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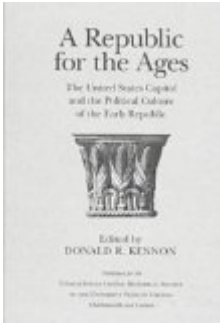
Donald R. Kennon, ed.. *A Republic for the Ages: The United States Capitol and the Political Culture of the Early Republic.* Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1999. xiii + 583 pp. $55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8139-1795-5.



Reviewed by Bob Arnebeck

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The United States Capitol is a remarkable building and symbol. The idea of it is almost as old as the republic. It has fulfilled its function continuously since 1800, save for a brief period when it was being repaired after the War of 1812. Its permanence in a country that has changed so much and continues to change has a tendency to seduce some historians into thinking that it embodies the very fabric of the Republic, its Constitution, laws, and moral compass. Other historians, those trying to understand the tumultuous changes in the rest of the country are in the habit of viewing the Capitol as merely a stage on which the necessary business of governing is ongoing. While there is a play of exalted national symbols there, the Capitol is much more a place where expedients are cobbled together to contend with more fundamental forces in the country that are its true history. So there is a difficulty with histories of the Capitol and the national capital because to many of us they seem, well, so un-American.

The fourteen essays in *A Republic for the Ages* are in the main by and for true believers in the symbolic importance of the Capitol. There's no nay-saying here. For example, though much is made in the essays of the Capitol as a symbol of liberty, union and other civic virtues, not one even alludes to the slave labor that built it. So this is a book very much of the old school of history. The authors are forever on the high road. But is that so bad? Indeed in many of the essays you get a giddy sense of relief from the usual fare of modern studies of the early republic: not a merchant ledger, not a plantation diary, not a speculative bubble in sight.

Editor Donald R. Kennon divides the book into five sections: "Capital Ideas," which explores the ideology that informed the City of Washington; "Gender Politics in the Early Capital," which explores the place of women; "Freemasonry and the Capitol," which makes the Capitol building a significant expression of Masonic ideals; "Republican Iconography and the Capitol," which takes a more traditional view of the building; and a "Conclusion," which is a nearly one-hundred-page tribute to Henry Adams. This arrangement doesn't

form an argument or narrative. The reader is free to skip around and I recommend it.

The most enjoyable essay in the book, Charles E. Brownell's "Thomas Jefferson's Architectural Models and the United States Capitol," captures the allure of falling in love with this building. What reader of a Jefferson biography didn't wish for amplification of those scenes when Jefferson collaborated with Benjamin Latrobe in designing the ongoing work on the Capitol? Brownell does that and more. He wants to prove that Jefferson's guiding hand directed the design of the Capitol from its inception so that it would become a "museum of the orders," (p. 324) architectural orders, that is, Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian. Brownell admits to difficulties in finding some pertinent drawings, forcing him to speculate on them. Plus, he has to speculate on what happened when the correspondence between Jefferson and Latrobe gave way to face to face meetings with no witnesses. In a nutshell, Jefferson preferred Roman models and Latrobe preferred Greek. There are hints that expediency sometimes overruled architectural genius. The museum of orders did not materialize. But Brownell, who thinks Jefferson's ideas won out enough so that he should be credited along with William Thornton and Stephen Hallet as architects of the Capitol, is still searching for clues to establish his exalted view of this process. He is a long way from proving his case, and the collaboration between Jefferson, Thornton and Hallet will be much harder to track down, but all the nuances of the argument are interesting.

Damie Stillman's essay "From the Ancient Roman Republic to the New American One: Architecture for a New Nation," explores Jefferson's hand not only in the Capitol design but also other state buildings. The nation's founders looked to Ancient Rome for political ideas, and it seemed natural to look to the architectural remnants of the Romans. The very word "capitol" comes from the Romans. Jefferson fell in love with the Maison Carree in Nimes, France, and used it as a model for his design of the Virginia State Capitol. The dome in the early designs of the Capitol was lifted from the Pantheon. Then Stillman explores the influences on the designs for the never built mausoleum for George Washington. These designs fed off a renewed modern interest in houses for the dead, and congressmen had to ponder pyramids. Stillman doesn't go beyond the task of explaining the influences on the designs. He doesn't explore contemporary reactions. Once again we are left on the high road, but in such charming Mediterranean vistas, who can complain?

Of all the essays, Pamela Scott's "Power, Civic Virtue, Wisdom, Liberty and the Constitution: Early American Symbols and the United States Capitol" best explores the rub between symbols and politicians. Scott puts a high gloss on the latter, perhaps rightly so. One can fault Charles Thomson, secretary of Congress, for pinning the American eagle back as if it were on a specimen board, but Scott doesn't. She credits him for consulting "Joachim Camerarius's 1654 emblem book ***Symbolorum e emblematuum*** in settling on the eagle's heraldic pose." (p 408) Scott takes four symbols popular in the late eighteenth century, "the eagle, Hercules, Minerva, and Liberty," (p. 404) and shows how each pops up as icons of the early Republic. Poor Hercules had a nice rise and fall. In 1776 John Adams proposed that the symbol of strength and virtue be on the seal. Benjamin Franklin did work the young Hercules into a medal, along with Minerva, that he had designed in Paris. Nearly 50 years later all that was needed was a nod from the president and a Persico-designed Hercules would decorate part of the Capitol. John Quincy Adams turned thumbs down. Scott argues that these republican icons were "enshrined" (p. 447) to reassure the people of the government's republican ideals. She makes that case well. Still, suggesting or approving designs for these decoration also seems to have been a perk of the highest office, a largely unexamined one at that. Why did Congress give the President such

power over what went up on the pedestals in the "People's House?"

There are other essays in the book about architecture, but since I'm emphasizing the better essays by placement in this review, let's turn to "Roman Matron on the Banks of Tiber Creeks: Margaret Bayard Smith and the Politicization of Spheres in the Nation's Capital." While it seems you can't shake the Romans in this book, actually Fredrika J. Teute's doesn't dwell on the analogy. Of course, Smith is not unknown. Her *Forty Years of Washington Society* remains a charming book. However, Teute shows how the editors of that book cut out portions of letters pertaining to what we call today women's issues, such as the frustrations of being excluded from positions of power. As Teute shows, Smith was an energetic and skilled writer and *Forty Years* only taps from two-to-five percent of her "several thousand letters and manuscripts." (p. 102) Teute uses the letters to show how Smith fashioned a woman's sphere in Washington by widening her domestic circle to include men of power and their wives, thus creating "female networks" (p. 115) that could influence appointments to office if not legislation. One of Teute's intentions was to show that women of the post-Revolution generation were not so dull as historians have assumed. Teute notes that "the obligations of domesticity oppressed her and she wrote about it openly." (p 100) In my view she makes a very good case for a fuller treatment of Smith. Exploring her experiences with childrearing, charity work, slavery, and nature, with which her letters abound, might make her an important influence on historians studying the period. I had the pleasure of dealing with a small portion of her papers. What historian hasn't sometimes moaned in frustration about letter writers and diarists who simply don't write what they experience and see. Smith is often so forthcoming in that regard it's a pity her works remain in obscurity.

Two substantial essays on the ideologies that determined the nature of the site of the Capitol best exemplify how historians close to Washington opt for high principle over expediency. Until the end of this century most historians were comfortable with the notion that the Compromise of 1790 which put the federal capital on the Potomac was an expediency that solved two issues bogging down the First Congress, the capital and assumption of state debts. In "Republican Expectations, Revolutionary Ideology and the Compromise of 1790," Melvin Yazawa seems to begin on the tack. He comes on like a Johnny Cochran as he contrasts the two versions Jefferson left of his famous dinner with Alexander Hamilton. But Yazawa leaves the dinner un-deconstructed. Instead he marshals his considerable knowledge of the period between the Declaration and the Constitution to show that Jefferson was justly alarmed that New England would leave the union if the federal government did not assume state debts. The deal was not an act of expediency. It was statesmanship that saved the nascent union. (p 35) Yazawa describes the long-held "fear of disintegration into competing confederacies, military confrontations, and, finally, despotism," (p. 6) that tormented the young nation's leaders. Yazawa does a masterful job in highlighting those fears. Many issues conspired against union, from British trade policy to the natural animosities between states. The Constitution was not an attempt at a more perfect union, but was the only hope for any union at all. Yet, one wishes there was a little more evidence than Hamilton's anguished looks that the North was about to send Jefferson, Madison and even Washington back to Virginia forever if the state debts were not assumed. Yazawa is not the only one to sanctify this deal. Elkins and McKitrick contend that it provided the "moral cement" to assure support for the Potomac capital for years it would take to build it.[1] Yet, there is little evidence that the deal had any symbolic meaning to contemporaries. When the commissioners of the District of Columbia needed a loan guarantee from Congress in 1796, Madison's advice was to forget it. Anything for the benefit of the Potomac

capital could only be extracted by bowing to more demands from the north.[2]

In "A Capital before a Capitol: Republican Visions," Kenneth R. Bowling examines the conflicting visions of what the federal capital should be. Adherents to "pre-Revolutionary American republicanism" (p. 38) hated cities, luxuries and extravagance, and wanted a simple capital to match. Post-Revolutionary republicans embraced the "rising-glory movement," (p. 45) and envisioned a capital that would be the grand seat of the Empire in the West to rival the glory of Ancient Rome. Bowling's essay is a great one to show to students who envision writing history as a process of holing oneself up with a great man's letterbook. The best part of the essay is the medley of quotes amplifying these contrasting views. Bowling found these letters in manuscripts collections all over the country. Then after stringing the young nation out on the horns of a dilemma, Bowling effects a neat conclusion. In choosing the site on the Potomac, George Washington found a compromise, a rural capital that in 100 years would rival most European cities and become "the greatest commercial emporium in the United States." (p. 54) I think this analysis is far too charitable to Washington, the man. This century-long view of his took shape only when it became clear that funds to build a lavish city could not be raised by the sale of city lots. So Washington put the best face on "the pimping scale," as L'Enfant put it in a parting blast to his patron, that the city would be built.[3]

The remaining eight essays in the book present, to me, some problems in scholarship and interpretation. Most are still up there on the high road, but on a slippery slope. For example, after dazzling the reader with an array of sources in his essay on the nature of the city, in his essay "'The Year 1800 Will Soon Be upon Us': George Washington and the Capitol," Bowling appears to simply summarize a collection of letters Washington wrote to the city commissioners published by the Columbia Historical Society in 1914. Not surprisingly Bowling gives the impression that Washington remained in control of events. That is an impression one doesn't get from reading the letters that the commissioners, proprietors of the city lands, and other interested parties wrote to Washington. For some reason the 1914 collection did not include Washington's last letter to one of the commissioners, Thornton, in which he describes the short history of the city as a "fiery trial."[4]

Jan Lewis's "Politics and the Ambivalence of the Private Sphere: Women in Early Washington, D.C.," is an ambitious effort to open all eyes to the importance of women in early Washington. She sets up some straw men (me included), claiming that in their books on Washington one cannot find the word "woman" (p 122) (yes, but there are seventeen women listed in the index of my book), and then with a flourish produces unremarkable quotes from women like Mrs. William Thornton showing that women were indeed around, especially in the galleries. From that she trivializes the effects that certain scenes and speeches had on participants and spectators. Since grown men cried after Burr's farewell speech and Webster's arguments in the Dartmouth College case, something they admitted to be unmanly, she suggests that therefore women, ever present in the gallery, had an effect on what was happening in Washington. She argues that women leaving the domestic sphere to view the political sphere created an "ambivalence." (p. 151) In the Dartmouth case, this served Webster's end in making the private realm seem more benevolent than the contentious political realm. To be sure, one learns much about the early republic by following the trails of tears. But the weeping in the Capitol? One supposes that Webster could as easily have brought tears to the eyes if he argued the other side of the case.

For reasons not questioned, and therefore not justified at the time, the Capitol cornerstone was laid in a Masonic ritual. This inspired three essays

on Freemasonry in the early republic. Len Travers's "'In the Greatest Solemn Dignity': The Capitol Cornerstone and Ceremony in the Early Republic," explains the Masonic rituals used during the event; In "'Sensible Signs': The Emblematic Education of Post-Revolutionary Freemasonry," Steven C. Bullock argues that the "brotherhood" had considerable influence until the anti-masonry campaigns of the 1830s; and James Stevens Curl anoints Benjamin Latrobe as the grand Masonic influence on the Capitol in his essay "The Capitol in Washington, D.C., and Its Freemasonic Connections." There is a disconnect between these essays and the others in the book. Both Brownell and Scott deal at some length with Latrobe's work on the Capitol and neither mentions Masonic symbols. Scott writes that Latrobe "was leery of using abstruse allegories in America because he felt they were as unintelligible as Indian sign language to the uninitiated." (p. 433) Yet Curl walks into the old House chamber designed by Latrobe and finds the Masonic influence "blindingly obvious once they are recognized." (p 266)

These three essays do make their points at some length and without equivocation. In that respect they are valuable. One can read them and make a judgment. It would be nice, however, if Travers had one contemporary account, apart from the press release describing the ceremony, that showed that someone was indeed impressed by the Masonic ritual. The choreography of the day entailed the Virginia lodge crossing the Potomac to be met by the Maryland lodge and then led to a ceremony officiated by the new District of Columbia lodge. One could say the masons were primarily reenacting and reminding the nation of how the new federal territory came to be. And Curl has no evidence that Latrobe, who was evidently an active Mason, ever owned up to what Curl says he was doing or that anyone recognized the Masonic underpinnings of his work. As for Bullock his hot language and elevated ideas can take one's breath away.

Bullock argues that because "the larger mystery of Masonry's visual efflorescence" was particularly significant in the "post-Revolutionary context," (p. 180) Masonry flourished in the first fifty years of the new nation. He shows how the symbols were designed to make "brother" Masons (he uses the fraternal word throughout the essay) more moral, and by sharing those symbols Masons sought "to teach morality to an audience that went beyond the brotherhood." (p. 197) There was "a widespread conviction that Masonry would help determine the character of the new nation" (p. 181) and that character would be rooted in virtue. At the end of his essay Bullock attempts to disarm critics by claiming that due to "the success of Antimasonry and the end of the neoclassical symbolic tradition," scholars think of Masonry as akin to "the Flintstones' Water Buffalo." (p. 213) Actually, what scholars are looking for and what they will miss in Bullock's essay is evidence that freemasonry to men like George Washington was anything more than a high-toned men's club. Men became masons at an age long after their morality was formed. He suggests that Washington "argued" that his fellow brothers wanted to "make the nation what Masonry already was 'a lodge for the virtues,'" (p. 182). Presidents, of course, get congratulatory messages from all sorts of civic bodies. Masonic Lodges sometimes wrote to him on December 27th, one of their special days. In 1796 the Pennsylvania Grand Lodge thanked Washington, who had announced his retirement, for all he had done. Both that letter and Washington's reply were freighted with Masonic language. He alludes to the effort of many men to make the nation a "lodge for the virtuous." [5] If we are to parse all the wonderful replies Washington and other presidents made to all the wonderful sentiments sent to him and them, what a wonderful world it would seem, but is it history? Lacking evidence of any explicit Masonic program for the government, Bullock gives the impression that it was forwarded by winks and nods and sensible signs. Here's how he ropes Jefferson into the pro-

gram: "If, as Thomas Jefferson suggested, the United States Capitol was 'the first temple dedicated to the sovereignty of the people,' then Freemasons in their cornerstone ceremony officiated as its first high priests." (p. 187) The Jefferson quote was from an 1812 letter. Jefferson did not attend the cornerstone ceremony in 1793. There is no evidence that anyone at the time thought of the attending Masons as high priests.

Shortly after the death of George Washington, Congress asked his widow for permission to remove his remains to a suitable tomb to be built in Washington. In this topic all themes of this volume intersect. There was congressional debate, newspaper discussion, and presumably comment in private letters. The "political culture" was engaged, and out in the open, no deals here. It became a gender issue when Martha Washington eventually made clear her wishes in the matter. Architects made drawings (some of them included in Stillman's essay in the book) and presumably this was a field conducive to Masonic symbols. Unfortunately, Karal Ann Marling's "The United States Capitol as Mausoleum: Or, Who's Buried in Washington's Tomb?" hardly engages those issues and her essay might be placed more happily in a popular magazine. However she does entertain and also provide scholarly commentary on the practice of enshrining heroes.

The remaining two essays are curiosities. Imagine that after feasting on the other twelve essays, a large conclave of historians leans back and over brandy invites two colleagues to unwind. The first entertains us with the argument that Washington, D.C., is a mistake, and the other that the best historian of the period under discussion wrote his masterpiece over a hundred years ago. At first blush it seems like these essays would be just what I want, but, as do all the others, they take the high road. The mistake is not a house of cards built on expedients and the greatest historian is no friend of detail. James M. Banner, Jr., begins his essay "The Capital and the State: Washington, D.C., and the Nature of American Government," with a quote from Oscar Wilde extolling the virtues of giving "an accurate description of what has never occurred" (p. 64). Banner argues that the nation would have been better served if the capital had been placed in a cultural and commercial city, something more like Paris and London, and he goes off imagining just what a place it should be. He contrasts that with the sorry reality on the Potomac and blames its founders and designers for putting too much energy in the design of the city, "not its life." (p 74) Actually L'Enfant in an August 1791 letter did describe life in the city, shops, markets, theaters and so on,[6] but expectations of four million dollars from the sale of city lots were dashed in late 1791, muting official speculation on living arrangements. Mounting bankruptcies by the 1790s dimmed most but not all of the speculators' visions. That aside, it would be fun to join Banner in his speculations, if he were not so serious. He contends that putting the capital on the Potomac "can be seen as one of the great failures of imagination of the generation of the founders." (p. 86)

In "'Conglomerate Rock': The American Nation and Capitol and Its Greatest Work of History," David Grimsted celebrates Henry Adams and his *History of the United States, 1800-1817*. This essay offended me at first, as Grimsted makes clear he was told by the editor that he could have all the space he wanted, so off he went for 99 pages on Adams, who has had his fair share of encomiums showered on him. Surely there are 99 pages of something else about the Capitol that might be of value, but on second thought why not let historians write about historians? Grimsted discusses Adams's use of literary allusion, symbolic fact, dramatic tension, dramatic characterization, and humor, and touches on his portrayals of Jefferson, John Randolph, and John Quincy Adams, among others. A reviewer is wise not to tangle with Henry Adams nor his idolater. Grimsted introduced two interesting concepts: "gross accuracy" and the avuncular voice in history. The former is bad, and

Adams was not guilty of it. The latter is good. Grimsted explains that Adams thought of himself as writing for his nieces, and indeed we should be "adoring nieces all." [p. 471] Why not? At least until we descend from the Capitol and return to America and get back to our usual task of sifting the evidence in an effort to get to the bottom of things.

Notes

[1]. Stanley Elkins and Eric McKitrick. ***The Age of Federalism*** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 156.

[2]. Bob Arnebeck. ***Through a Fiery Trial: Building Washington 1790-1800*** (Lanham, Maryland: Madison Books, 1991), 331ff.

[3]. George Washington Papers, Library of Congress, American Memory ColIection, Series 2, Letterbook 23, Image 191ff.

[4]. Arnebeck, 2, 631n.

[5]. George Washington Papers, Library of Congress, American Memory ColIection, Series 2, Letterbook 40, Image 245. (A search of this collection for the word Freemasons had one result: a ship name, the ***Freemason***.)

[6]. Elizabeth S. Kite, ***L'Enfant and Washington*** (New York: Arno Press, 1970) 67.