

THOMAS JEFFERSON. MISCELLANEOUS WRITINGS ON ARCHITECTURE

Letter from Thomas Jefferson to James Oldham (24 December 1804)¹

There never was a Palladio here [in Washington] even in private hands till I brought one: . . . I send you my portable edition, which I value because it is portable. It contains only the 1st book on the orders which is the essential part.

Letter from Colonel Isaac A. Coles to General John Hartwell Cocke (23 February 1816)²

With Mr. Jefferson I conversed at length on the subject of architecture--Palladio he said 'was the Bible' -- you should get it and stick close to it.

Jefferson's "Account of the Capitol in Virginia" (ca. 1785)³

The Capitol in the city of Richmond . . . is the model of the Temples of Erectheus at Athens or Balbec, and of the Maison quarree of Nismes. All of which are nearly of the same form and proportions, and are considered as the most perfect examples of cubic architecture, as the Pantheon of Rome is of the spherical.

Letter from Thomas Jefferson to B. Henry Latrobe Latrobe (12 July 1812)⁴

I shall live in the hope that the day will come when an opportunity will be given you of finishing the middle building [of the Capitol in Washington] in a style worthy of the two wings, and worthy of the first temple dedicated to the sovereignty of the people, embellishing with Athenian taste the course of a nation looking far beyond the range of Athenian destinies.

Jefferson's *Autobiography* (ca. 1823)⁵

I applied to M. Clerissault [in Paris], who had published drawings of the Antiquities of Nismes, to have me a model of the building [the state capitol in Richmond, Virginia] made in stucco, only changing the order from Corinthian to Ionic, on account of the difficulty of the Corinthian capitals.

Letter from Thomas Jefferson to James Madison (20 September 1785)⁶

But how is a taste in this beautiful art to be formed in our countrymen, unless we avail ourselves of every occasion when public buildings are to be erected, of presenting to them models for their study and imitation? . . . the comfort of laying out the public money for something honourable, the satisfaction of seeing an object and proof of national good taste, and the regret and mortification of erecting a monument of our barbarism which will be loaded with execrations as long as it shall endure. . . . You see I am an enthusiast on the subject of the arts. But it is an enthusiasm of which I am not ashamed, as its object is to improve the taste of my countrymen, to increase their reputation, to reconcile them to the rest of the world, and procure them its praise.

Jefferson's "Notes on objects of attention for an American" (19 June 1788)⁷

Architecture is among the most important arts and it is desirable to introduce taste into an art which shew[s] so much . . . [painting and sculpture are] too expensive for the state of wealth among us. It would

be useless, therefore, and preposterous, for us to make ourselves connoisseurs in those arts. They are worth seeing, but not studying.

Letter from Thomas Jefferson to John Page (1786)⁸

DEAR SIR,

I returned but three or four days ago from a two months trip to England. I traversed that country much, and own both town & country fell short of my expectations. . . . The gardening in [England] is the article in which it surpasses all the earth. I mean their pleasure gardening. This indeed went far beyond my ideas. The city of London, tho' handsomer than Paris, is not so handsome as Philadelphia. Their architecture is in the most wretched stile I ever saw, not meaning to except America where it is bad, nor even Virginia where it is worse than in any other part of America, which I have seen. The mechanical arts in London are carried to a wonderful perfection. But of these I need not speak, because of them my countrymen have unfortunately too many samples before their eyes. I consider the extravagance which has seized them as a more baneful evil than toryism was during the war. It is the more so as the example is set by the best and most amiable characters among us. Would that a missionary appear who would make frugality the basis of his religious system, and go thro the land preaching it up as the only road to salvation, I would join his school tho' not generally disposed to seek my religion out of the dictates of my own reason & feelings of my own heart.

Jefferson on “Colleges, buildings, and roads” (from *Notes on the State of Virginia, 1781*)⁹

The private buildings are very rarely constructed of stone or brick; much the greatest proportion being of scantling and boards, plastered with lime. It is impossible to devise things more ugly, uncomfortable, and happily more perishable. There are two or three plans, on one of which, according to its size, most of the houses in the state are built. The poorest people build huts of logs, laid horizontally in pens, stopping the interstices with mud. These are warmer in winter, and cooler in summer, than the more expensive constructions of scantling and plank. The wealthy are attentive to the raising of vegetables, but very little so to fruits. The poorer people attend to neither, living principally on milk and animal diet. This is the more inexcusable, as the climate requires indispensably a free use of vegetable food, for health as well as comfort, and is very friendly to the raising of fruits. -- The only public buildings worthy mention are the Capitol, the Palace, the College, and the Hospital for Lunatics, all of them in Williamsburg, heretofore the seat of our government. The Capitol is a light and airy structure, with a portico in front of two orders, the lower of which, being Doric, is tolerably just in its proportions and ornaments, save only that the intercoloniations are too large. The upper is Ionic, much too small for that on which it is mounted, its ornaments not proper to the order, nor proportioned within themselves. It is crowned with a pediment, which is too high for its span. Yet, on the whole, it is the most pleasing piece of architecture we have. The Palace is not handsome without: but it is spacious and commodious within, is prettily situated, and, with the grounds annexed to it, is capable of being made an elegant seat. The College and Hospital are rude, mis-shapen piles, which, but that they have roofs, would be taken for brick-kilns. There are no other public buildings but churches and court-houses, in which no attempts are made at elegance. Indeed it would not be easy to execute such an attempt, as a workman could scarcely be found here capable of drawing an order. The genius of architecture seems to have shed its maledictions over this land. Buildings are often erected, by individuals, of considerable expence. To give these symmetry and taste would not increase their cost. It would only change the arrangement of the materials, the form and combination of the members. This would often cost less than the burthen of barbarous ornaments with which these buildings are sometimes charged. But the first principles of the art are unknown, and there exists scarcely a model among us sufficiently chaste to give an idea of them. Architecture being one of the fine arts, and as such within the department of a professor of the college, according to the new arrangement, perhaps a spark may fall on some young subjects of natural taste, kindle up their genius,

and produce a reformation in this elegant and useful art. But all we shall do in this way will produce no permanent improvement to our country, while the unhappy prejudice prevails that houses of brick or stone are less wholesome than those of wood. The inhabitants of Europe, who dwell chiefly in houses of stone or brick, are surely as healthy as those of Virginia. These houses have the advantage too of being warmer in winter and cooler in summer than those of wood, of being cheaper in their first construction, where lime is convenient, and infinitely more durable. The latter consideration renders it of great importance to eradicate this prejudice from the minds of our countrymen. A country whose buildings are of wood, can never increase in its improvements to any considerable degree. Their duration is highly estimated at 50 years. Every half century then our country becomes a *tabula rasa*, whereon we have to set out anew, as in the first moment of seating it. Whereas when buildings are of durable materials, every new edifice is an actual and permanent acquisition to the state, adding to its value as well as to its ornament.

Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Pierre Charles L'Enfant (10 April 1791)¹⁰

Whenever it is proposed to prepare plans for the Capitol [*in Washington*], I should prefer the adoption of some one of the models of antiquity which have had the approbation of thousands of years; and for the President's house I should prefer the celebrated fronts of modern buildings which have already received the approbation of all good judges. Such are the Galerie du Louvre, the Garde Meubles; and two fronts of the Hotel de Salm.

Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Madame Tesse (20 March 1787)¹¹

Here I am, Madame, gazing whole hours at the Maison Quarree, like a lover at his mistress. The stocking weavers and silk spinners around it consider me a hypochondriac Englishman, about to write with a pistol the last chapter of his history. This is the second time I have been in love since I left Paris. The first was with a Diana at the Chateau de Laye Epinaye in the Beaujolais, a delicious morsel of sculpture by Michale Angelo Slodtz. This, you will say was in rule, to fall in love with a fine woman: but, with a house! It is out of all precedent! No, madam, it is not without a precedent in my own history. While at Paris, I was violently smitten with the Hotel de Salm, and used to go to the Tuileries almost daily to look at it. The loueuse des chaises, inattentive to my passion, never had the complaisance to place a chair there, so that, sitting on the parapet, and twisting my neck round to see the object of my admiration, I generally left with a torticollis. From Lyons to Nismes I have been nourished with the remains of Roman Grandeur.

Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Littleton Waller Tazewell (5 January 1805)¹²

The greatest danger [*when setting out to build a college*] will be their overbuilding themselves by attempting a large house in the beginning, sufficient to contain the whole institution. Large houses are always ugly, inconvenient, exposed to accident of fire, and in bad cases of infection. A plain small house for the school & lodging of each professor is best. These connected by covered ways out of which the rooms of the students should open would be best. These may then be built as they shall be wanting. In fact, an University should not be a house but a village. This will much lessen their first expenses.

Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Nathaniel Bowditch (26 October 1818)¹³

No one more sincerely wishes the spread of information among mankind than I do, and none has greater confidence in its effect towards supporting free and good government. I, am sincerely rejoiced, therefore, to find that so excellent a fund has been provided for this noble purpose in Tennessee.... I consider the common plan [for colleges] followed in this country, but not in others, of making one large and expensive building, as unfortunately erroneous. It is infinitely better to erect a small and separate lodge for each professorship, with only a hall below for his class and two chambers above for himself; joining these lodges by barracks for a certain portion of the students, opening into a covered way to give a dry communication between all the schools. The whole of these arranged around an open square of grass and trees would make it what it should be in fact, an academical village.... Much observation and reflection on these institutions have long convinced me that the large and crowded buildings in which youths are pent up are equally unfriendly to health, to study, to manners, morals, and order.

¹ University of Virginia (UVa) archives.

² UVa, Cocke Papers, No. 640, Box 21.

³ Fiske Kimball, *The Capitol of Virginia*, ed. Jon Kukla with Martha C. Vick and Sarah Shields Driggs (Richmond, 1989), 13.

⁴ Monticello, July 12, ME, XIII pp.178-179.

⁵ Lipscomb and Bergh, *Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (vol 1:68).

⁶ *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Julian P Boyd (1956), 8:535.

⁷ *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Julian P. Boyd, (1956), 13:269.

⁸ Website "From Revolution to Reconstruction."

⁹ From Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*.

¹⁰ Saul K. Padover, ed., *Thomas Jefferson and the National Capital* (Washington, D. C.: US Government Printing Office, 1946), 59.

¹¹ DLC Papers, 11, 226-228.

¹² Special Collections Department, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, Va.

¹³ Papers of Thomas Jefferson, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.