

Historic Holt House (~ 1810-1814); A Legacy of Wm. Thornton



Illustration 1: Holt House - 1889¹

Introduction

Holt House (Ill. 1), located on a secluded promontory in Washington's National Zoo, is a stately neo-classical structure that has survived the past 200 years with evidence that it was conceived by Dr. William Thornton, the 1st Architect of the Capitol (Ill. 2). Many of Thornton's contemporaries and founders of the Federal City such as Benjamin Stoddert, Walter Mackall, Thomas Johnson, John Quincy Adams, and Amos Kendall are identified with the property. The house is notable as an important surviving example of a five-part Palladian house plan but with Thornton's probable influence on its design, and other historic ties, it is therefore an important and intrinsic part of Washington, D.C.'s history and that of the New Republic.

Holt House, currently owned by the Smithsonian Institute, was listed in 1973 on the National Register of Historic Places as a "Landmark of importance which contributes significantly to the cultural heritage and visual beauty of the District of Columbia."² Recognized as a house of "notable design" in the application; Thornton's Holt House is one of a few five-part houses, surviving from the Federal Period in the District of Columbia.

It is known through his wife's, Anna Maria's diary, that Dr. William Thornton often prepared plans and designs for his friends and secured design commissions by virtue of his personal relationships. This paper will explore the design features of Holt House, its history, the prominent people of the era and their relationships with Dr. Thornton, providing evidence that William Thornton created the architectural concept for Holt House.

¹ Photo 1889, Smithsonian Institute Archives, Negative #14330

² Holt House National Register Nomination Form, April 24, 1973, p2



Illustration 2: Wm. Thornton, 1st Architect of the Capitol³ (1759-1828)

Holt House's Design

Holt House is one of the few remaining 'suburban villas' in Washington, D.C, a design concept by the 16th century Italian architect, Andrea Palladio. As with Holt House, designs modeled after Palladio's, incorporated a central block, flanked by symmetrical wings, each consisting of connecting hyphens and end pavilions. (Ill.3)

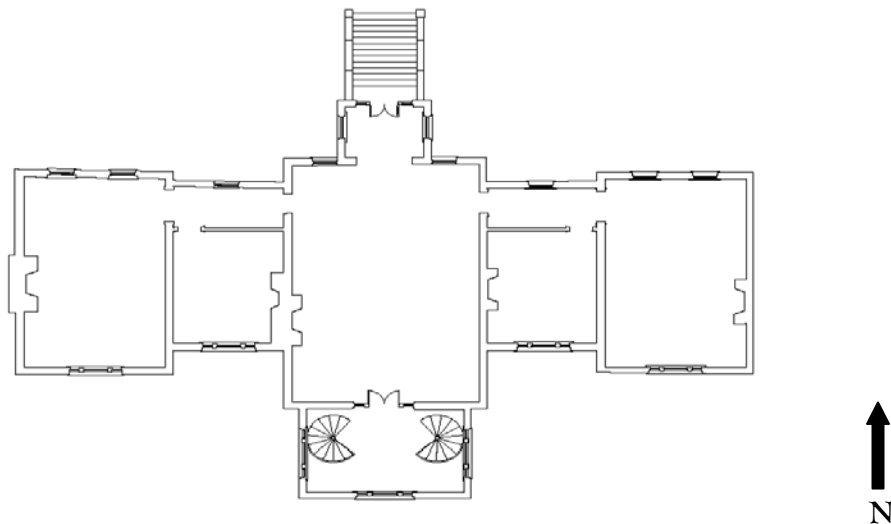


Illustration 3: Holt House-Main Floor Plan (1889)⁴

³ Office of the Architect of the Capitol, George B. Matthews, after Gilbert Stuart Oil on canvas,1930

³ HABS No.DC-21DC,WASH,128, United States Department of the Interior,p57

Holt House is a *piano nobile* design, an architectural term for the upper floor of a large house, with higher ceilings than the ground floor, containing the main reception rooms. The upper level or main level of this house was originally used as the principal and formal living areas; with the lower level or ground level used as service area and cellar. The upper level featured a large central space in the main block with bed chambers and other family spaces probably in the hyphens and wings.

The ground level is thought to have had at least five rooms originally but less finely finished than the main floor and not a full story in height. The west wing had an interior stair that connected the lower floor with the upper floor, probably connecting a ground level kitchen with an upper level dining area.

There has been speculation that due to the different methods of construction, including an oversized chimney and bricked up openings, that the west wing may pre-date the rest of the house. It may have been used as a small single family dwelling as the other parts of the house were completed; as was the sequence at both Tudor Place and Arlington House.⁵ It was the custom in the 18th century, that when an owner was constructing a large house, to first erect one of the wings to house the family until the other portions were complete. This gave the owner a place to live and allowed him to be on-site to supervise the construction. It may have also been built at the time of the Columbia Mills to house a mill manager.

Holt House was built of load bearing masonry walls; primarily of brick but intermingled with local stones and rocks. The exterior of the masonry was covered with a white limed based stucco, with a smooth finish and possibly scored to resemble ashlar; similar to the exterior finish of Tudor Place (Ill. 4).



Illustration 4: **Tudor Place (1805)** ⁶

⁵ Fredrick Doveton Nichols, Tudor Place, 1969, p.80

⁶ Image from Buildings of the District of Columbia, Pamela Scotand and Antoinette J.Lee, New York, Oxford University Press, 1993, p411

The central block and matching wings on Holt House have gabled roofs with pedimented façades that are articulated with equally spaced modillions (Ill. 5). The modillions are rectangular blocks or brackets used horizontally in a way that appears to support the roof above. The pediment of the central block, on the north and south elevations, is accentuated with an oculus recess in the masonry. Since there was no attic space or need for light, these recesses may never been glazed but the fashion of the era would have dictated a glazed opening.



Illustration 5: **Holt House-North Elevation (~ 1810-1814)**⁷

Originally the north entrance served as the main entrance to the house and was accessed by a stairway from the ground level to the main level's open porch. Beneath the porch was an enclosed space accessed on both the east and west elevations through arched openings; both arches remain today.

The south elevation of the central block, the most prominent elevation, (Ill. 6) was accessible on both the main and ground levels. The main level had an open porch with a parapeted flat roof, which was accessed off the ground level by a pair of matching spiral stairs. The paired spiral stairs were unique to this area but not extraordinary in Palladio's designs. The main level entrances on both the north and south sides of the central block were three panel double-doors with glazed sidelight sashes.



Illustration 6: **Holt House-South Elevation (~ 1810-1814)**⁸

⁷ Stephen Hansen, DC Historic Designs, Holt House-North Elevation Drawing, 2009

A significant architectural feature of Holt Houses' design was the use of Wyatt windows in the south elevation. These tripartite sash windows, with a center sash of six over nine, were a design popularized by the English architect, James Wyatt in the 18th century. The Wyatt window (Ill. 7) is similar to a Serliana or Palladian window, but without a center-arched glazed section. Wyatt windows are found in many houses in the Washington vicinity at the turn of the 19th century.

Benjamin Latrobe used Wyatt windows in many of his designs but they were typically adorned with blind arches at the head (a semi-circular recess in the stucco) as seen on the south elevation of the Van Ness House (1813-1816). Thornton used unadorned Wyatt windows at Tudor Place and Holt House.

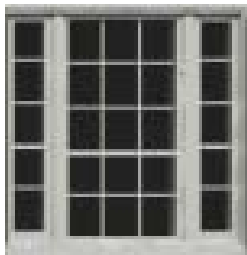


Illustration 7: **Wyatt Window Common Domestic Type, c.1810.**⁹

These and other design aspects will be discussed further in a later section devoted to architects and builders in the area at the time of the construction of Holt House.

The History of Property Ownership

Holt House takes its name from Doctor Henry Holt (Ill. 8) who purchased the house and the land in 1844.



Illustration 8: **Dr. Holt at South Entrance (1889)**¹⁰

⁸ Stephen Hansen, DC Historic Designs, Holt House-South Elevation Drawing, 2009

⁹ Stephen Hansen, DC Historic Designs, Wyatt Window Drawing, 2009

The property, on which Holt House sits, is now a part of the Smithsonian Institute's Zoological Park. It has exchanged hands many times since it was first titled to the Beall family in the early part of the 18th century. Part of this holding became the land on which the Columbia Mills (III.12, #6) and Holt House were later built. The property was deeded in 1795 to Benjamin Stoddert, one of the land speculators appointed by President George Washington to acquire land for the new Federal City.¹¹

Stoddert served the New Republic as a Captain in the Continental Army, Secretary of the Board of War, merchant in Georgetown, 1st Commissioner of Washington, D.C, co-founder and first President of the Bank of Columbia and 1st Secretary of the Navy in 1798.¹²

Benjamin Stoddert, credited with building the original Columbia Mills (III.8), is unlikely to have built Holt House. Stoddert never lived on the property but had a residence nearby at 34th & Prospect St. in Georgetown (III.12, #8) and a country house in Bladensburg called "Bostwick".



Illustration 9: Columbia Mill, Rock Creek¹³

In 1800, Stoddert sold off parcels of his holdings, including flour and plaster mills, to his friend Walter Mackall, a wealthy landowner from eastern Maryland. The deed included "the buildings, improvements, privileges, advantages and appurtenances."¹⁴ These "buildings" may be a reference to only the mill structures, but may have also included some form of a residence for a mill manager. Architectural evidence suggests that the

¹⁰ Photo, Smithsonian Institute Archives, Negative #5369

¹¹ Land Transfer Deed from George Beall to Benjamin Stoddert. District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds, Land Records Liber A 1 Part 1, folio 255-257

¹² Dumas Malone, ed. American Biographies, Vol. IX (NYC: Charles Scribner's & Sons, 1964) 62-64.

¹³ Photo, D.C. Historical Society, Negative CHS 952

¹⁴ DC Recorder of Deeds, Land Records F6, folio 95-97

west wing of Holt House may have been built earlier than the rest of the house and may have served as a small residence for the mill's manager. If a house the present size of Holt House existed at the time, it probably would have been mentioned separately in the deed.

Mackall sold the property, then called "Pretty Prospect", in 1804 (consisting of a mill and 42.5 acres) to a Pennsylvania Quaker and miller, Jonathan Shoemaker.¹⁵ The quick transitory nature of Mackall's ownership suggests that he did not build Holt House. Also, if he had built such a large house, the next owner Shoemaker, who was a small business miller with a large family, probably could not have afforded to buy the property.¹⁶

The Shoemakers were among the earliest Quaker settlers in the area and traveled far to Indian Springs, Md. to attend meetings. It was not until in 1806, that the first Quaker Meeting was held in Washington.

Problems at the Columbia Mill and a dispute with Thomas Jefferson forced the Shoemakers to sell the property and relocate to Shadwell, Va. Due to Shoemaker's financial problems and the death of his wife; it is unlikely he would have had the financial resources or need to build a large, neo-classical house during his tenure at the mills. Additionally, with his Quaker beliefs, it is more likely he would have built a more modest, stone, Germanic style house that he would have been accustomed to in eastern Pennsylvania.

In 1809, Shoemaker sold the property to Roger Johnson, of Fredrick, Maryland, the younger brother of Maryland's first governor, Thomas Johnson. Family records indicate that Roger Johnson purchased this land in 1809, probably for his son George to operate the Columbia Mills. In 1810, George married Elizabeth, the daughter James Dunlop, Jr. of Georgetown (Ill. #12, 11). Elizabeth was the niece of Thomas Peter, the builder of Tudor Place.

The mills were destroyed in 1812, so George Johnson employed a millwright "to build the best new mill possible".¹⁷ Unfortunately he was forced to mortgage the mill in 1818 to pay off debts;¹⁸ perhaps debts associated with building new mills and the addition of

¹⁵ Shoemaker, Benjamin D. *Genealogy of the Shoemaker Family of Cheltenham, Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1903) 30.

¹⁶ Garvin Farrell, *Smithsonian Institute National Zoological Park: A Historic Resource Analysis*, Sept. 10, 2004, p172

¹⁷ George Johnson's daughter, Roberta Johnson Peter in the "Johnson Family"

¹⁸ Land Transfer Deed from Roger Johnson to James Dunlop, Junior. District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds, Land Records Liber AT 44, folio 39-42.

a large house. By 1820, George claimed to have invested as much as \$60,000 in 'the property'. It is unknown as to whether this included the house now on the property.

By the summer of 1823, the Bank of Columbia was threatening to foreclose on the property and in desperation; Johnson went to his cousin Louisa's husband, Secretary of State, John Quincy Adams, for assistance. Adams agreed to pay off the \$20,000+ mortgage and keep George Johnson employed as the mill's manager. Adams sold \$9000 in U.S. Bonds and mortgaged his house at 1335 F St. to raise the funds.¹⁹ The mills became known as Adams Mills (Ill. 12, #6) from then on until they no longer existed on the tax books in 1867.

Perhaps the earliest known reference to a "*house*" on the property appears in an 1818 letter²⁰ from George Johnson to his father-in-law, James Dunlop. He is concerned that "my house"...."in town" would be attached by the bank and sold. While "in town" in present-day terms generally refers to an urban center, because George Johnson is writing from the Frederick countryside, he may be referring to Washington in general.

George was hopeful his Father could negotiate a settlement with the Bank and he could rent the house. There is no other evidence to show that George had any property other than "Pretty Prospect".

When Roger Johnson died in 1831, the house on the property, which had earlier been separated from the mill property in 1823, was identified in his will. The will stated that "the *house* and the lot adjoining the Columbia Mills in the District of Columbia" was among the list of properties to be sold to cover debts.²¹ The house was described as being located on the highest portion of the property, removed from the mills by steep slopes and a curve in Rock Creek.

In 1823, there would have been little reason to split the land unless there had been a residence where his son and family were still residing and needed to remain. Holt House (Ill.12, #7) was almost certainly built during the time of the Johnsons' ownership. Roger Johnson was a man of sufficient wealth to have built the house and was trying to set his son up in a manner befitting his social status. His son through marriage to Elizabeth, was now a member of the distinguished Dunlop Family of Georgetown.

¹⁹ Samuel F. Bemis, John Quincy Adams and the Union (New York 1956) p.197-198

²⁰ Letter from George Johnson to James Dunlop, Fredrick, 21 Dec. 1818. Dunlop Papers 1788-1908. Maryland Historical Society

²¹ Roger Johnson's will dated February 14, 1831. Frederick County Recorder of Wills, Frederick, MD, Liber GME 1, folio 212.

The buildings physical evidence, as evaluated by Denys Peter Myers in 1977, suggested a date of circa 1820.²² However with the circumstantial evidence, it appears that Holt House was probably built a little earlier, between 1810 and 1814, just prior to George Johnson's financial problems.

Nothing more is on record about the house until it was sold in 1835 when a deed for the property with a house on it was purchased²³ by Dr. Ashton Alexander. Alexander, a prominent physician from Baltimore, Md., must have been acquainted with the Johnsons; both their wives were Quakers and distant cousins.²⁴ Alexander never lived in the house but used it as rental property.

The house was rented to in 1837 to Amos Kendall, one of the founders of the modern day Democratic Party, a confidant to President Andrew Jackson and Postmaster General of the United States. Kendall dubbed the place 'Jackson Hill' in admiration of his friend but much to the chagrin of the owner and adjoining property owner, John Quincy Adams. According to Alexander, during the rental period, the "property underwent three years of deterioration by the worst treatment by those who unfortunately tenanted....and for a full three years not a dollar, so far, has been received for damages or rent."²⁵

Dr. Henry Holt, a former US Army assistant surgeon from Oswego County, NY, although not practicing medicine at the time, purchased the property in December 1844.²⁶ Dr. Holt and his family lived in the house and farmed the land until it was sold to the Commissioners for the National Zoological Park in 1889 for \$40,000,²⁷ nearly \$900,000 in today's dollars. At the time of the Zoo's acquisition, the Holt property, as recognized by Fredrick Law Olmsted, was an essential parcel in order to prevent development from encroaching on the ridge and despoiling the natural setting around the 13.75 acre Zoo property.²⁸ Olmsted, famous for his landscape designs at New York City's Central Park, Chicago's 1893 Columbian Exposition, the US Capitol's grounds and Baltimore's Druid

²² Denys Peter Meyers, Report on Holt House: A Feasibility Study to Determine Restoration Goals. May 1977,p21

²³ Land Transfer Deed from Joseph A. and Charles Johnson (sons of Roger Johnson) to Ashton Alexander on January 29, 1835. District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds, Land Transfer Deed Liber WB 51, folio 280-282.

²⁴ Land Transfer Deed from Joseph A. and Charles Johnson (sons of Roger Johnson) to Ashton Alexander on January 29, 1835. District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds, Land Transfer Deed Liber WB 51, folio 280-282.

²⁵ National Intelligencer, June 30, 1841

²⁶ Land Transfer Deed from Ashton Alexander to Henry Holt on December 21, 1844. District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds, Land Records Liber WB 114, folio 205-208.

²⁷ Land Transfer Deed from Dr. Henry Holt et al to the Commissioners of the Zoological Park. District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds, Land Records Liber 1424, boundary map,

²⁸ William Hornaday, Jan 1,1889,SIA,RU 74,Box 289,folder 9

Hills Park, encouraged the Zoo Superintendent to take their inspiration for future Zoo structures from Holt House.²⁹

In 1889, the Zoo found itself the owner of a dilapidated structure that was badly in need of repairs. To meet the Zoo's needs for an administrative building and to stabilize the structure, many alterations were made from 1890 to 1903. During this time, much of the historic fabric of the interior was lost; wood framing was replaced, a large skylight was added in the ceiling of the central block, new walls built, windows and doors replaced, new windows and larger windows cut in the masonry, ground floor level lowered, and the primary entrance was moved to the south elevation on the ground level from the upper floor of the north elevation. Zoo personnel occupied the building until 1988 after which it was boarded up and abandoned (Ill. 10). Currently, the house grounds are used by the Zoo as a storage area for the Zoo's facilities and it awaits future plans.



Illustration 10: Holt House-North-2008³⁰

The Architect/Builder

The designer of Holt House may never be firmly established but what is known is that the neo-classical lines, massing and details of Holt House were common design elements shared by architects James Hoban, George Hadfield, Benjamin H. Latrobe, (Ill. 11) and Wm. Thornton; as well as many builders at the time working to build the new Federal City.

²⁹ HABS No.DC-21DC,WASH,128, United States Department of the Interior,

³⁰ Photo, D.C. Historic Designs, 2008

Illustration 11:



James Hoban³¹



George Hadfield³²



Benjamin H. Latrobe³³

The builder of Holt House would have been familiar with the other “suburban villas’ that were built or being built in the rural highlands of the District Columbia around 1810-1814. Several were designed by known architects of the day while others were designed by unidentified builders. Unidentified builders built many of Washington’s early houses: Rosedale (1793-1810), Woodley (1800-1804), Dumbarton Oakes (1801), Dumbarton (1801-1816), Grasslands (1806), and Montrose (1810).

The local builders known to be constructing residences in the District and its surrounds at this time were: John Templemen, William Lovering, William Dyer, Leonard Harbaugh, Robert Fleming, George Blagden and Charles Sengstack; to name a few. The neo-classical, Federal-era building tradition provided a basic guide to the design of their buildings. A local builder may have been aided by plans and elevations from 18th century plan books, such as Robert Morris’ *Select Architecture: Being Regular Designs of Plans* (1757), but there are no plans similar to Holt House’s plan in Morris’ plan book.

James Hoban (Ill. 11) of Charleston, S.C., the architect of the White House (1792-1800) and Blodgett’s Hotel (1795-1796; Ill.12, # 1), owned many properties in the Federal City in the 1800’s. He is known to have designed many private and speculative buildings in and around the city but none remain today. All his personal papers were lost in a fire in the 1880’s. Oak Hill, a residence in Loudoun County, Virginia, commissioned by President James Monroe for his retirement, is the only private standing Hoban building.

Since Hoban was tasked with the building and rebuilding of the White House, Treasury and the Capitol Building burned out in 1814, it is highly unlikely he would have

³¹ U.S. Postal Service, Postage Stamp Design, 2008

³² Photograph, Congressional Cemetery, Washington, DC, 2009

³³ Office of the Architect of the Capitol, George B. Matthews, after C. W. Peale Oil on canvas, 1931

bothered with designing a country house at the time. It is therefore, difficult to tie Hoban to the design of Holt House.

Another architect's name that has been mentioned in association with the Holt House is George Hadfield (1763-1826). An English architect, he was a pupil of James Wyatt and settled in the United States in 1795. He was the superintendent of the Capitol Building's (Ill.12, #10) construction until 1798, when he was dismissed at Wm. Thornton's insistence. He designed several neo-classical buildings in Washington, including the 1st Treasury Building (1800), the District's City Hall, currently the D.C. Court House, (1820-1826), Arlington House (1818), Meridian Hill (1816) and the J.P. Van Ness Mausoleum at Oak Hill Cemetery in Georgetown (1826). Hadfield's only known surviving house is Arlington House (Custis-Lee Mansion), for which no drawings remain.

As a student of James Wyatt, it would not be surprising to see Hadfield use Wyatt windows in his designs, as are seen at the Holt House. It was not uncommon at the time for other architects and ordinary builders to be use a tripartite window, since they could easily be made in carpentry shops throughout the region. Wyatt windows are seen in Thornton's designs for Tudor Place and Octagon House (Ill. 12, #2) as well as in several of Latrobe's designs but the use of Wyatt windows alone are not enough evidence to associate the design of Holt House with any one architect.

Hadfield's successor on the Capitol Building, Benjamin Latrobe, pointed out that the young architect Hadfield was "...motivated primarily by good taste and impeccable training;"³⁴ not factors evident in the design or construction of Holt House. Also, if the massive unfluted, Paestrum Doric portico of Arlington House and the monumental style of the District's City Hall are signatures of his work, than it is unlikely that he would have been the designer of the much simpler styled Holt House.

Others have suggested Benjamin Latrobe (1764-1820) as the designer of Holt House.³⁵ Latrobe (Ill. 11), who is considered the first 'true' American architect, was formally trained. He is known to have closely supervised his work; it is improbable that he would have allowed the poor construction of Holt House, were it his design.

The plan of the Holt House resembles the general concepts of Latrobe's "rational house" with neo-classical detailing, an unadorned north elevation as the primary entrance and a *piano nobile* concept. Holt House's design, although possessing these elements, lacks the sophistication and the professional skill for which Latrobe is well

³⁴ Les Standiford, Washington Burning, (New York 2008),p180

³⁵ Ibid, Meyers, p33

known.³⁶ Some of Latrobe's local projects included: Kalorama (1807), Van Ness (1813-1816), Meridian Hill (1816), and Brentwood (1817) all substantial houses with designs more refined than Holt House.

Unlike Thornton, whose design career was based primarily in Washington and its surrounds, Latrobe traveled extensively and was busy designing prominent buildings in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Richmond, New Orleans and Adena, Ohio.³⁷ Latrobe terminated his Washington affairs after the death of his son in 1817 and moved to New Orleans where he would live out the remainder of his life.

Thornton proudly wrote that he was untrained as an architect,³⁸ maybe the reason he chose not to supervise the construction of the Capitol Building. Thornton is known to have failed to commit himself wholeheartedly to the tedious work of a full-time architect who would supervise his own work.³⁹ Untrained, perhaps Thornton was just unable to do so.⁴⁰

Thornton's Capitol Building (Ill. 12, #10) which.... "following an inspection of the shoddy workmanship of the foundations of the South Wing of the new Capitol Building (footings too narrow to bear the massive loads required, stones tossed one atop another, unsecured and without regard to fit), Latrobe issued a blistering report to the President that pointed up the shortcomings of the 'stupid genius' of William Thornton."⁴¹ Like the work at the Capitol Building, the foundation at Holt House was constructed of stones loosely tossed one on another and also insufficient to support the walls, a concern expressed in several pieces of correspondence by the Zoo's Superintendent, Frank Baker in 1890⁴².

His ideas on building are further illustrated when he writes to Jefferson on May 27, 1817 that the Pavilions at the University of Virginia "...be built in the roughest manner and plastered over in imitation of freestone."⁴³ Holt House and Tudor Place's brickwork is sloppy, intermixed with stone, in anticipation of the coat of lime-based stucco used to cover any masonry defects.

³⁶ HABS No.DC-21DC,WASH,128, United States Department of the Interior,p33

³⁷ Ibid, Paulson, p223

³⁸ George W. Paulson, M.D., William Thornton, M.D.-Gentleman of the Enlightenment,p142

³⁹ Ibid, Paulson,p143

⁴⁰ Ibid, Paulson,p143

⁴¹ Les Standiford, Washington Burning,p242

⁴² Smithsonian Institute, Holt House, Records Relating to the National Zoological Park Ownership of the Land 1890-1899,

⁴³ Ibid, Doveton,p78

The remainder of the paper will present examples of how William Thornton's personal and social connections translated into architectural designs. The Map of Washington below shows the relative relationships of the properties to be discussed.

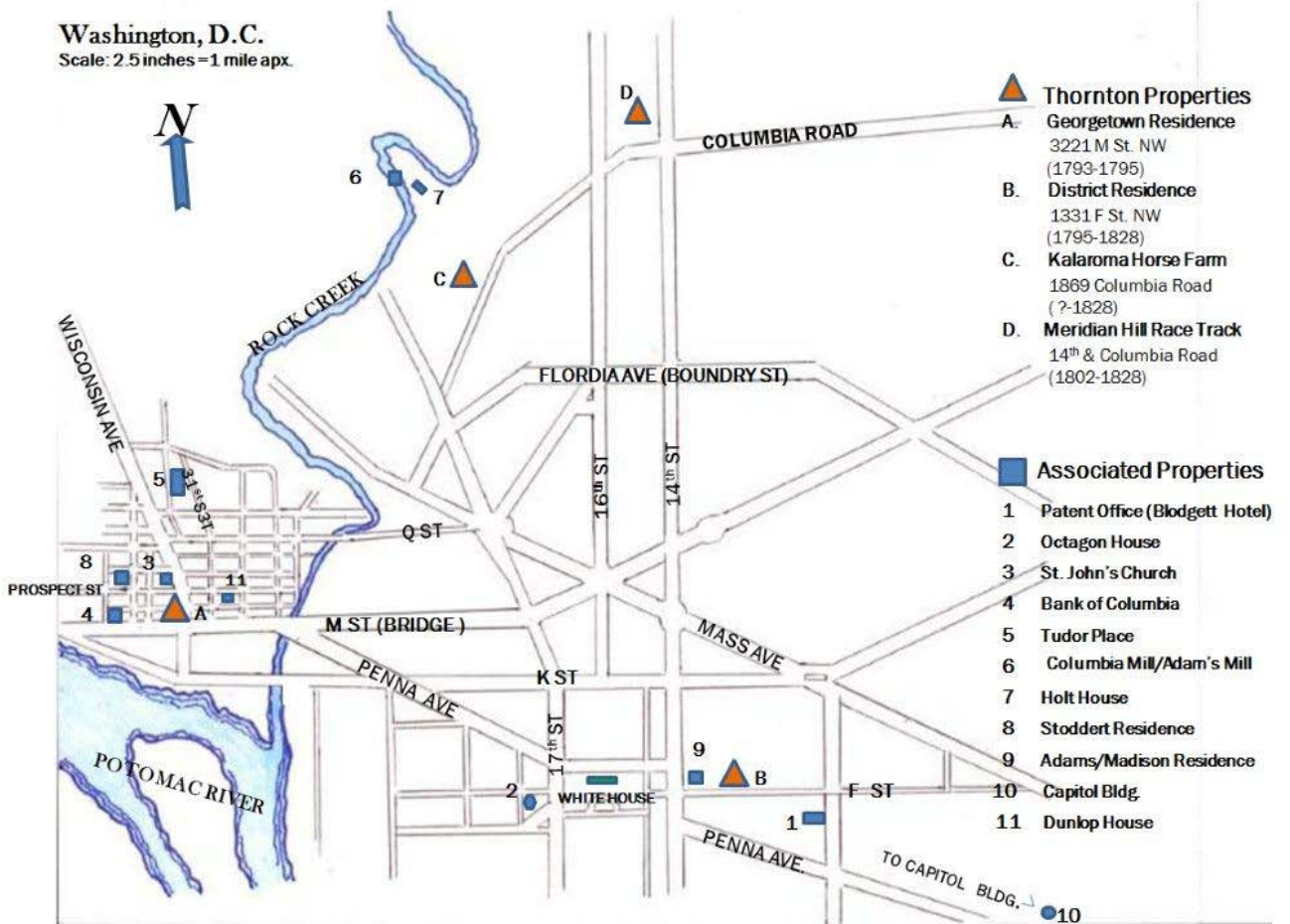


Illustration 12: Washington Map of Thornton's and Associated Properties⁴⁴

⁴⁴ DC Historic Designs, Map of Washington, DC and Georgetown, 2009

Social Connections

William Thornton was born May 20, 1759 into a Quaker family on the island of Tortola in the Virgin Islands. He was sent to England at an early age and later studied medicine at the University of Edinburgh. After a study trip to Paris, where he met Benjamin Franklin, he came to America and became a citizen in 1788. In 1789, with the encouragement of Franklin, he received his first American design commission; the Library Hall of Philadelphia (1890) the predecessor of the Library of Congress.⁴⁵ (III. 13)



Illustration 13: Library of Philadelphia (1890)⁴⁶

A pervading characteristic of Thornton's life is that when he developed a friendly, personal relationship with a man, as he did with Franklin, he frequently ended up preparing conceptual sketches and designs for their house or commercial properties. There are several significant other examples where this occurred.

In his early years in Philadelphia, Thornton met the Virginia Delegate to the Continental Congress, James Madison. Madison became a lifelong friend, fellow horse racer and Thornton's neighbor, at 1333 F Street (III.12, #9). He prepared architectural sketches for Montpelier, Madison's Virginia estate.⁴⁷ "The original house at Montpelier was built between 1756 and 1760 by Madison's father....It was enlarged at different times and various improvements made, the most important being in 1809 by Dr. Thornton."⁴⁸

After winning the design competition for the Capitol Building in 1793 (III. 14), he became close friends of President George Washington and then Secretary of State, Thomas Jefferson. Washington saw Thornton's design for the Capitol Building as

⁴⁵ Ibid, Nichols, p75-76

⁴⁶ William Birch, Library and Surgeons Hall in Philadelphia The Library Company of Philadelphia 1799,

⁴⁶Ibid, Paulson, p148

⁴⁶ Ibid,Paulson,p148

"...grandeur, simplicity and convenience so well combined in this plan."⁴⁹ Washington liked Thornton and admired his many skills and considered him the Architect of the District. In addition, Washington hired Thornton to supervise the construction of his rental properties on Capitol Hill and later appointed him as a Commissioner of the District.⁵⁰

Fray writes: "*Washington was a familiar visitor at the Thornton home when in the Federal City. Jefferson, Madison, Randolph, L'Enfant, Hamilton, Adams, Fulton and numerous others were noted among his close acquaintances. His social circles embraced....many other families of distinction. The most valid reasons for all his acceptance in the small and close knit society was that he was a locally respected artist, scientist, intellectual, a lover of horse races and not the least of these, the designer of the U.S. Capitol.*"⁵¹

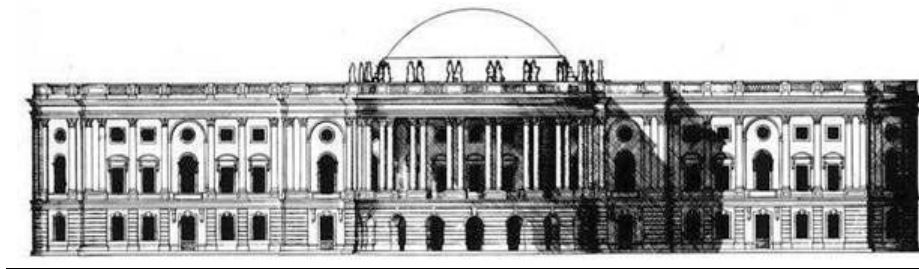


Illustration 14: **Thornton's Design for the Capitol Building-West Elevation**⁵²

Wm. Thornton's personal relationship with Washington played a key role in his developing career as an architect. Thornton went on to design Woodlawn (1800) for Washington's nephew Major Lawrence Lewis and his bride, Eleanor "Nelly" Custis Lewis and Tudor Place (1805; Ill. 12, #5) for the daughter of Martha Washington's son John Parke Custis. Martha's granddaughter, Martha was married to Thomas Peter, a horse racing enthusiast and a vestryman at St. John's Church in Georgetown. Through the Peter relationship, Thornton provided the design for Tudor Place, as well as early designs of St. John's Church (1803; Ill.12, #3) and became a co-founder of the horse racing track on Meridian Hill (Ill.12, D) for which Thomas Peter served as a Racing Commissioner. George Johnson was married to the niece of Thomas Peter so it may have been Thomas Peter who introduced Thornton to George Johnson.

Another co-founder of the race track was Colonel John Tayloe, the owner of the Octagon House (1799; Ill.12, #2). It was George Washington, who persuaded Col.

⁴⁹ Ibid, Paulson,p153

⁵⁰ Ibid, Paulson, p112,121

⁵¹ Ihna Thayer Frary, They Built the Capitol, Garrett and Massie, Richmond, Va. 1940

⁵²

Taylor to build his urban house in the new Federal City and to select Thornton, over Benjamin Latrobe, to design the Octagon House. (Ill. 15)



Illustration 15: **Octagon House (1798-1800)**

The relationship of Thornton with Thomas Jefferson was complex but rewarding overall. Despite their many differences, in 1817, Jefferson solicited ideas from Thornton for designs for the new founded University of Virginia. Jefferson credits Thornton for the innovative arcade under a second story portico on the front of Pavilion VII. (Ill. 16)



Illustration 16: **Pavilion VII, University of Virginia** ⁵³

When Thornton won the design competition for the Capitol Building (Ill. 14) in 1793, he also won \$500 and a building lot in Georgetown. This lot in the 3200 block on Bridge St., now M St., (Ill.12, A) was across the street from the future site of the Bank of Columbia (1804-1807; Ill.12, #4), the first national bank. Benjamin Stoddert, co-founder of the bank with Thomas Peter, was also an original District of Columbia Commissioner along with Thomas Johnson, the older brother of Roger Johnson. In 1794, Thornton succeeded Thomas Johnson as Commissioner but then later served together as commissioners.⁵⁴

⁵³ Mary Ann Sullivan, www.bluffton.edu/.../uvalawn/lawn.html

⁵⁴ Ibid, Paulson, p121

Stoddert, the owner of 'Widows Mite'; a large tract of land east of Rock Creek spanning from the Potomac River north to about Taylor Lane (present day Columbia Road); sold 56 acres to Thornton for his horse farm (III.12, C). Thornton's farm was within one-half mile of the part of the tract upon which Stoddert built Columbia Mill. There were at least two mortgages and numerous notes held by the Bank of Columbia on Thornton's properties. Since Thornton was well known by the bank's officers, as well as a neighbor and business associate of Benjamin Stoddert and president of the bank in 1802, it is probable that Thornton conceived the design or influenced the design of the original, Palladian-style, Bank of Columbia (III. 17) as well.



Illustration: 17: **Bank of Columbia (1804-1807)**⁵⁵

At the beginning of the 19th Century, the Quaker community in Washington was very small and without a local meeting house until 1811 when the first meeting house was opened at the Lancastrian School in Georgetown. Some suggest that Thornton gave up his Quaker associations when he was expelled from the Philadelphia Meeting, because of his marriage on Oct. 3, 1790 to a non-Quaker, Anna Marie Brodeau.⁵⁶ However, he attended a Quaker meeting in Georgetown with John Quincy Adams as late as March 25, 1821.⁵⁷ It is likely that Roger Johnson, married to a Quaker and prominent in the community, knew Thornton quite well because of the small size of the local community.

While living on F St. NW (III.12, B), Thornton was a neighbor and close personal friend of John Quincy Adams (III.12, #9). Adams' wife Louisa was a niece of Roger Johnson. When Johnson's son, George, was in financial trouble, it was Adams who saved him from foreclosure by buying the mill property and hiring him to manage his newly purchased mills.

⁵⁵ Photograph Bank of Columbia-Watercolor by August Kollner 1839, , Washington, D.C., Sights before 1850 Collection, Library of Congress, #181

⁵⁶ Ibid, Paulson, p26

⁵⁷ Clark, p125

Roger Johnson, the likely builder of the Holt House, who was familiar with the Peter's of Tudor Place; a friend of the Madison's; related to the Adams; and a customer of Benjamin Stoddert were also personal associates of Wm. Thornton. Any one of these people, who knew Thornton well and considered a friend, could have recommended him to Roger Johnson for the design of Holt House.

Further, Thornton stabled his and friend James Madison's race horses on his farm off of Taylor Lane (III.12, C), what is now approximately 1869 Columbia Road, which was less than a mile from the Johnson's and Adam's mill properties.⁵⁸ Taylor Lane was then one of the main roads from the north into the District and from which one would access Adams Mills, the Johnsons' property and Thornton's horse farm.

Under these circumstances and Thornton's personal style, it would have been extremely unlikely that he and Roger Johnson were not well acquainted and unthinkable therefore, that Johnson would not have solicited his ideas and that Thornton would fail to provide plans for Johnson's new country house. Anna Maria Thornton's diary indicates that her husband was busy drawing up plans for others houses in 1811 and 1812, although she does not mention for whom he was doing these favors. Thornton's friends openly asked him for free advice, for which he never charged.⁵⁹

Thornton's known drawings consist primarily of conceptual plans and renderings of the elevations rather than final presentation or detailed working drawings (the interior details often left to the whims of the builder). Since paper was expensive and time was valuable, one copy is probably all that Roger Johnson received from Dr. Thornton to give to his builder for the construction of his son's house.

It is highly probable that in 1811 Thornton provided conceptual plans and elevations for Holt House to Roger Johnson, which were then loosely interpreted and implemented by an ordinary, under-supervised local builder. This would explain its refined classical elevations as well as its poor construction.

Closing Comments

Holt House, after enduring nearly 200 years of history, multiple ownership, neglect and urban sprawl; still survives today as a witness to the founders, developers, and builders of Washington, D.C.. Its survival has everything to do with its "simple, noble, beautiful;"

⁵⁸ John Clagett Proctor, *Beautiful Temple Heights Estate is Center of Historic Washington Section*, The Sunday Star, Sept. 22, 1940, pC-4

⁵⁹ Anna Maria Thornton Diary, July 1820, W. Thornton Papers, Library of Congress's Manuscript Div. Vol. 7

architectural style; terms used by President Jefferson to describe Dr. Thornton's design for the US Capitol Building.⁶⁰

Although the designer and even the original owner of the house may never be firmly established, a plausible case has been made that Dr. William Thornton had a hand in Holt Houses' design. He was recognized and respected in the community for his creativity and readily produced plans for many of his friends and neighbors. Thornton was a fellow Quaker, neighbor and friend of the probable builder of Holt House, Roger Johnson, and more than likely created the classical, conceptual plan for the house.

Currently, Holt House, the oldest building owned by the Smithsonian Institute, has been surrounded by a facilities yard for the National Zoo. The pristine site that inspired Fredrick Law Olmsted is surrounded by many mature trees planted by Dr. Holt in the mid-1800's and awaits the group who will recognize its architectural significance, respect its historic fabric, repair its cracked masonry, and replace its frail woodwork.

Restoration of Holt House offers significant recognition to any organization that is able to caringly return it to a well earned, sustainable position of historical and architectural importance; just as Dr. William Thornton, the 1st Architect of the Capitol, would have wanted his legacy.



Holt House – South Elevation (~ 1810-1814)⁶¹

⁶⁰ George W. Paulson, M.D., William Thornton, M.D.; Gentleman of the Enlightenment, 2007, p 124

⁶¹ Stephen Hanson, DC Historic Designs, Drawing Holt House South Elevation (1815),2009

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ORGANIZATIONS

DC Historical Society, Georgetown Historical Society, Library of Congress, Maryland Historical Society

[DC Preservation League](#) (placed Holt House on their [2005 List of Most Endangered Places](#))

[DC Historic Preservation Office](#)

[Kalorama Citizens Association Holt House Preservation Task Force](#)

[Smithsonian Architectural and Historic Preservation Division](#) (AHP)