

The very first Miss Liberty

Latrobe, Franzoni and the first Statue of Liberty, 1807-1814

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Introduction

When the U.S. Capitol was burned on 24 August 1814 and its principal chambers gutted, Benjamin Henry Latrobe's neoclassical masterpiece, the Hall of Representatives, became a smoldering ruin and a tenuous gesture of the young republic's idealism and promise (Chenoweth, 2011). Also lost on that day was the nation's first monumental Statue of Liberty. It is not well known because it was never recorded topographically; all that remains are descriptive fragments regarding its design development. The neoclassical sitting figure of Liberty was modeled and carved in plaster, and presided over the chamber from 1807-1814. Even if the Liberty had been carved in Vermont marble, as was the intention, it would not have survived the fire. In a post fire report, Latrobe wrote that the marble columns of the Senate chamber were reduced to lime, so surely the Liberty also would have been.

This paper will describe as many known facts about the first Statue of Liberty as can be ascertained. On an objective level, letters provide dimensions and parameters of the figure and its accoutrements. On a subjective level, Latrobe's musings in letters inform us of his favorite sculptors, his proclivities in art, and his emotional response to stylistic ideas and elements. And when Latrobe puts pencil to paper, his ideas are very clear, therefore the one drawing depicting Liberty, although of small scale, is very informative.

The Liberty was organic to the design of the complete chamber. It was not an afterthought. Latrobe imagined early on that the Liberty was an integral part of the entry sequence and the experience of the architectural space of the chamber. Latrobe wrote: "The Statue is indeed essential to the effect of my Architecture [...]"¹

Latrobe did not carve the Liberty but he carefully guided its creation. He made one sketch, and wrote several descriptive passages and reports about it. The man holding the chisels, and interpreting the magnificent, complex geometry of human form itself, was Giuseppe Franzoni, who had arrived from Rome in early 1806, hired for this specific task.

Iconography and Early Attempts to Sculpt a Liberty

The idea of an American symbol of freedom was not new in 1805. Since colonial times, images had appeared of allegorical figures of American freedom, usually as female Native Americans in headdress. She was generally known as *Liberty, Freedom,*

1. Latrobe letter to Philip Mazzei, 4.12.1806.



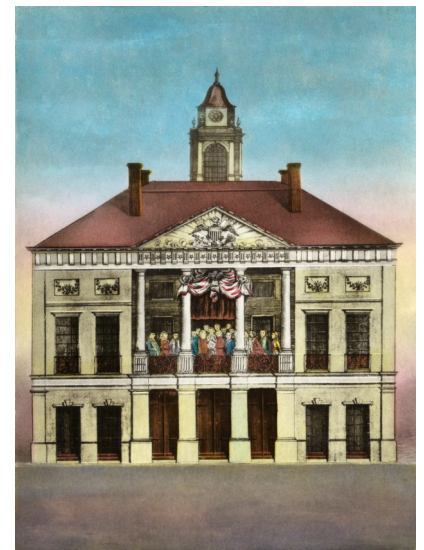
A personification of Liberty”, 1782

or *Columbia*. Liberty’s personification evolved, however, and took on more Roman attributes in the later part of the XVIIIth century as interests in neoclassicism and archaeology began to influence the arts.

Late in 1788, French architect Charles Pierre L’Enfant was asked by the Congress to renovate New York’s City Hall for their first session in April 1789. The renovated building, known thereafter as Federal Hall, had two principal legislative chambers and a second story balcony for public events that overlooked Wall Street and axially aligned with Broadway’s Trinity Church. It was considered a state of the art facility and was the nation’s first building specifically designated for federal business. Federal Hall was

demolished in 1812, and the marble Greek Revival building now on the site was built as the New York Customs House in 1842.

L’Enfant’s elegant additions and renovations of the interior were well received and described in print, but were unrecorded as pictures or engravings. He established an early standard for the hierarchy and decoration of an important federal building, which included no small degree of iconographic representation (Scott, 1995). L’Enfant planned for a statue of Liberty to be placed behind the Speaker’s chair in Federal Hall but there is no record that this occurred. His most powerful iconographic effort was a rising sun motif in the building’s pediment, which author and historian Pamela Scott (1995) suggests may have had the binary purpose of alluding both to France’s assistance during the revolution and to the Masonic seal of Philadelphia’s Carpenters’ Company. Only two sessions of Congress met in Federal Hall, but the important Residence Act of 1790 was passed here, creating the District of Columbia. The third session of Congress met in Congress Hall, Philadelphia, in December 1790.



*“Federal Hall, New York, 1789”
by Amos Doolittle, 1790
Library of Congress*

“Minerva” inserted into Congress Hall, Philadelphia, 1792 (Chenoweth)



In early 1791, George Washington asked L’Enfant to design the new federal city. L’Enfant developed a plan of radiating avenues connecting salient higher elevations that was interwoven with a grid of smaller streets; by these formal devices the plan emphasized a hierarchical and symbolic expression of the new government, particularly of the relationship between the legislative and executive branches. In a letter to George Washington dated 22 June 1791, he describes Jenkins heights, his choice for the site of the Capitol, as a “pedestal waiting for a monument”. He suggested placing below the crest of the hill a “grand Equestrian figure”, a reference to the bronze statue of George Washington that was approved by Congress in 1783.

America’s attempt to create a statue of Liberty took a significant step forward in October 1791, when Roman

sculptor Giuseppe Ceracchi proposed to Congress a fantastic sixty-foot high allegorical group he described as, *Monument designed to perpetuate the Memory of American Liberty*.² Ceracchi's proposal called for the equestrian bronze of Washington at the center of four allegorical sub-groups placed on a sub-base over two hundred feet in diameter³. He produced a six foot drawing of the proposal as well as a written description.

Ceracchi's written description evokes at least three colossal female figures that each seem to contain some element of a Liberty. He refers to a female figure "expressive of Policy," who, "[...] attempts to soften the furious Spirit of the God of War." In another group, Ceracchi shows a "Triumph of America with respect to Arts, Agriculture and Commerce [...]" who sits on a sea coast with a cap of liberty, a rattlesnake on her helmet, and stars beaming from her aegis. A third female is drawn as Minerva, the "Patroness of Arts and Sciences, sitting on a fragment of an Egyptian Obelisk, leaning on a figure of Osyris, and holding the Papyrus."

Ceracchi's proposal received serious consideration, but was rejected in May 1792. That year, however, his giant bust, *Minerva as the Patroness of American Liberty*, was placed behind the Speaker's platform in Congress Hall. It's odd, gigantic scale suggests it was a study piece for the huge group he proposed in 1791. The composite photograph by the author shows this 5'-6" tall Minerva, in scale, as it would have appeared in the House chamber. It's clearly not integral to the design of the chamber. The Minerva bust was given to the Library Company of Philadelphia when Congress moved to Washington in 1800.

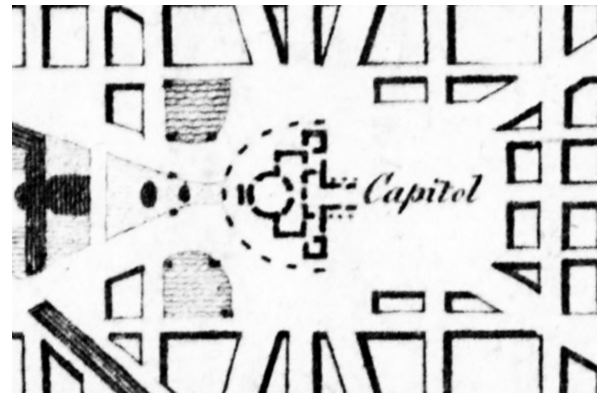
L'Enfant was fired in early 1792 and was off the job. Ceracchi never achieved his grandiose statue of liberty, and was dead by 1801.



Art in Early America

In Latrobe's 6 March 1805 letter to Mazzei, he states that, "The Capitol was begun at a time when the country was entirely destitute of artists [...]" . From Latrobe's perspective as a classically educated European, this was true; painting, sculpture and architecture were fledgling arts in 1792. In 1811, in a formal address in Philadelphia to the Society of Artists of the United States, however, he expressed his optimism that in a free republic it's inevitable that the arts will flourish. In that speech Latrobe said that, "[...] the days of Greece may be revived in the woods of America, and Philadelphia become the Athens of the Western world."⁴

In this address, Latrobe identifies architecture as the most advanced of American arts in the year 1800. First, he lauded Blodgett's First Bank of the United States for its use of marble, and second, he lauded his own client Samuel Fox for having the vision and courage to build The Bank of Pennsylvania. Latrobe shyly neglects to mention that this masterpiece was his own design. The Bank of Pennsylvania, the first Greek revival building in America, modern and sleek in white marble, was truly innovative for any modern city in 1800; it was masonry-vaulted, naturally lit, unencumbered of ornament, and sleekly elevated of elegant Greek angles.



Detail, L'Enfant
Plan for D.C., 1791



"Fourth of July in Center
Square, 1812" by John
Lewis Krimmel.

2. Ceracchi letter to the United States Senate and House of Representatives, 10.31.1791.
3. Ceracchi letter to Alexander Hamilton, 7.16.1791.
4. Latrobe address to the Society of Artists, 5.8.1811.

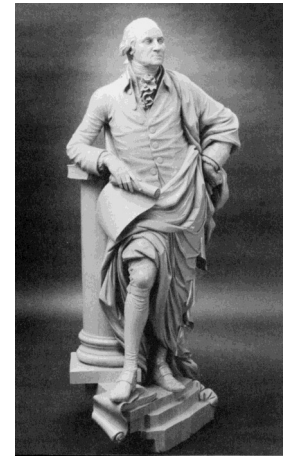
Metaphorically, it must have had an impact in Philadelphia similar to that of parking a late model white Porsche in a lot filled with brick red Model-T Fords.

In painting, Latrobe suggests that America was on the cusp of greatness; yet America's painters lacked good commissions and Europe valued our great painters more than we did. He stated that America rivaled Europe in portraits, most likely referring to Gilbert Stuart and John Trumbull. Though personally slighted by the brilliant Stuart, Latrobe always held his work in high esteem.

In sculpture, America languished in 1800. American figurative sculpture in the late eighteenth century mainly consisted of decorative woodcarving, such as in the making of nautical figureheads, or the decorative carving of fine furniture. Stone carving in the eighteenth century mainly consisted of the carving and incising of gravestones.

America's best figural sculptor of the period was William Rush of Philadelphia, who, with Charles Willson Peale, founded the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. Rush made figureheads for ships, which Latrobe considered an art form in and of itself. He held Rush in very high regard. Rush even carved the allegorical *Water Nymph and Bittern* that stood at Centre Square, Philadelphia, directly in front of Latrobe's Greek style pump house of the Water Works. Today, this site is occupied by Philadelphia's City Hall.

Latrobe did not call Rush to duty when hiring sculptors for the Capitol, although Rush was a mere one hundred forty miles north. Latrobe stated quite simply that Rush's medium was wood; and though extremely talented, he was never considered for work on the Capitol. Rush's carved wood figure of George Washington (1814) shows his true talent; It's a sophisticated sculpture, alive and animated in its detailed contrapposto arrangement.



"George Washington" by William Rush, 1814, (Second Bank of the United States National Park Service)



Some of Latrobe's Influences

Latrobe deeply admired the sculpture of Englishman John Flaxman from his London days. Charles Brownell has pointed out that Latrobe emulated Flaxman figures in his own sketches on at least two occasions⁵. Besides Latrobe's admiration of the artistry of Flaxman, Canova, and Thorvaldsen, he certainly saw and admired other neoclassical sculptors in Europe prior to coming to America in 1796. He must have known the work of Germany's leading neoclassical sculptor, Johann Gottfried Schadow.

Schadow's model for Minerva at the Brandenburg Gate (1792), when reversed, is strikingly similar to Latrobe's drawing of a Minerva for the Capitol from about 1810. And he certainly knew Jean-Antoine Houdon's masterful busts of Jefferson and Franklin and the full standing figure of Washington, unveiled in the Virginia Capitol the year Latrobe arrived in America.

"Apollo and Marpessa" by John Flaxman Royal Academy of Arts



"Minerva for Capitol's West Front" by Benjamin Henry Latrobe, c. 1810 (Left)

"Minerva" model by Johann Gottfried Schadow, Brandenburg Gate, c. 1792 (Right, image reversed)

5. Brownell, *et al.*, *Latrobe's View of America*, 1985

The Latrobe-Franzoni Sitting Liberty

It was not until 1807 that a monumental allegorical Statue of Liberty was erected as an integral part of the design of the Hall of Representatives in the Capitol.

Latrobe first mentioned the idea of a monumental Liberty in a letter to Philip Mazzei on 6 March 1805, requesting assistance in hiring sculptors in Italy to work on the Capitol. Latrobe wrote to Mazzei at Jefferson's behest. Mazzei was an old friend and colleague of Jefferson's, living in Pisa at the time, and their conversations over past decades were varied and robust. Mazzei cheerfully referred to America as his adoptive country and was glad to assist his American friends in the effort to build the Capitol.

In the letter, Latrobe asked Mazzei to obtain a bid price from Antonio Canova, then in Rome, to carve the Sitting Liberty. Mazzei responded on 12 September 1805, reporting that hiring Canova was impossible due to the artist being overbooked. Mazzei also requested a price from esteemed Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen, also working in Rome, and the price was exorbitant. Then Mazzei told of the young sculptor he did hire, Giuseppe Franzoni, claiming that, "Franzoni will soon be a second Canova."⁶ Franzoni, and Giovanni Andrei, Mazzei's two hires, departed Italy by ship with their families in November 1805 bound for the U.S.

The Design and Creation of the Sitting Liberty

On 28 March 1806, the two Italian sculptors Franzoni and Andrei arrived from Rome. In Mazzei's estimation, Franzoni's "masterful stroke" would make him a first rate sculptor of the figures, and Andrei would be a first rate sculptor of the flora and decorative pieces. On 29 May, in a letter to Mazzei, Latrobe lamented that Franzoni must carve the large eagle in the frieze before he can even, "[...] *think* much of our Statue of Liberty." Latrobe wrote, "[...] I have distributed the department of *animals* to Franzoni, and of *vegetables* to Andrei." Based on this letter, no Liberty model existed as of 29 May 1806.



ADE 2462, Drawing 18, c. 1805
by Benjamin Henry Latrobe, Library of Congress

But on 2 June 1806, a model was underway. Latrobe wrote to his brother Christian: "Flaxman is I think one of the first Sculptors in the world. Franzoni was his pupil. He is engaged in modeling for me a figure of Liberty, sitting, of colossal size. It promises to be a classical Work. This is one of many efforts I am making to introduce into this country something superior to the mean sti[le] brought hither and spread by English joiners and measurers, and to the absurd impracticalities of American book architects".

In his first letter to Mazzei, Latrobe described the Liberty as 9'-0" tall while seated. The only existing sketch of her appears in a drawing that was delivered to Jefferson prior to August 1805. It's a south-looking, east-west

6. Mazzei letter to Latrobe,
9.12.1805.



“Portrait of a Lady” by Henri
François Mulard, 1810
(a fashionable lady)

section of the Hall demonstrating the extreme angles of light rays entering the chamber. At the scale of 1/8” to 1’-0”, the Sitting Liberty is shown exactly 1½” high, therefore 12’-0” high per the drawing’s scale, including her plinth. The drawing demonstrates the powerful image Latrobe developed in his mind of entering the chamber from the north, and seeing the colossal Liberty opposite, framed by twenty-six foot columns and crimson drapery.

Even at small scale, details about Latrobe’s intentions for the Sitting Liberty can be seen. She wears a fashionable Greek style gown with décolletage and a high waist, a large ornament at her breast, and her hair piled up with a tiara – a very fashionable look for 1805. Her left arm holds a liberty pole with the Phrygian liberty cap. Her right foot is raised. An eagle in repose, with an outward look as though in a defensive stance, is on her right. Two books are nested on her left, possibly a reference to the two books in Stuart’s famous Lansdowne portrait of Washington, a painting well known to Latrobe. The books in the Stuart painting are thought to be the Federalist Papers and the Congressional Record.

Writing to Mazzei on 19 December 1806, Latrobe expresses some confusion about whether or not Thorvaldsen was actually commissioned to carve the statue. If Mazzei had commissioned him, it was without Jefferson’s approval of the high price. Latrobe also told Mazzei he had already given the work to Franzoni. Latrobe wrote that Franzoni “[...] will not disgrace us by his Sculpture, but that Canova, probably Thorvaldsen, and Flaxman are his superiors to a great degree.”

By 31 December 1806, Latrobe apparently did not approve of the direction of development of Franzoni’s model. Latrobe expressed misgivings about the model to his Clerk of the Works John Lenthall, “[...] Lady Liberty [...] seldom behaves much like a Lady.” Franzoni had sculpted allegorical elements that Latrobe thought inappropriate or heavy-handed: a club and doves nesting in a helmet. “It may be correct *Symbolology* [...] to give Dame Liberty a Club or Shelelah, but we have no business to exhibit it so publicly.” Latrobe instead demands one arm close in to her body, resting in her lap, and one arm raised, resting, “[...] on a Wig block, or *capped stick* (which is as much more honorable than a Wig block as the cap is more honorable than the Wig) *for ought I care*.” (This is essentially the torso arrangement shown in Latrobe’s own sketch). In this letter Latrobe pondered reducing Liberty to 7’-0” in height. Though often besieged by his own scathing and sardonic wit, Latrobe maintained exactly the right balance of allegorical propriety he thought proper for the chamber, and steered Franzoni in the design of the Liberty.

On 1 September 1807, Lenthall’s men took down the scaffolding around the Speaker’s Chair, revealing two finished columns and the sitting Statue of Liberty. Latrobe wrote Jefferson later that day: “[...] the figure of Liberty, which, tho’ only a Model, is an excellent work and does Franzoni infinite credit.” She was in service that day.



“Madame Raymond de Verninac”
by Jacques Louis David, 1799
Louvre Museum
(a fashionable lady)

In his report to Congress of 22 November 1807, Latrobe describes the complete tableau: “Between the two columns opposite to the entrance, behind the Speaker’s Chair, sits on a pedestal a colossal figure of liberty. The present figure is only a plaister model hastily executed in three weeks by Mr. Franzoni, but has great merit. It is proposed to place a marble figure of the same size in its room [...]”. He continues, “The figure, sitting, is 8’-6” in height. By her side stands the American eagle, supporting her left hand, in which is the cap of liberty, her right presents a scroll, the constitution of the United States. Her foot treads upon a reversed crown as a footstool and upon other emblems of monarchy and bondage.”

In the course of her design in the first nine months of 1807, Liberty’s eagle shifted from her right side to her left (from east to west), and her pole and liberty cap were replaced with a more relaxed arrangement with a cap and constitution.

Latrobe described the scene at entry: “One large ample curtain is suspended in the space between the columns opposite the entrance, and being drawn in easy folds to each pilastre, discloses the statue of Liberty. The effect of this curtain of the statue and of the Speaker’s chair and canopy [...] is perhaps the most pleasing assemblage of objects that catch the eye in the whole room.”

And as Latrobe states, “To give an adequate idea of a building by a description unaccompanied by drawings, is always a vain attempt, and no one who has not seen the Hall of Congress can, from what I have said, understand exactly the effect and appearance of the room.”

Later Statues of Liberty

The Capitol’s second building campaign from 1815-1819 featured a monumental figure in the Hall of Congress called *The Genius of the Constitution* by Enrico Causici. It’s still in its plaster state, in that same room, and has come to be known as a *Liberty and the Eagle*.

Thomas Crawford’s Statue of Liberty, called *Freedom*, was raised to the top of the Capitol dome in 1863. Crawford never saw it raised. He died in 1857 before the plaster version was shipped from his studio in Rome.

The most famous Statue of Liberty, of course, is Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi’s *Liberty Enlightening the World* in New York Harbor. Conceived in the early 1870s, it was finally installed in 1886.

My Interpretation of the Latrobe-Franzoni Sitting Liberty

Based on the parameters from the drawing and letters, ideas of dress and style, and a deep understanding of Latrobe’s aesthetic proclivities, I sculpted a version of the first Statue of Liberty for my recreation of the Hall of Representatives.

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“Siting Liberty”
by Richard Chenoweth, 2011
(Sculpture based on known facts)



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“Sitting Liberty” by Richard Chenoweth, 2011
(Sculpture based on known facts)