

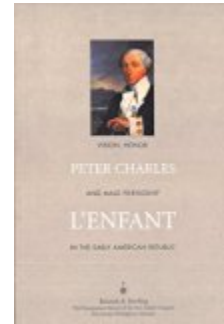
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Kenneth R. Bowling.** *Peter Charles L'Enfant: Vision, Honor, and Male Friendship in the Early American Republic.* Washington, D.C.: Friends of the George Washington University Libraries, 2002. viii + 79 pp. \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-9727611-0-9.

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## Revisiting an Old Controversy

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Well known to many readers is the story of the 1792 falling out between L'Enfant, creator of the original design of what would become Washington D.C., and his backers, chief among them President Washington. Far less known, however, are most other aspects of L'Enfant's somewhat sad life, including which first name he used!

Bowling directs a Washington-based project that is publishing the papers of the First Federal Congress, and is a recognized and widely published authority on the early history of the nation's capital. His book *Creating the Federal City, 1774-1800: Potomac Fever* (1988) offers excellent context for his new work. Prior to this monograph, we have had to rely on two fairly old books for information on this subject: Hans Paul Caemmerer's *The Life of Pierre Charles L'Enfant* (1950), which Bowling says "must be used with care," and the earlier collection of relevant documents edited by Elizabeth Sarah Kite, *L'Enfant and Washington* (1929). More recently, the Library of Congress issued a monograph on L'Enfant's physical plan itself, to accompany the release of new reproductions: Richard W. Stephenson, "A Plan Whol[l]y New": *Pierre Charles L'Enfant's Plan of the City of Washington* (1993).

This new study of Peter/Pierre L'Enfant (1754-1825) began when Bowling wondered why the French emigre used an American first name when he purchased a Wash-

ington lot in 1791—indeed, why he had used it when he first came to the rebelling colonies in 1777. Out of that query came this new study of the man's life, based on a host of original papers. We learn of his French origins (the last name was originally spelled Lenfant; our subject added the apostrophe), his work as an engineer for the American forces during the Revolution (in which he was seriously wounded and was also a prisoner of war), and his work in the 1780s in New York City on buildings and plans for a variety of clients, including the rebuilt Federal Hall. As Bowling notes, however, the Federal Hall was "the last known professional project that he would see through to completion" (p. 14).

For at the heart of this tale is the difficult nature of this transplanted French engineer who combined brilliant ideas (he may have been the first to suggest a Corps of Engineers, and he worried about air and water pollution at least a century before most others) and vision with a whining personality that quickly grated even on dedicated supporters. A born self-promoter, L'Enfant constantly complained about money owed to him as well as the lack of recognition he believed he deserved. Easily insulted and quick to sulk, he was difficult to work with and soon wore out any initial welcome.

L'Enfant was recommended to Washington by Alexander Hamilton (a friend from Revolutionary War days) as perhaps the best person to design a federal city on the Potomac location chosen by Washington in 1791.

Bowling relates the story of L'Enfant's dramatic design which made the most of the natural landscape and included the locations of what became the White House and U.S. Capitol. At first things went well. The designer worked closely with Washington for several months, but then, as old habits reasserted themselves, L'Enfant ran afoul of the presidentially appointed commissioners in charge of the city's development. After several attempts to keep L'Enfant employed on a project that he clearly loved, Washington reluctantly gave up trying to rein in his designer, and L'Enfant resigned his post. At that point, in early 1792, Washington and Thomas Jefferson both moved quickly to defuse the growing political crisis—the three commissioners had threatened to resign—and planning went ahead without L'Enfant's participation.

The rest of the story is one of sad events and slow decline. L'Enfant worked on designs and projects in Philadelphia, though none came to fruition. With the death of Washington in 1799, L'Enfant began a long series of petitions to Congress to be paid for his work in designing the city. His requests for tens of thousands of dollars went unanswered; only years later were small sums paid, and virtually all of the money went to his debt holders. He was penniless but still proud, as Washington

banker and philanthropist William W. Corcoran later remembered. In 1812 came an unexpected offer as a professor of engineering at the new military academy at West Point, but L'Enfant turned it down, believing he was not suited to teaching. An assignment to rebuild a fort near Washington also ended in failure as L'Enfant asserted his prickly independence. In the process, however, he became close to Thomas Digges, who financially supported L'Enfant in his final years. Bowling explores their relationship, making clear that in that era men could have close friendships without aspersions being cast about their sexuality.

This is a well-written survey of a fascinating if disappointing life. Illustrations of key figures, buildings, and maps are well captioned to place them in context. The matter of the confusion over his name is traced, in the end, to early twentieth-century writing about the city and its planning. Several writers (including Jule Jusserand, the French ambassador to the U.S. in the 1900s and 1910s) referred to both "Peter" and "Pierre," but only the latter stuck. As Bowling's title shows, history is long overdue to recognize the transplanted French engineer as the American he considered himself to be for most of his life.

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