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Title: Letter from Benjamin Latrobe to Mary Latrobe

Date: November 30, 1802

Location: I-AsbellY-2002-1

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Washington City Nov: 30th 1802.

My dearest Mary,

Yesterday I wrote to you a long letter for which you will have to pay treble postage, but if you value my letters, as I do yours you will not complain. I had dined with the president; his invitation was to meet a small party of friends, - & accordingly I found only 3 besides myself. - I was introduced to them all, but their names were pronounced in so flowery a way by Capt ^{and} Lewis the President's secretary, - that I only half understood them & had in ten minutes forgotten them entirely, for my head was full of a previous conversation on the Drydock. Their names are however of no consequence: they were all men of science; - one of them had a broad Scotch accent & seemed lately arrived. - The conversation turned on the best construction of arches, - on the properties of different species of Limestone, - on cements generally, - on the difference between the French and English habits of living as far as they affect the arrangement of their houses, - on several new experiments upon the properties of light, - on Dr Priestley, - on the subject of emigration, - on the

culture of the vine, on the dishonesty of Peter Legoux
& his impudence, - on the domestic manners of Paris,
& the orthography of the English & French languages,
- by this time the President became very entertaining
& told among others the following anecdote of poor
Friend Dorcas. -

A number of English, & some french ladies with
their husbands were assembled at Dr Franklin's, - who
spoke wretched French. Dorcas whose proficiency was
not much greater, undertook on several points to set
him to rights, & had become ~~the~~ very ridiculous by
some of her corrections. At that moment Temple Frank-
lin entered, & in one of his freaks of affluance kissed
the lady who stood nearest to the door, - & then went
round the room saluting ^{each of} them; - & last of all he kissed
Mrs Jay. - Mrs Jay amused to such gallantry blushed
so deeply that Dr Franklin observing it, asked why
she blushed, - Mrs M. immediately answered, "Parce qu'il
a lui baisé la derriere, instead of la derriere.
Poor Dorcas might as well have used the broad
English phrase of Moll Turner, - as to the feelings

of Mr. Jay, or the entertainment of the French Men.
Yesterday night I wrote thus far, I was then absolutely
driven by the cold into bed, for as it was the first
day of the rains, every body had gone out, & there was
no Wood split. - This is one of my grievances, - for the
wood comes home in long logs & must be cut up by
the servants. - The rains have brought hundreds to
this city, and among the rest Judge ^{Mr} Washington
who called upon ^{me} for ten minutes, - & appeared, & I am
sure were so unfeignedly glad to see me, that I have
not felt so much pleasure since I left home. - You
are absolutely bespoke for Mount Vernon, & no deli-
al is to be taken. - Several other of my Virginia
quaintance are here & have called, but I have not
out of my room, - not even to spend the evening
with Judge Washington as I was invited to do, or with
Chevalier D'Yrejo as I also ought to have done, - for
it has rained violently all the evening & night, & I was
glad of the excuse, - for I cannot afford the time, and
to amusement I find none in any party. - I did not re-
ceive a letter from you yesterday, - for no mail arriv-
ed by today expect a few lines with certainty. You
ought to have received a letter from ^{me} daily, - for I have

not once wiped, - nor do I intend it. Would to God I could
return to you on the day you mention, - Monday, - but
you forget that that is the day on which at soonest
I can leave this Place, - for it is the day on which for-
giveness opens, & of course I must stay till then. Then there
are three days of travelling to be got over before I

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W. Latrobe

Architect

Philadelphia.

him
some

Can again embrace you I shall not be able to say with cer-
tainty what day I can return till Saturday except God
bless you may best beloved wife. Take ^{care} of yourself & of your
dear infant, & believe me unalterably, Yours truly Henry Latrobe

Dining with Jefferson: Art, Science and Ribaldry

LATROBE, BENJAMIN H. (1764-1820). English-born, American artist, architect, and engineer, best known for his work on the U. S. Capitol. ALS. ("B. Henry Latrobe"). 4pp. Small 4to. On a folded sheet. Washington, November 30, 1802. To his second wife, **MARY HAZLEHURST LATROBE** (1771-1841). Published in Talbot Hamlin's biography, *Benjamin Henry Latrobe* (pp.576-577).

Yesterday I wrote to you a long letter for which you will have to pay treble postage, but if you value my letters, as I do yours you will not complain. I had dined with the president [Thomas Jefferson]: his invitation was to meet a small party of friends, & accordingly I found only 3 besides myself. I was introduced to them all, but their names were pronounced in so slovenly a way by Captn. Lewis the President's secretary, that I only half understood them & had in ten minutes forgotten them entirely, for my head was full of a previous conversation on the Drydocks...The conversation turned on the best construction of arches, on the properties of different species of Limestone, on cements generally, on the difference between the French and English habits of living as far as they affect the arrangement of their houses, on several new experiments upon the properties of light, on Dr. Priestley, on the subject of emigration, on the culture of the time, on the dishonesty of Peter Legoux & his impudence, on the domestic manners of Paris, & the orthography of the English & French Languages, by this time the President became very entertaining & told among others the following anecdote of Friend Dorcas. A number of English, & some French Ladies with their husbands were assembled at Dr. Franklin's -- who spoke wretched French. Dorcas whose proficiency was not much greater, undertook on several points to set him to rights, & had become very ridiculous by some of her corrections. At that moment Temple Franklin entered, & in one of his freaks of assurance kissed the Lady who stood nearest to the door, & then went round the room saluting each of them; & last of all he kissed Mrs. Jay. Mrs. Jay unused to such gallantry blushed so deeply that Dr. Franklin observing it, asked why she blushed. Mrs. M. [Dorcas] immediately answered, 'Parc'qu'il a lui baise la derriere,' instead of 'la derniere' ['Because he kissed her behind' instead of 'Because he kissed her last'.] Poor Dorcas might as well have used the broad English phrase of Moll Turner, as to the feelings of Mrs. Jay, or the entertainment of the French Men. Yesterday night I wrote thus far, I was then absolutely driven by the cold into bed, for as it was the first day of the Races, everybody had gone out, & there was no Wood split...The races have brought hundreds to this city, and among the rest Judge & Mrs. Washington who called upon me for ten minutes, & appeared, & I am sure were so unfeignedly glad to see me, that I have not felt so much pleasure since I left home. You are absolutely bespoke for Mount Vernon, & no denial is to be taken. Several other of my Virginia

acquaintances are here & have called, but I have not [been] out of my room, not even to spend the evening with Judge Washington as I was invited to do, or with Chevalier d'Yrujo [the Spanish plenipotentiary to the United States] as I also ought to have done, for it rained violently all the evening & night, & I was glad of the excuse, for I cannot afford the time, and as to amusement I find none in any party...You ought to have received a letter from me daily, for I have not once missed, nor do I intend it. Would to God I could return to you on the day you mention, Monday, but you forget that that is the day on which at soonest I can leave this Place, for it is the day on which Congress opens, & of course I must stay till then...

Believing that "There was but one person in America...who was fitted to handle so large a project" (*Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, Hamlin), President Jefferson approached Latrobe on November 2, 1802 with the idea of building a covered drydock to house uncommissioned naval vessels. Within a week, Latrobe had accepted, and by mid-November he was en route to Washington, where he soon produced an outstanding design reminiscent of Paris's Halle aux Bles. Deeply impressed, Jefferson invited him to the above-described dinner, whose "real purpose...was probably to give the President an opportunity of observing the architect more closely and of finding out if he could become a congenial collaborator [on] another pressing architectural problem...the completion of the United States Capitol" (*ibid.*). While Congress ultimately refused to appropriate the funds required for the drydock, it did authorize \$50,000 for construction of the Capitol's south wing on March 3, 1803. Three days later, Jefferson chose Latrobe to oversee this monumental project by offering him the job of Surveyor of the Public Buildings of the United States, "the most important architectural position in the country" (*ibid.*). An old family friend and neighbor, **Meriwether Lewis** (1774-1809; American officer and explorer) became Jefferson's private secretary in 1801. Two years later, fulfilling the president's longstanding dream, he and fellow officer William Clark embarked upon their now-famous expedition to find a land route to the Pacific Ocean. **Joseph Priestley** (1733-1804) was the famous English clergyman and chemist. From December 1776 until July 1785, **Benjamin Franklin** (1706-1790) served as a diplomat in France, assisted by his grandson and secretary, **Temple** (1760-1823). **Sarah Jay** (1756-1802) was the wife of the American statesman and first Chief Justice, John Jay. **Bushrod Washington** (1762-1829, American jurist and George Washington's nephew) was appointed associate justice of the Supreme Court in 1798. Influential in the development of constitutional, admiralty, and commercial law, he also supported the abolition of slavery, and in 1816 was elected the first president of the American Colonization Society. He settled at Mount Vernon following the death of his uncle's wife, Martha, in 1802, the year our letter was written. With the attached integral address leaf and original paper seal remnant. Worn, with the triangular seal tear affecting several lines of text on the third page, and five closed tears along the folds, slightly affecting the text, but easily restorable. An amusing and unusual historical association. Very rare.