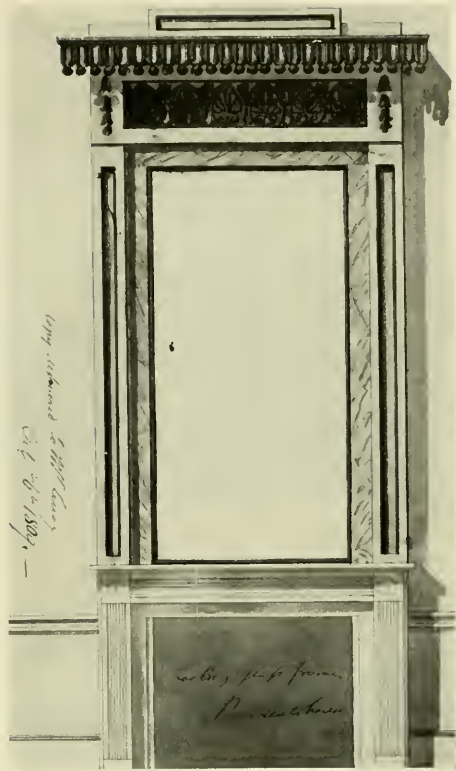


FIGURE 8.—LOOKING-GLASS FRAME designed by Benjamin Latrobe for the Oval Drawing Room. (Photo courtesy Library of Congress.)

In November Latrobe was making inquiry of Bradford and Inskeep of Philadelphia for 12 patent lamps with spiral burners and double lights of a handsome pattern for the President's drawing room. He specified:

I would prefer handsome bronze to brass and I think either to cut glass unless the latter can be had of a very handsome pattern at the above price. Lamps ornamented with drops and festoons of cut glass would soon be demolished by clumsy and careless servants of this part of the world and therefore I should wish that whatever is sent should be of a kind to bear handling.¹⁸

¹⁸ Latrobe papers, letter of November 21, no. 352.



FIGURE 9.—ST. JOHN'S CHURCH AS SKETCHED BY BENJAMIN LATROBE IN 1816 showing in the background the ruins of the White House. (Photo courtesy Library of Congress.)

On December 23, Latrobe wrote that the lamps received "give great satisfaction to Mr. and Mrs. Madison and permit me to add at a proper distance to myself although I cannot say that I admire the mixture of Egyptian, Grecian, and Birmingham taste which characterizes them."¹⁹ Here, he must refer to those for the new drawing room, as he adds that one of the two branch lamps "leaks so exceedingly as to have spoiled a crimson velvet cushion of one of the sofas."²⁰

Now all that was needed to complete the room was the floor covering. That, too, was provided by John Rea, whose bill to Latrobe under date of December 27, 1810, records the following:²⁰

To making up 169 yds of Brussels carpt.	$\frac{20}{100}$	33. 80
To 169 yds of carpt. Brussels 2	$\frac{75}{100}$	464. 75

¹⁹ Latrobe papers, letter no. 389.

²⁰ National Archives, record group 217, General Accounting Office, Miscellaneous Treasury Accounts, account 29,494, voucher 11.

To 30 yds of Border 2	$\frac{75}{100}$	82. 50
To 1 Large Harth rug to match		24. 00

The room was furnished in time for the President's reception on New Year's Day, 1810. The final effect was apparently worth the time and money lavished on it, for contemporary accounts speak of the elegance and beauty of the room. With completion of the Oval Room, the collaboration of Dolley Madison and Benjamin Latrobe in furnishing the White House drew to a close. They never had the funds to decorate the East Room; it is left to our imagination to visualize this great ballroom done in the classical style. Other interior work in the house during the Madison administration had included converting the office, formerly used by the private secretary, into a room to be used for Cabinet meetings. Latrobe also closed off the west windows in the library, converting it into a large dining room, which it remains to this day. It was in the dining room that Latrobe placed the Gilbert Stuart portrait of Washington, one of the few things saved from the White House when it was burned.

The cost of the refurbishing project undertaken by

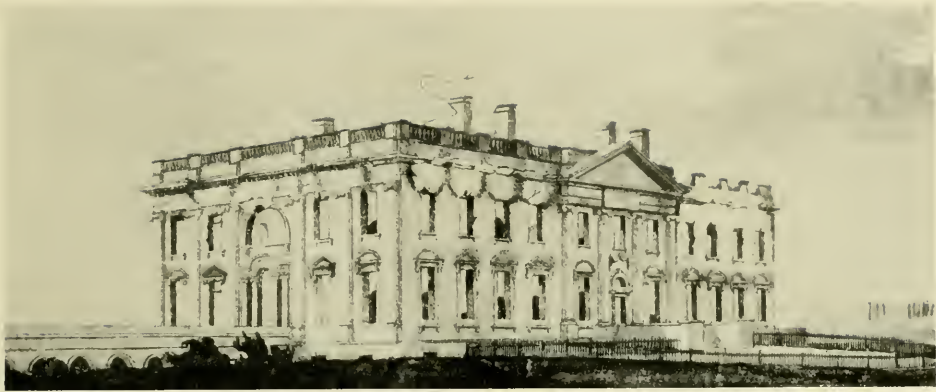


FIGURE 10.—BURNED-OUT SHELL OF THE WHITE HOUSE, sketched in 1814 by Strickland. (Photo courtesy Library of Congress.)

Dolley and Latrobe was not exorbitant. The Miscellaneous Treasury Accounts in the National Archives give as \$12,669.31 the amount of the expenditures from April 2, 1809, to January 31, 1811, for looking glasses, silver, china, and crockeryware, house and table linens, "piano forte" and guitar, books for the Presidential library, cabinet and upholstery work, iron mongering, and kitchen furniture. This includes Latrobe's commission at 2 percent.²¹

In 1811, when war with England seemed imminent, Congress failed to appropriate any funds with which to continue construction of the Capitol or work on the President's house. Thus, Latrobe's position as Surveyor of Public Buildings in Washington came to an end.

A graphic account of the interior of the house is recorded in the diary of a young man from Massachusetts, Elbridge Gerry, Jr. While visiting his father, then Vice President, during the summer of 1813, the young Gerry was at the White House on July 9 and 10. He has left us a very complete description of the work done by Benjamin Latrobe and the First Lady:

The President's house is a perfect palace. You enter the front door, and are at once in a large hall, which is an entry, etc. Pillars of immense size are dispersed thro' this, and it is handsomely furnished etc, and has large lamps for the whole length. On the side opposite to the entrance are doors opening to four rooms. The

corner is the dining room and is very spacious, and twice the height of modern parlours and 3 times as large. This is furnished in the most elegant manner and the furniture is so large, that Mrs. Cutts says, the side board would cover the whole side of a large parlour. At the head of the room, General Washington is represented as large as life. This room opens by a single door into Mrs. Madison's sitting-room which is half as large. This furnished equally as well and has more elegant and delicate furniture. Her portrait is here seen. This room in the same way, enters into the drawing room, which is an immense and magnificent room, in an oval form, and which form is preserved in those above and even to the cellar. A door opens at each end, one into the hall and opposite, one into the terrace, from whence you have an elegant view of all the rivers, etc. The windows are nearly the height of the room and have superb red silk velvet curtains which cost \$4 a yard. The chairs are wood painted with worked bottoms and each has a red velvet large cushion. They are arranged on the side and are divided into four divisions by sofas. These three rooms are all open on levee nights. Next to the drawing room is the President's sitting-room which has no communication with the former and opens to the hall. This corresponds to Mrs. Madison's parlour, and is handsomely furnished. This opens to his cabinet which I did not see. The cabinet is divided by a temporary partition from the grand council chamber which runs the whole breadth of the house and is more than twice the breadth of common halls. This room is unfinished. Opposite to the dining room is one of the same size for the private secretary and between that and the door, one smaller for the porter who is always at the door.

²¹ *Ibid.*, account 24.181, voucher 1.

Lengthways of the house, and thro' the hall is a walk which extends on a terrace on each end for some way. A staircase arched to admit of this walk ascends at one end and this is the grand staircase. It is in the form of a U and has stairs on each side meeting in the centre. Thro' the second story is a hall or entry and this opens into all the rooms, which are more numerous and smaller than the lower rooms. The President's communicated with others and this is all the information I can give of the inside of the house.²²

In August of the year following young Elbridge Gerry's visit came the heartbreak of having all this work literally go up in smoke. As Dolley tells it in a letter to Mrs. Latrobe, "Two hours before the enemy entered the city, I left the house where Mr. Latrobe's elegant taste had been so justly admired and where you and I had so often wandered together; and on that very day I sent out the silver (nearly all) and velvet curtains and General Washington's pictures, the Cabinet papers a few books and the small clock and left everything else."²³

Figure 9 shows the devastated mansion. The house was gutted, and of the elegant drawing room created by Dolley Madison and Benjamin Latrobe only the crimson velvet curtains were saved. However, in the view of the White House in figure 10 we can see still standing outside the ruins the fence designed by Latrobe.

The Diorama

On the basis of this research on the Oval Drawing Room, a diorama of the room has been created and is displayed in the First Ladies' Hall of the Museum

of History and Technology. Some of the details of the diorama were decided on the basis of the evidence at hand. For example, the colors used on the furniture and on the mirror frame are those found on the watercolor drawings by Latrobe. These dictated the use of the other colors seen in the room. We can only wonder how much the red color seen in the drawing of the sofa and chairs may have faded in view of Mr. Latrobe's comment on "the terrible velvet curtains! Their effect will ruin me entirely so brilliant will they be." The Latrobe letter book states that the President's Drawing Room was painted by Mr. Bridgeport of Philadelphia, but leaves no clue to the color he used or what portions of the room were painted. None of the contemporary descriptions of the room mentions the way it was painted; one must assume that to those who saw it, the paint seemed completely in harmony with the furnishings, and that such painting probably consisted of decorative touches rather than an overall wall treatment.

For the floor covering described in the Archives Records as "169 yards of Brussels carpet and 30 yards of border—plus a large hearth rug to match," investigation revealed that Brussels carpeting in 1809 would have been handwoven on a draw loom. An early description says that Brussels was distinguished from ingrain carpeting by having "a raised pile with figures and colors produced from the warp." The design for the carpet was chosen from those illustrated in George Smith's *Collection of Ornamental Design after the Manner of the Antique*, published in London in 1812. It has an anthemion motif echoing that on the Latrobe furniture and gave the room an ensemble type of decor—the kind of setting for which Benjamin Latrobe seemed to be striving and which he apparently achieved.

²² *The Diary of Elbridge Gerry, Jr.* (New York, 1927), pp. 180-181.

²³ HAMLIN, op. cit. (footnote 2), p. 304.