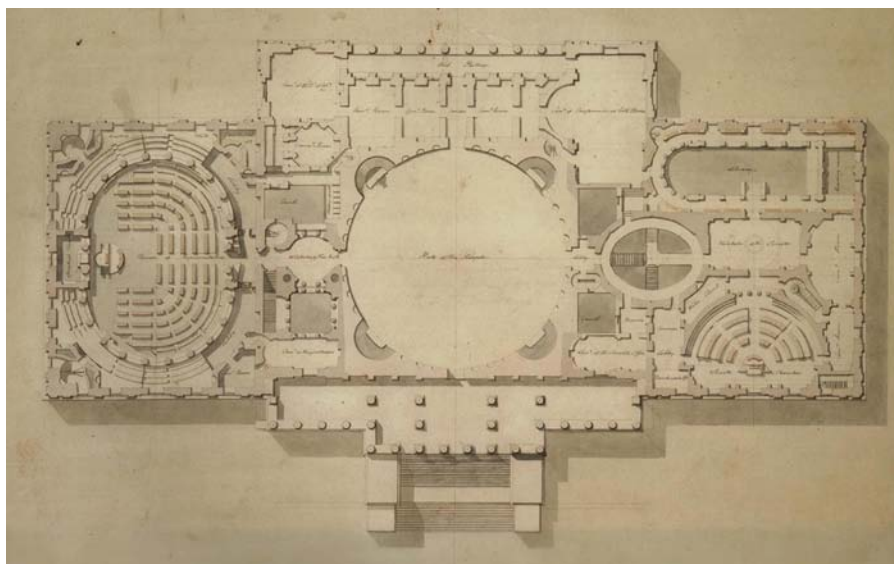


## Latrobe's Egyptian Library of Congress: Echoes of Enlightenment and Imperialism

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### Introduction



*Overall plan by  
Benjamin Henry Latrobe (1806)*

In the Fall of 1808 the U.S. Capitol was a work in progress. The North and South Wings were functional but much of the building was in a state of ongoing construction, repair, and redesign. Benjamin Henry Latrobe had been appointed Surveyor of Public Works by President Thomas Jefferson in 1803. The South Wing contained the House Chamber, Latrobe's masterful infill project comprised of twenty-six-foot-eight-inch sandstone columns arranged in a hippodrome shape (Chenoweth, 2011). The chamber featured a colossal Sitting Liberty that had been unveiled in September 1807. By 1808, however, Latrobe had refocused his attention on the North Wing which contained the hemispherical domed Senate Chamber, figural courtrooms, and a small library. In 1802, Jefferson



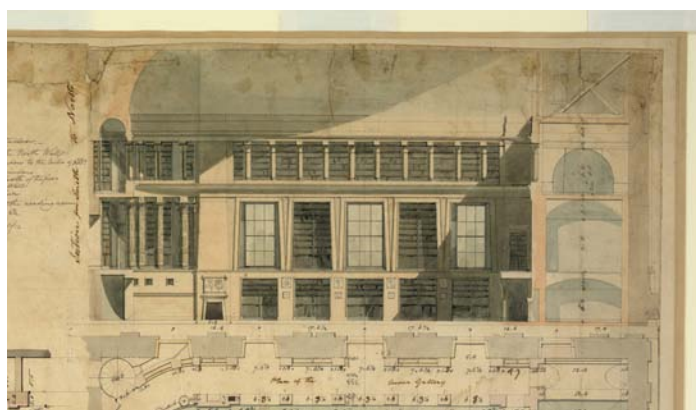
*Exterior view of Capitol in 1814, by author*

had approved legislation to create the position of Librarian of Congress, who would oversee this modest library.

The North Wing, completed in 1800 for the arrival of Congress from Philadelphia, had been designed and built by others. The path forward had never been forthright. The works had been cobbled together in an architectural compromise of plans and facades. The man who won the competition for the building never actually worked as its architect, but three other architects did, and conflicts abounded. The result was that by 1800, the building had been badly built at a great cost and by 1808 portions of the North Wing already were in need of design or redesign. Hence, Latrobe refocused his energies here as a source of more architectural projects. This paper focuses on Latrobe's ambitious plan in 1808 to insert a design for an Egyptian-styled Library of Congress in the North Wing.

### Latrobe's Picturesque Neoclassicism

Latrobe's first building campaign spanned March 1803-July 1811; his second building campaign spanned April 1815-November 1817.



*1808 overall section of Library (drawing by BHL)*

The architect inherited the shell of the Capitol and spent a good portion of his two building campaigns infilling the stolid, English Renaissance sandstone facades designed by William Thornton dating from the 1793 competition. He thought the facades comically old-fashioned. But his new position afforded him an opportunity to flex his design skills as the premier architect and engineer working in America at the time.

Sculpting space and light with innovative and daring sandstone vaults, monitors, and hidden light sources, Latrobe's designs for the Capitol were exquisite expressions of neoclassical spaces arranged and sequenced in a picturesque fashion.

The quality of the picturesque was important to Latrobe. As a landscape painter himself, he deeply admired Claude Lorraine's picturesque compositions that unfolded for the viewer. The Claude compositions had foregrounds, middle grounds, and distant views that suggested an immediacy and participation on the part of the viewer.

The Picturesque as expressed in architecture is a strong concept that is in part akin to one of Latrobe's specialties: perspective drawing. Drawing prospective perspectival space was a powerful tool for perceiving architecture. He often populated his topographical perspectives and paintings with Romantic figures. Latrobe admired the sculptural work of John Flaxman, sometimes borrowing Flaxman's figures for his own drawings.

Latrobe's architecture was crafted similarly by the use of picturesque and controlled sequencing of sculptural spaces within unified lighting systems. At the South Wing vestibules, he surprised visitors with tall vertical chambers filled with natural light. A darker compressed stair led upward to the House vestibule and the main chamber,

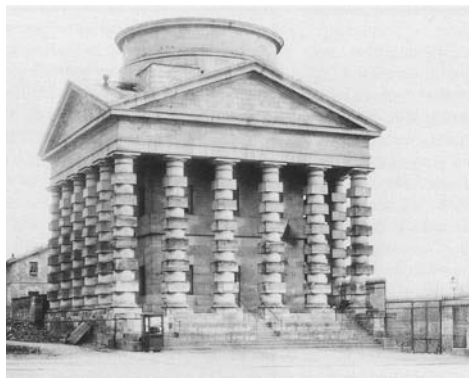
which, upon entry, displayed one hundred skylights within a domed chamber over fifty feet in height. A neoclassicist, Latrobe's architecture was based on the strength and purity of volumes and forms within this sort of unified light. He abhorred the silliness of ornament and ridiculed its use. He was a true Enlightenment architect in the sense of Soane and Ledoux. He preferred Greek architecture over Roman for the strength of its forms and the determinate shadows that Greek mouldings created. Greek architectural mouldings, such as the elliptical cavetto, (a concave form) and the quirked ovolo (an egg-shaped convex form) offered him an opportunity to create a more interesting play of light and shadow on his robust entablatures.

Although shy about symbolism in architecture, Latrobe was not against it and, we shall see, he would comfortably reinvent symbols for a new age.

In our subject Egyptian library, all of Latrobe's design proclivities will come together as an extraordinary infill project. Latrobe's architecture demonstrates the clarity of utility; the strength, solidity, and simplicity of form; the careful manipulation of light sources; and a clear direct use of symbol or metaphor.

### The Egyptian Style

To understand Latrobe's initial thoughts about his monumental library design we first will explore the rise of interest in the Egyptian architecture in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century and early 19<sup>th</sup> Century.



*Ledoux barrière (left), Soane's Bank of England (right)*

Napoléon Bonaparte's rise to power began with the Battle of 13 Vendémiaire Year III (5 October 1795) as a twenty-six year old General of the Army of the French Republic. The Directory governed the French Republic from November 1795 to November 1799. He engineered the Coup of 18 Brumaire (9 November 1799) which established him as the First Consul of the French Republic. The Consulate would remain in power until Napoléon declared himself Emperor Napoléon I in 1804.

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In that short span of years between 1795-1799, Napoléon attempted to conquer Egypt in order to control access to the Red Sea (thereby denying its access to the British). It was thought that an ancient Canal of the Pharoahs could be discovered and revived, which may have connected the Mediterranean Sea with the Red Sea. This strategic chokepoint was the focus of a lengthy and bloody



*Napoléon at the Sphinx by Gérôme (above), Desaix sur les ruines de Thèbes by Émile Boutigny (below)*

French military campaign that began with Napoléon's armies landing on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1798.

Essentially, Napoléon's foray into Egypt was a military disaster and the French ultimately were defeated in March 1801 at the Battle of Alexandria. But Napoléon was long gone by that time. He had left Egypt in August 1799, returning to France in October of the same year and carrying out with difficulty his coup of Brumaire.

What is exceptional about this episode is that the French military expedition was linked to a broad and ambitious French scientific expedition. This collaboration was thought to be the first of its kind wherein military and scientific efforts of this scale were comingled. Napoléon had a deep interest and talent in mathematics from his school days. When several of his former professors from the École Militaire, now members of the scientific Société de Arcueil nominated Napoléon for membership to the Institut de France in 1797, Napoléon invited them to join his expedition.

Napoléon established the Institut d'Égypte in Cairo in August 1798, not long after his landing, to further the "progress and propagation of the Enlightenment in Egypt" as an arm of the Institut de France. It is noteworthy that within the first year of the expedition, Lieutenant Pierre-François Bouchard discovered in a village near Alexandria a slab of black granite with one hundred lines of text carved into it which later became known as the Rosetta Stone (the Stone went back to London after the British victory and the stone's ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics--the top



*La pierre de Rosette (above)  
et l'Institut de France (below)*

fourteen lines--were not translated by Champollion until 1822).

Two very important publications arose from the expedition to Egypt. The first one (Denon 1802) was architectural in nature and the other (Commission d'Égypte, 1809) was of a broader scope of scientific investigation. Back in France, these publications led to a general excitement and a rigorous cultural interest known as Egyptology or Egyptomania. Scots James Stuart and Nicholas Revett had driven a similar interest in Greek architecture through the publication of their *Antiquities of Athens* (1762), and as Giambattista Piranesi (and others) similarly had ignited interest in Roman architecture with a steady stream of editions beginning in 1748.

In 1809, *La Description de l'Égypte*, an imperial work, was an encyclopedic compendium dedicated to Egyptian culture and science. Its



*Panckoucke frontispiece description de l'Égypte*

second more colorful edition was published by C.L.F. Panckoucke in 1822 (Paris) for which Panckoucke also was the art-ist. The tome that featured Egyptian architecture, was published first, however: Dominique Vivant Denon's *Voyage dans la basse et la haute Égypte* (1802).

The book that Latrobe borrowed from the library of the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia in January 1808 was Denon's. Charles Brownell speculates in *The Architectural Drawings of Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, that Latrobe's use of Egyptian detail may have come from this book (*Drawings of Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, Vol. II, page 406). Denon had been attached to General Louis-Charles Desaix's column which pushed south toward the region of upper Nile as Napoléon ventured to the east into Sinai and Syria (now Israel). Along Desaix's trek, Denon discovered all the majestic sites of antiquity: Karnak, Luxor, Dendera. General Desaix's campaign to capture or kill the Ottoman leader Murad Bey was recorded in map form.



*Battle of the Pyramids from François André Vincent (Metropolitan Museum of Art)*

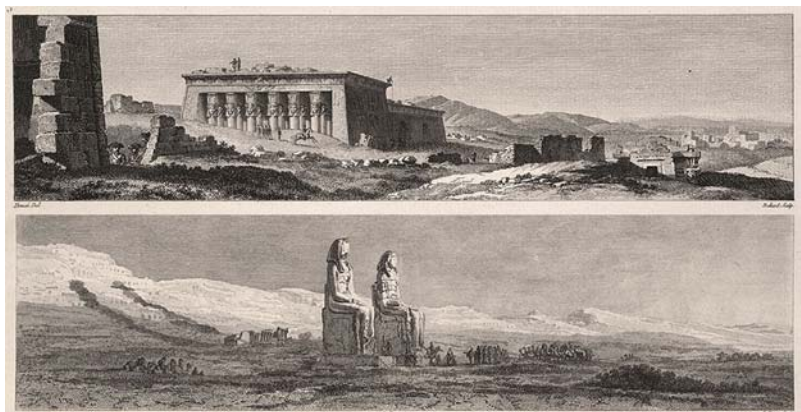


Vivant Denon's images were evocative drawings that depicted the Egyptian sites in their various states of ruin and degradation. Once back in Paris, his drawings were engraved for publication. One can clearly see in Denon's images the bold forms of Egyptian monumental architecture that are reimagined in Latrobe's library, such as battered walls capped by deep sweeping cavettos with giant bullnose mouldings (the traditional layering of architectural detail Latrobe would use in the Egyptian Library to signify the construction method is also typical of classical architecture). One sees in Denon's depictions of columns that, carved in stone, appear to be bound

*Images from Denon's voyage dans la Basse et la Haute Égypte (1802)*

papyrus reeds, capped by buds and also by buds that have blossomed. In many images, the carved winged sun disk God Horus is seen above the doors of the principal axes.

Also remarkable about Denon's images is his use of undistorted panoramic perspective, a wholly inventive and scientific development in itself.



### Latrobe's Other Influences

Egyptian architectural forms had been well known in Europe for some time, but generally the understanding was confined to obelisks and pyramids. The Egyptian Obelisk at St. John Lateran in Rome was built during the reign of Thutmose III and transferred and erected at the Circus Maximus in 357 C.E. Having fallen and been lost for a thousand years, it was rediscovered, excavated, and reset in the Lateran Square in 1588 by Pope Sixtus V, who sanctified it with a cross. In Paris's Parc Monceau, a number of Romantic follies were designed by Louis Carmontelle in 1779 for his client the Duke of Chartres. One of the follies was an Egyptian tomb in the form of a pyramid. Denon's book must have been a refreshing resource to Latrobe in 1808. But he knew of the haunting power and iconography of Egyptian models prior to this. Most likely he'd seen himself examples in Paris, Rome, and London. The excitement of Egyptology in Paris already had affected architectural design as early as 1798 with the construction of the Passage du Caire. Latrobe never could have seen this work, however.



*Egyptian Obelisk by Giambattista Piranesi (above), the Egyptian tomb folly at Parc Monceau (below)*

When George Washington died in December 1799, Latrobe made a formal proposal to the United States Congress to immortalize Washington with the form of an Egyptian pyramid. Latrobe thought a stone pyramid the most permanent form for immortalization, as carved sculpture was more subject to the ravages of time and bronze sculpture was “utterly unpleasant to look at”. The design was composed of thirteen steps leading to a platform. Upon the platform was a block-like lower story styled like an Egyptian tomb with battered walls and deep cavetto mouldings. The pyramid itself was above the lower story. Four equal doorways led to a cubic chamber with four allegorical paintings of Washington's life and career. The doorways were distyle in antis openings framed with massive Greek Doric columns, creating an interesting marriage of the Egyptian and the Greek. Above the entrance portal carved into the deep cavetto shape of the stone lintel where one might expect Horus to appear (the winged Egyptian God represented as a sun disk as we see in Denon), Latrobe transformed the iconic threshold relief into an American eagle. He felt that universal and permanently intelligible symbolism might become transformed in the Democratic arts (Cohen & Brownell, 1994). This is Drawings of Benjamin Henry Latrobe, Vol. I, page 272.



*Washington's Tomb by Latrobe showing close-up of eagle at doorway*



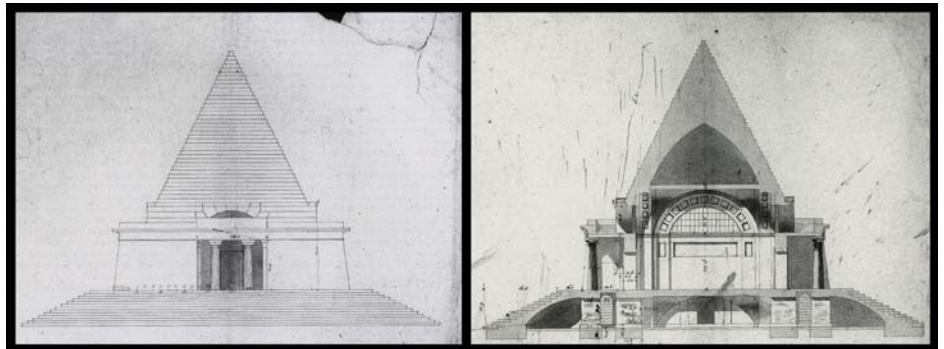
Denon's engraving of the Horus sun-disk (above), the American eagle as carved by Valaperta in 1816 in the Capitol (below)

architectural visionaries who designed with this in mind. The traditions of the picturesque and the sublime in art and architecture often were integral with lighting schemes. This was one of Latrobe's fortes, and several of his works hinged upon schemes that introduced indirect light with soft or sudden falloff that created mysterious effects of light and dark. His conflict with Jefferson concerning the lighting of the Hall of Representatives chamber was one of those efforts. Latrobe lost that battle, but he did succeed with an innovative and unseen source of soft light at the Baltimore Cathedral. In short, it was possible to create with the integral use of light an awe-inspiring beauty that might elevate one to the emotional level of the sublime.

Sir John Soane, whose Bank of England Latrobe knew well, used a term for the awesome effect of light in a lecture in 1819 when, speaking of Soufflot's Sainte Geneviève that the, "...lumière mystérieuse', so successfully practiced by the French Artist is the most powerful agent in the hands of the man of genius... It is, however, little attended to in our Architecture...". Endnote #3 – Drawings of BHL, Vol. I, page 30. Introductory Essay entitled: *The Neoclassical, the Picturesque, and the Sublime in the Architecture of Benjamin Henry Latrobe*.

Latrobe's pyramidal tomb for Washington was not built: A large equestrian statue of Washington had been approved by Congress in 1783 and was to be sited on the Mall. The competing pyramid scheme created too much conflict for a decision to be made. But Latrobe did get to explore an indirect lighting scheme in the pyramidal chamber. Light would bounce into the chamber through lunette-shaped windows and provide a soft mysterious light for the contemplation of the tomb and its allegorical paintings.

Latrobe's philosophy about lighting places him squarely in the camp of the Enlightenment philosophers who identified the elevated psychological sense known as the sublime and the



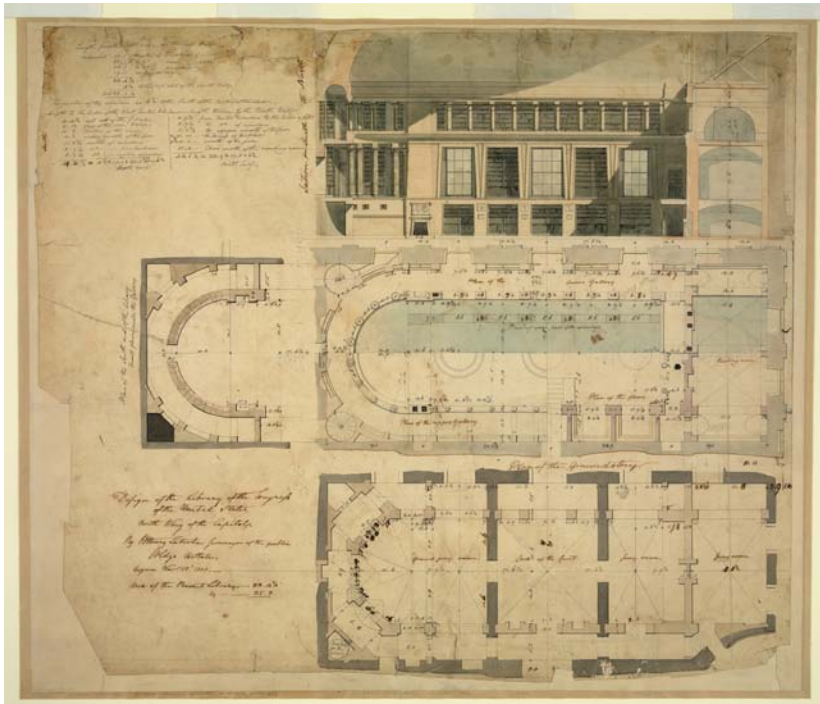
Latrobe's Elevation and Section of the tomb showing lunettes



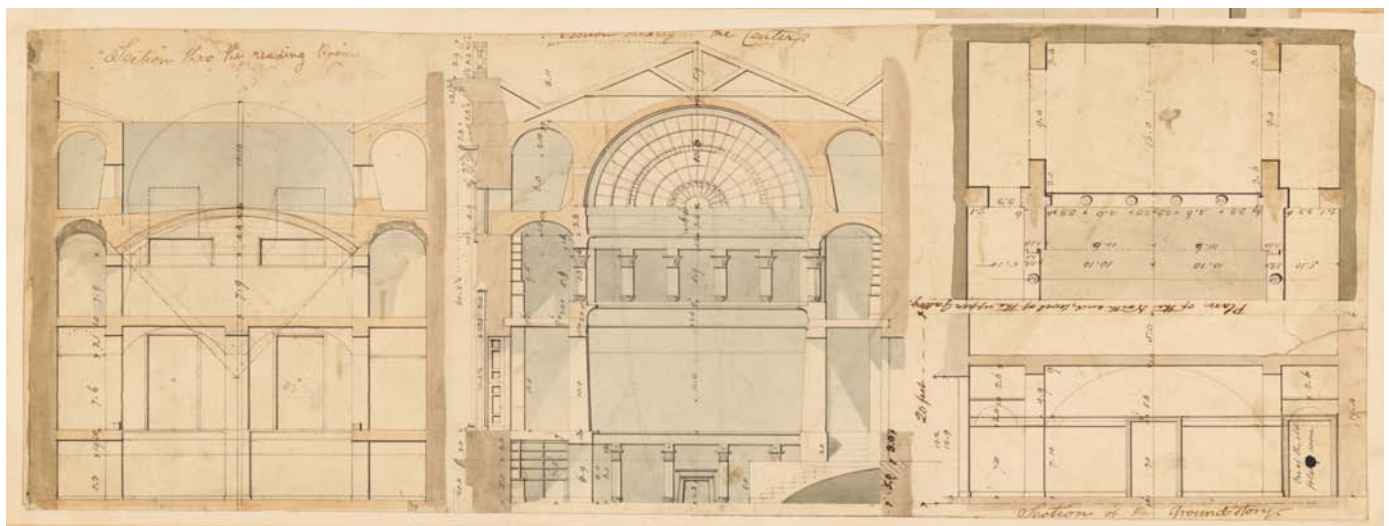
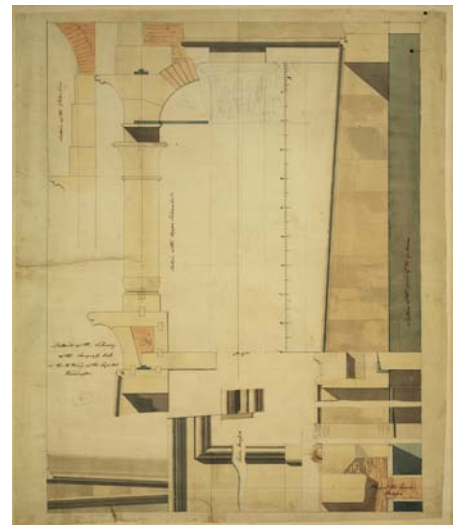
Bank Stock Office, Bank of England by John Soane (Watercolor by Joseph Gandy)

### Latrobe's Design for the Egyptian Library

In an 1806 detail plan of the North Wing, Latrobe showed an apsidal figural space tucked into the northwest corner which he labeled Library. A year later, structural detail was added to the drawing indicating internal support. A year after that, he began to produce the three drawings the author of this paper has used in his digital construction of the library. One of these drawings is dated 18 November 1808.



*Drawings by Latrobe: Long Section with Plan  
Short Section  
Detail Sheet*



The Egyptian theme has come to full fruition in these drawings as a coherent iconography. Two drawings are of a smaller scale, and one is a detail sheet which is larger and of larger scale. In typical Latrobian fashion, the architect has methodically defined his subject with rigorous dimensioning and notes. His infill design is carefully set within the existing masonry shell and then rhythmically

established based on the existing window centerlines. Five major bays in the main gallery are coordinated with the three large existing windows. Several windows are covered up in this design. Nine minor bays in the upper gallery harmonize with the five major ones below, obviating the need for an upper gallery column to land on the center of a lintel. His dimensions always add up. In this case, the apsidal end of the library had to dig into south wall by 4 1/2" for all of this optimal geometry to resolve itself and he has made a note on the drawing stating as such. The internal structure all ties back to the massive exterior walls.

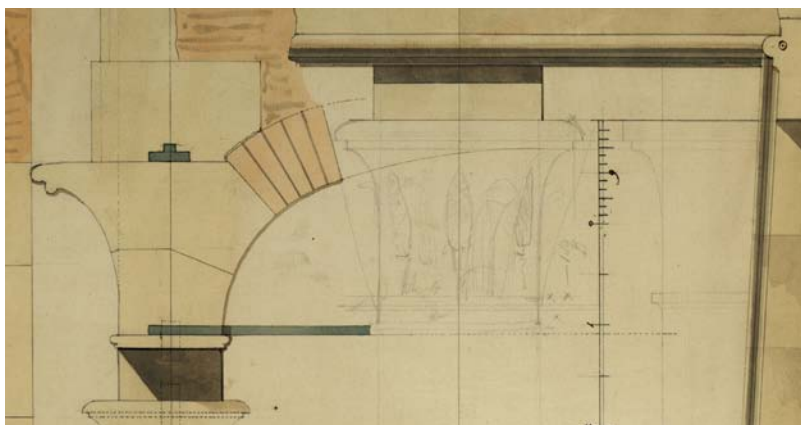
For the roof structure, Latrobe indicates a barrel vault of radius 10'-10" as the principal ceiling with an apse at one end and a large north-facing window at the opposite end to receive light and bounce it inward. The masonry-vaulted roof is meant to be fireproof. A hyphen-like banding occurs where the apse springs from the barrel vault and in doing this, Latrobe creates large masonry blocks toward the middle of the room that support several fireplaces and flues. All of the room's structure falls below the building's exterior cornice. As seen from the outside, the only evidence of a library within, perhaps, would be that certain west-facing windows are blocked or partly blocked by the requirements of the library's arrangement.

To make the program work, the library's floor is five feet lower than the top of the impost level at both wings (20'-0") where the floor naturally would have been. This is the level at the exterior which includes the beautiful guilloché motif. Lowering the floor allowed for the library to be three stories high, and the levels were accessed via a split-level stairway. The library was meant to hold 40,000 volumes. These are meticulously and beautifully drawn in Latrobe's very convincing building section. Also drawn into the section is a collection of beautiful maps that are so nicely drawn that their geography is recognizable even at the scale of 1/8" = 1'-0". The large world map above the Egyptian style chimney piece seems to be hanging as if it were a scroll.

Watercolored directly into the section is the effect of the chamber's indirect lighting. This watercolor technique is a clear indication of the architect's intentions for lighting the room. Latrobe might have described the lighting as grand or based on determinate shadowing. Architectural Historian of the Capitol (Emeritus) William C. Allen has pointed out that this use of light is the most inventive and most important feature of the room. The half-round window, a vast illuminator of a 10'-6" radius, would bathe the room in a diffuse glow appropriate for a library. On bright days a farther falloff, on cloudy days, a softer, lesser one. As Latrobe had lost the argument over lighting the Hall of Representatives, perhaps this was another attempt to practice his theory. The lighting scheme, most likely, was his first intention.

Allen also wrote that the use of Egyptian motifs may suggest Egypt as the locus of the invention of paper, and hence be appropriate symbolism for a library. It is doubtful that the use of Egyptian motifs referred to the Library of Alexandria, as that Hellenistic structure most likely was Greek. The Egyptian details found in Denon are mostly evident here, too: battered walls, bound papyrus columns, and the strong deep cavettos and bullnoses. The details offer the architect a strong and clear vocabulary to shape the vaulted masonry spaces bathed with mysterious light or lumière mystérieuse.

Pencil work found on the detail sheet offers an interesting take on the capitals for the major columns. Rather than budded or flowering papyrus capitals as might be



*Detail sheet by BHL – tight crop on column capital*

seen at Karnak and elsewhere, Latrobe's sketch drawing hints at a column capital suggestive of alternating ears of corn and water leaves at forty-five degree intervals. Perhaps this is the germ of an invention that led to the corn capital. Latrobe shipped his corn capital example to Jefferson in the Summer of 1809, where it now resides on the observation terrace at Monticello. If the faint pencil sketch is the germ of this idea, it would make sense that Latrobe again would take license to transform an established icon or symbol detail into something new for the Democratic arts.

Latrobe asked for \$25,000 in 1809 to build his Egyptian Library of Congress but the funds were not appropriated. His idea essentially ended there. Had it been built, it would have become the Rosetta Stone (pun intended) for future Egyptian styled architecture in the United States. Latrobe is credited with bringing the Greek style to America in 1800, which resonated widely for more than fifty years.

### Conclusion

Although the Egyptian Library was never built, and never really seriously progressed beyond the evocative three drawings Latrobe left behind, it gives us another window into Latrobe's fertile mind. His impetuosity and (seemingly) effortless combination of ideas and forms linked the scientific qualities of light and form that he knew instinctively with the fascinating and new, yet ephemeral, details of Egyptology. Ultimately, when considered within the sequence of his major works, it certainly fits with his ongoing and deep exploration of the essence and power of forms in light.

### Coda

It's interesting to note that a favorite student of Latrobe's, William Strickland - who had worked for Latrobe possibly as early as age twelve; who had beaten him in the competition for the Second National Bank; who had designed the Tennessee State Capitol with a Monument of Lysicrates resting atop of it - did build an early example of Egyptian architecture forty years later in 1849: the First Presbyterian Church of Nashville.

It is thought to be the result of a purely Romantic notion, as the design began as a Classical one. By 1849, as interest in ancient Egypt had grown in the previous decades, a few examples of the Egyptian appeared before Strickland's, most notably in Richmond.

Strickland's First Presbyterian Church is strikingly reminiscent of Latrobe's unbuilt design for the Shockoe Hill Church in Richmond from 1799 (a project that Strickland probably had seen on paper). Latrobe's Shockoe Hill Church demonstrates a massive solidity and simplicity that almost connects us to the Egyptian – it has outsized archaic Greek columns defining a deep distyle loggia and its twin towers are modestly-

scaled and simplified forms similar to the upper tower portions of Saint Sulpice. When the front porch columns were finally added to Strickland's First Presbyterian in 1871, it takes on a greater similarity, although it is not clear these were part of his original design ■

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\*\*\* To see other images \*\*\*

- computer recreation by the author:  
<https://mostbeautifulroom.com/>



Shockoe Hill Church



First Presbyterian Church,  
Nashville