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Two Views of St. Paul's Church, Alexandria, Virginia

by T. Michael Miller

The past fifteen years have witnessed an explosion of new literature on Alexandria Virginia and its mercantile, socio/cultural and maritime history. Among the new publications are numerous genealogical volumes which record tombstone transcriptions, deed abstracts, marriage bonds, and church registers. The historic record is further supplemented by a wealth of photographic images which provide a visual record of the changes in the city's streetscape and historic housing stock. New monographs also address the history of local neighborhoods such as Del Ray, the Town of Potomac, the West End, Fagelson's Addition and Rosemont. Meanwhile, thematic social, cemetery and architectural walking tours permit tourists to saunter throughout the town, sampling anecdotes and pithy vignettes

about the old seaport community.

Recent strides in academic research have also altered the interpretation of Alexandria's history. When fresh data percolates to the surface, traditional views of the city are sometimes modified. The discovery of new evidence (letters, diaries, court records, etc.) often compel historians to re-examine long held convictions. Otherwise, there is a temptation to become an apologist for what is orthodox or politically correct.

No doubt there are occasions when historians search for the truth, scrutinize the same documents, and subsequently reach different conclusions. Therefore, I am the last to pontificate about these

questions. Surely, there is ample room for debate and disagreement in a pluralistic society. And, if necessary, we can all agree to disagree.

The following two letters reference Mr. Denys Peter Myers' remarks on St. Paul's Church which appeared in the "Architectural Walking Tour of Alexandria." The tour was published by the Alexandria Historical Society in the Spring/Summer 1996 issue of The Alexandria Chronicle. The first letter was written by Mrs. Ruth Lincoln Kaye, St. Paul's Church's noted historian and author of an admirable volume on this Gothic Revival house of worship.¹ Mr. Denys Peter Myers, architectural historian emeritus for the Historic American Buildings Survey of the National Park Service, has penned a rejoinder to Mrs. Kaye.

Readers may review relevant documents at the Alexandria Library, Lloyd House including the recently discovered Circuit Court Case of Robert Brockett, Jr. vs. St. Paul's Vestry found by Mrs. Anne S. Paul.

St. Paul's Episcopal Church and Benjamin Henry Latrobe

by
Ruth Lincoln Kaye,
Historian, St. Paul's

The Alexandria Chronicle
published by the Alexandria
Historical Society
[Spring/Summer 1996, Vol. 4,

No. 2] contains a number of factual errors. Moreover, there is a suggestion, unsupported by fact, that Benjamin Henry Latrobe only "advised" on the interior of the church.

This article is written to set the record straight.

First, for the errors. St. Paul's facade, according to Thomas T. Waterman, internationally known architectural historian, was inspired not by Litchfield Cathedral, but by Peterborough Cathedral. The style is Gothic, not Gothick. Second, the statement "the steeple proved unstable and was removed not long after its erection" is flatly incorrect; the words tower and steeple are interchangeable in architectural terms and did not mean the modern term of steeple or spire. The tower's understructure was found to be inadequate and was promptly corrected by corbelling. Third, the twenty-seven stained glass windows by W.W. Vaughan installed in 1878 were simple windows, more than half of which have since been replaced by glorious stained glass. Fourth, the chancel was recessed to the EAST, not the North, and in 1906, not 1897-99. Last, the resurfacing of the exterior with the Earley process of stucco was done in 1923, not 1958, and was necessitated by deterioration of the original Seneca stone, replacement of which would have been prohibitively expensive at that time.²

Now to the architect, who

for the last 179 years has been known as Benjamin Henry Latrobe. Vestry minutes of the time, 1817-1818, were destroyed in a fire during the Civil War, therefore corroboration cannot come from that source. There is, however, ample evidence of his talent in both exterior and interior, as well as verbatim copies of a number of his letters to the church in 1817 in which he deploras changes to his design.

Confusion has arisen lately because of a statement in the newly-discovered and hitherto unknown Circuit Court case of Robert Brockett, Jr. brick and stone mason, vs. St. Paul's dated January, 1820 - May 19, 1823. Brockett sued for what he claimed was the remainder of a bill for bricks and stone amounting to \$3,416.13.³ [He ultimately lost the case.] In an appearance before the Court in 1822, Dr. William H. Wilmer, St. Paul's rector, deposed that he had asked Mr. Latrobe for a drawing for the front and that Latrobe was not the architect of the building "by any arrangement or consent of the Vestry or Building Committee". That statement could be interpreted literally, or that persons other than the vestry and building committee engaged Mr. Latrobe. It is certainly possible that the cost was underwritten by Latrobe's friend and member of St. Paul's, Judge Bushrod Washington, nephew of George Washington, and by Major Lawrence Lewis, who married George Washington's adopted grand-daughter, or Daniel McLean, and other wealthy

members of the congregation. Traditionally, Bushrod Washington was the one who suggested Latrobe.

It is important to remember that Dr. Wilmer was spiritual head of the church, not temporal. Worldly affairs were the province of the vestry. Lawrence Hooff, senior warden, was also chairman of the building committee, not one of whom was an architect or capable of drawing plans for this large and architecturally difficult church. Latrobe, on the other hand, born and trained in England, had the knowledge and sophistication to draw the plans for St. Paul's which is said to resemble St. James Piccadilly in the interior and Peterborough Cathedral on the exterior.

Furthermore, there is the important and not-to-be-ignored testimony in the Brockett court case made by the first builder, Jeremiah Bosworth, on August 4, 1821, that "the plan was made by B.H. Latrobe which was adopted by the Committee of the church appointed to superintend the building", and that "B.H. Latrobe furnished the plan at the instance of this deponent." [Underlining supplied.] Who would know better than the builder??

The most conclusive evidence is found in the letters Latrobe wrote Dr. Wilmer and Mr. Hooff between July 4 and November 17, 1817, brief extracts presented here. (The complete letters are printed in the History of St. Paul's with permission from the Maryland Historical Society,

copies available from the church or the writer. (Underlining supplied.)

July 4, 1817: "Agreeably to my promise, I have made a drawing of your church in the style projected."

July 14, 1817: "I had prepared some drawings for Mr. Bosworth when fortunately he arrived...[Do not] permit yourself to think of alterations [such as] omitting the piers on the flanks and thickening the flanks..at the expense of 25,000 bricks."

August 10, 1817: A long and irritable letter. "I have given you the best design which I could form upon the given foundations of your church." He then bewails the square-headed windows on the floor level, obviously preferring elongated Gothic ones. He speaks of the congregations' "opinion of their architect" and of his more economical design for construction of the side walls.

Nove.[sic] 27, 1817: In a long letter he objects to construction of the galleries and makes a drawing which shows the arch of the vaulted ceiling. He thus had an intimate knowledge of this unusual vaulted ceiling.

Finally, an 1820 financial statement in the church archives shows a payment to Mr. Latrobe.

That Latrobe did design the building has been corroborated by eminent architects of this century who

have analyzed his style.⁴ Both Thomas T. Waterman and Talbot Hamlin describe the exterior and interior as uniquely Latrobe's. That the interior has been changed by addition of the chancel and chapel cannot be denied, yet Latrobe's original design is plainly to be seen, or else recognition would not have been given after exhaustive investigation on the site by the National Register of Historic Places and Virginia Historic Landmarks.

1. Ruth Kaye's volume on the history of St. Paul's Church may be purchased by writing her at 708 Braxton Place, Alexandria, VA 22301. The cost is \$25 plus \$3 postage. Proceeds will go toward the restoration of St. Paul's Church.

2. Ruth Lincoln Kaye, The History of St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Alexandria, Virginia, November 12, 1809-November 12, 1984

3. Alexandria County Record Book M: 1822-1826

4. Kaye, op. cit., pp. 20-21.

St. Paul's Church -- A Response

by Denys Peter Myers

Through the kindness of friends, I have received a copy of Mrs. Kaye's response to the segment on St. Paul's Church in my "Architectural Walking Tour of Alexandria." I am pleased to be corrected wherein I err

but wish to clarify questions concerning objections which I believe cannot be sustained. In no portion of my tour text did I categorically state that Benjamin Henry Latrobe was not the architect of St. Paul's. He unquestionably designed the west front, however much it may have been modified in execution.

Mrs. Kaye is absolutely correct in naming Peterborough as the probable inspiration for St. Paul's west front. After pondering how I came to mention Lichfield, I can offer only an explanation, not an excuse.

Lichfield: In 1977 I contributed a chapter on Alexandria Architecture to editor John D. Macoll's Alexandria A Towne in Transition. In that text I committed the cardinal sin of relying upon my fallible memory, not having been in either Peterborough or Lichfield since 1926, when I toured English cathedrals with my parents. (I also did not consult my library on the spelling of Lichfield, which I misspelled with a "t".) I repeated the error when writing a tour for the Historic American Buildings Survey interns in July 1995. MEA CULPA! The moral is that one should not rely upon secondary sources even when one is their author. The HABS walking tour text formed the nucleus for the Alexandria Chronicle architectural tour. I regret to note that on page 19 of Mrs. Kaye's admirable history of St. Paul's Church, she unfortunately attributes St. Mary's Seminary Chapel in

Baltimore, Maryland, to Benjamin Henry Latrobe when it was in fact designed by Maximilian Godefroy. (We are none of us infallible.)

St. James, Piccadilly:

Both Sir Christopher Wren's St. James, Piccadilly, in London and St. Paul's in Alexandria have side and rear galleries. If resemblance is claimed on that score, the same would also apply to Christ Church after its galleries were added in 1818. Learning new things has kept me young for eighty years. If anyone can demonstrate to me any stylistic resemblance between St. James, Piccadilly and St. Paul's, Alexandria, I will be delighted to alter my opinion that the "resemblance" is far from readily discernable.

Gothick vs. Gothic: The term Gothick with a "k" has been used at least since 1936, when I learned it from my great mentor at Harvard, Professor Kenneth John Conant, a founder of the Medieval Academy of America, the excavator of Cluny, and Officer de la Legion d'Honneur, to distinguish between the Georgian and all later phases of the Gothic Revival style. Calder Loth and Julius Trousdale Sadler Jr.'s, The Only Proper Style defines the distinction succinctly on page 13 as follows:

Langley and the Halfpennys perceived Gothic as ornamentation to be tacked onto the standard Georgian rectilinear forms, using whatever

materials were most expedient. Nowhere in the eighteenth century does there appear to have been any attempt to understand the genius of Medieval engineering or the interaction of Gothic ornament and structure. This eighteenth century approach to Medieval architecture, and the particular style it produced, is hereafter called Gothick in this work to distinguish between it and the very different interpretations of the style that appeared in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The term is chosen because eighteenth-century writers commonly spelled the word with a final k, a practice that was dropped in the early 1800s.

Having been for many years principal architectural historian for the Historic American Buildings Survey, I find it piquant to be instructed in architectural terminology by a fellow historian.

The Steeple Question: Mrs. Kaye asserts that my statement "The steeple proved unstable and was removed not long after its erection" is flatly incorrect. As for terminology, circa 1800-1825, "steeple"

almost invariably meant "spire," even when a tower base was also implied. The documentation indicates that Latrobe had incorrect measurements for the steeple. It is inconceivable to me that, had Latrobe (who was an engineer as well as an architect) designed the entire structure, he would not have been aware of the precise dimensions of the lower structure upon which the soon to be removed steeple was based.

The deposition given by Robert S. Lanphier in the Alexandria, D.C. Circuit Court Case, Brockett vs. the Vestry of St. Paul's, pgs 175-177, states in pertinent part:

Interrogatory 2nd -- Did you examine the steeple of St. Paul's Church?

Answer -- I did so.

Interrogatory 3d -- Is it your opinion that the said steeple is adapted to the purpose for which it is intended and would it be safe to build upon it as it was originally designed?

Answer -- I do not know what was the original design but I am of opinion that it would be "unsafe" to build a superstructure of any considerable size thereon the foundation being too weak to bear a heavy weight. By the foundation I mean the three walls which support the steeple.

Interrogatory 4th -- When you examined the Steeple did

you find that it had shrunk or had given way so as to be out of plumb?

Answer - I never made such an examination my object being to ascertain by measurement the number of bricks in the whole building.

Interrogatory 5th - Do you think the Steeple is safe in its present condition?

Answer: I do not think it is.

Interrogatories by Complainant's Counsel

6th - On how many walls as a foundation is the steeple built and how high do the said walls reach?

Answer: On three walls running north and south and on two running from east to west, the said foundation walls run to the square of the building.

7th - Which of these foundation walls did you consider too weak?

Answer - The east wall within the building.

8th - Is the wall of the Steeple above the said East wall thicker than the latter?

Answer: It is.

9th - Does the said defect proceed from bad workmanship or from a defect in the plan or design of the building?

Answer: From a defect in the plan.

On November 21, 1817, Benjamin H. Latrobe wrote these words to Robert Brockett, Jr.:

Sir

I drew the design of your steeple without information of the depth from East to West and supposed it to be square and that of course there would be 15 ft. 9 inches square on which to erect it... p 165

The evidence throughout both Latrobe's letters and the court case deposition seem to me to show most convincingly that the foundations and the lower portions of the walls were already constructed before Latrobe's assistance was requested.

Stained Glass Windows: As for Vaughan's 27 stained glass windows which replaced the clear glass in 1878, I was remiss in not adding that more than half have since been replaced by memorial windows including at least two by the noted Philadelphia maker Henry Lee Willet. Again, MEA CULPA!

Chancel: As for the chancel, most unfortunately the typist who prepared my text for the Alexandria Chronicle omitted a sentence. My draft read: "... A chancel by Emmett C. Dunn, a local architect, was added to the east in 1906. Dunn also designed Norton Hall, added to the north flank of the church in 1897-99 ..." The moral of that is, proof-read carefully.

I trust that clarifies the question of the chancel to the east and the construction of Norton Hall to the north.

Resurfacing the exterior of the Church: As for the resurfacing, H. Delos Smith's 1958 additions could hardly have been surfaced before they were built. The standard practice for stuccoing in the 19th century was to create a smooth surface scored to resemble ashlar masonry. I do not question that the exterior of the church was replastered in 1923 using the Earley Process of rough casting which bore little relationship to the 19th century surface of the church.

The Role played by Benjamin H. Latrobe, architect, in the construction of St. Paul's Church:

We now come to the role played by the architect and what is meant by that term. I could cite numerous instances in the United States before the middle of the last century where a designer was not considered the architect unless he personally supervised the construction of an edifice. E.g., the Boston architect Isaiah Rogers was premiated for his design of the Masonic Hall in Augusta, Georgia, in 1828, yet the published records attributed the building to the local contractors, not to its designer, as he did not supervise its erection. Both his award of the premium and one of his subsequent advertisements, plus stylistic evidence, establish him as the

architect.

A significant example much closer to home is the case of Christ Church Washington, D.C. For years it was attributed to Latrobe, but recent research accepted by the Parish Historian confirms that the architect was Robert Alexander, a member of the vestry, a builder and Latrobe's chief contractor for the Navy Yard. Latrobe may well have suggested the pointed windows. The tower admired by Talbot Hamlin wasn't added until 1849. See: Pamela Scott & Antoinette J. Lee, Buildings of the District of Columbia (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 262, 263.

As Latrobe did not supervise St. Paul's Church, that may in part explain the Reverend Dr. Wilmer's deposition when he was questioned on June 11, 1822. Wilmer swore under oath as follows:

He [Wilmer] distinctly recollects that when the question of selecting a plan [p. 179] for the building of St. Paul's Church was agitated by the vestry, Mr. Latrobe was named by someone with reference to that subject. He also distinctly recollects that Mr. Latrobe was generally disapproved of, [underlining mine] and that it was resolved not to employ his services, on the ground that he was considered extravagant and expensive in his plans and his style of architecture: St. John's

Church in Washington was mentioned as an instance of this kind. After the walls of St. Paul's Church, however, advanced above the ground, and the general plan of the building had been digested and settled by my particular request, I obtained leave to ask of Mr. Latrobe a drawing for the front of the Church.' This was received and adopted as the model of the front. Further than this, I believe he was not the architect of the building by any arrangement or consent of the vestry or building committee.

Mr. Latrobe came down occasionally during the progress of the work, as well to bring Mrs. Latrobe on a visit to my family with whom she was acquainted, as also to witness the effect of his own skill in the appearance of the front: [underlining mine] but never as far as I know and believe, by a request of the Vestry or building committee.

Mr. Bosworth who was the undertaker of the Wood Work was in the habit of consulting him on the matters that arose in the course of the work, and

when the mistake occurred by making the superstructure of larger dimensions t h a n t h e foundations, I believe he went up to the City to consult him. This Bosworth did, as I further believe, principally, on his responsibility, to get some relief in the difficulty in which his own error had placed him. ...

I repeat, the evidence appears overwhelming, at least to me, that Latrobe was presented with a partially constructed building, asked to provide a frontispiece and to furnish drawings for the completion of a church whose dimensions were already fixed. I concur with Professor Charles Brownell's analysis of the evidence, which was furnished to Mrs. Kaye.

My mention of Latrobe's advice (which was not followed) on the "flanks" refers to the north and south walls. I made no specific attribution of the interior details, which appear to have been, according to Professor Brownell's convincing analysis, entirely attributable to Jeremiah Bosworth.

A final word regarding the architectural merit of St. Paul's may be apropos. Loth and Sadler wrote:

St. Paul's Church in Alexandria is one of the two (sic!)

surviving Gothic buildings by Latrobe. Like most of his works in this style, it lacks conviction, but retains a certain appeal. Some of the flatness of the facade is relieved by the three tall arches reminiscent of the west front of Peterborough Cathedral. The building has its shortcomings, but they are due, at least in part, to departures from the architect's design. Latrobe, who did not supervise the work, was aghast when he learned of the modifications that had been made. An 1817 letter to the rector reads: 'I have given you the best design which I could find on the foundations of your church...I now find from Mr. Bosworth that not only is the whole church lowered eighteen inches, but square windows are put in the flanks. What a confession of ostentatious poverty! ... [Calder Loth & Julius Trousdale Sadler, Jr. The Only Proper Style, op. cit., p. 25.]

Earlier scholars, like my great mentor at Columbia, Talbot Hamlin, refer to St.

Paul's in his biography Benjamin Henry Latrobe as "a characteristic example of Latrobe's inept Gothic." Hamlin further writes:

"... St. Paul's in Alexandria still stands, but so many vital changes from the drawings were made in its building--Latrobe did not superintend the work--that for its architect it was a source of irritation and disappointment rather than of pride. Even the major proportions were altered-- the height reduced a foot and a half, for instance--and square heads were substituted in the windows for the arches Latrobe had planned. ..." [Talbot Hamlin, Benjamin Henry Latrobe (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1955), pp. 460, 461.]

Fiske Kimball, a pioneer scholar of early 19th century American architecture, in his lengthy article on Latrobe in the Dictionary of American Biography fails to mention St. Paul's Church at all, but he did not have access to many Latrobe papers which were later available. [Dictionary of American Biography, Vol. VI, pp. 20-25.]

Samuel Wilson, Jr., whose

wife was a Latrobe, had access to a plethora of Latrobe documents before the family presented them to the Maryland Historical Society. Yet in his biography of Latrobe in The MacMillan Encyclopedia of Architecture, Vol. II, p. 611-617, he omitted any mention of St. Paul's. When I asked him about that, he said the ruinous alterations made in Latrobe's design ruled it out in his opinion. His general comment was that "Latrobe's attempts in the Gothic idiom, though interesting and imaginative, are among the least successful of his designs." [Samuel Wilson, Jr. Benjamin H. Latrobe, op. cit, p. 613]

Construction Chronology for St. Paul's Church:

1817, April 30: Proposals

Will be received until the 10th of May, for the Carpenter's Work, Brick Work, and Brick, of a new Church to be erected for the use of St. Paul's congregation. A PLAN [underlining mine] will be shewn, and further particulars explained, on application to the subscriber, who will also treat for a Lot of Ground which may afford a suitable site for the building. [Alexandria Gazette: April 30, 1817]

[There is no primary evidence that Latrobe was hired by St. Paul's as its architect in April 1817 or that the plan mentioned in the April 30, 1817 M'Clean proposal was drawn by Latrobe.]

1817, June 21: The Masons of Alexandria-Washington Lodge #22 laid

the cornerstone for St. Paul's Church [Minutes of the Alexandria Washington Lodge No. 22 as quoted in Mrs. Kaye's The History of St. Paul's Church, p. 22-23.]

1817, July 4: Latrobe wrote the Reverend Dr. Wilmer as follows:

"Agreeably to my promise, I have made a drawing of your church in the style projected." "Perhaps it would be convenient for Bosworth to come up to have it explained on Sunday or Monday."

And again on July 14, Latrobe wrote:

"I had prepared some drawings for Mr. Bosworth when fortunately he arrived with your letter and enabled me to make them correct..."

These letters from Latrobe, fully quoted in Mrs. Kaye's History of St. Paul's Church, confirm that he did not prepare or present his plans to Bosworth until Sunday July 6 or Monday July 7, 1817. This is more than two months after M'Clean, on behalf of the building committee, offered to let carpenters and brick masons view the plan for the new church. Bosworth had signed a contract with St. Paul's building committee as undertaker for the project on July 1, 1817. [Alexandria Gazette: April 27, 1818]

Since the congregation had sold their former church on S. Fairfax Street two months prior, Professor Brownell suggests that the commencement of a new church building so late in the year is unlikely. Indeed, that St. Paul's was well under construction is authenticated by Latrobe's letter to Wilmer of **August 10, 1817** in which he writes:

"I have given you the best design which I could form upon the given foundations of your church...I now find from Mr. Bosworth that not only is the whole church lowered eighteen inches, but square windows are put in the

flanks. What a confession of ostentatious poverty! The congregation are proud enough to build a handsome front to show the passengers, but too poor to be consistent in the flanks...

Seventeen days later on August 27, 1817, Charles Page or Lawrence Hooff placed the following notice to plasterers in the Alexandria Gazette:

To Plasterers,

Proposals will be received for ten days for plastering and rough-casting St. Paul's church. The work to be commenced as soon as the house is covered, and to be finished with all despatch. Apply to

CHARLES PAGE, or
LAWRENCE HOOF ---- C.W.

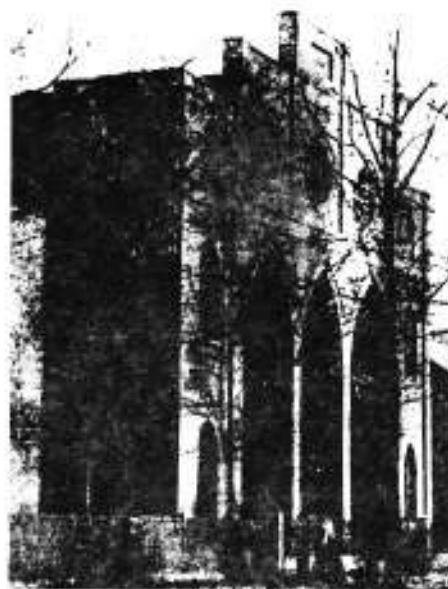
August 27

Robert Brockett subsequently contracted with St. Paul's building committee on January 7, 1818, for "the stone and brickwork for the building of the said church." [Brockett vs. Vestry of St. Paul's Church, p. 149]

Alterations and repairs to the interior of St. Paul's Church commenced as early as 1831 and subsequently were undertaken in 1840, 1861, 1865, 1867, 1872, 1874, 1875, 1878, 1881, 1906, 1923, 1945, 1958, 1967, and 1996.

Lest my opinions be misinterpreted as animadversions, I rejoice to say that I have happy memories of St. Paul's, having assisted there during the rectorship of Leon Laylor, in my capacity as a clergyman before the Bishop assigned me to Grace Church Alexandria.

Denys Peter Myers
Principal Architectural
Historian Emeritus
Historic American Buildings
Survey
National Park Service
United States Department of the
Interior



St. Paul's Episcopal Church--
222 S. Pitt Street; Photograph
courtesy of St. Paul's Church
archives and William Francis Smith.
The image was taken by a photographer
named Hartman in 1862 during the
Civil War.


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