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Title: Letter from Benjamin Latrobe to Hugh Henry Brackenridge

Date: May 18, 1803

Location: RG 1/1 - 5.4.1

Contact:

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Philadelphia, May 18th 1803.

Dear Sir

You will herewith receive the designs for Dickinson College which I promised you. In forming them, I have endeavored to take all the circumstances which you stated to me into consideration, and to do the best for you which they would permit. — I will beg leave to state to you the principles which have governed me in the distribution, & arrangement of the apartments. —

The two aspects, the most unpleasant in our climate are the North East & the North West. The extreme cold of the North West winds in winter, & their dryness, which causes a rapid evaporation, so thoroughly chills the walls of every house, exposed to them, that when the wind, as is almost always the case, changes afterwards to the West S. W. & becomes warmer & moister, — the water is precipitated upon the Walls from the air, by their coldness, — as upon the outside of a Glass of cold Water in warm weather, — and they soon steam with humidity. — The North East winds bring along rain & sleet, — & their violence

drives the moisture into every wall of which the material will permit it. The unpleasantness of the winds is aggravated by the rapidity & suddenness with which the Northwest commonly succeeds the North East. I have stated these things, which are indeed known to every body, to in order to explain a law, which is thereby imposed upon the Architecture of our Country: It is, — to reserve the Southern aspects of every building in the erection of which the choice is free, for the inhabited apartments, and to occupy the Northern aspects by communications, as Stairs, Lobbies, Halls, Vestibules &c.

This Law governs the designs herewith presented to you. —

On the North side the Vestibule & lobbies, or passages. They protect the Southern rooms from the effect of the Northern winds. On this aspect I have also placed the dining room, a room only occasionally occupied & for a short time, — & the school rooms above it, — which by means of Slaves, & the

concourse of Students are easily kept warm.
There are indeed two Chambers in the N. Ewing
on each story. - If these Chambers be inhabited
by Preceptors, the one as a study, the other as a
Bedchamber, the disadvantages of the Aspect
must be overcome by such means, of Curtains
& Carpets, as a Student does not so easily acquire.
The ~~fourth~~ Front affords on each story 6 rooms
for Students. The angle rooms will accommodate
3, and each of the other, 2 Students; in all 14
on each floor. ^e

The Hall is intended to occupy two stories.
Above the Hall a room of equal size may be
appropriated to a Library, or may furnish
^{2 or 3}
4 or 6 Students rooms, ^{to} to the South and
as many to the North.

The usual mode of planning colleges, by
arranging the rooms on each side of a long
passage, has many disadvantages, - the chief
of which are the noise, & the necessary darkness,
of the Passage; and the bad aspect of one half
of the rooms. - These inconveniences do not, I be-

live exist in the plan I present to you, & should
at a future period, the celebrity of your institution
increase the number of your students, as it no
doubt will, - it will be better to erect new
accommodations, than to obtain room by con-
necting the wings, in order to save expence; as
has often been done. -

In respect to material, - I would certainly
recommend that you should build ^{your external} walls of the
stone of your Valley, rather than of brick. The
internal Walls, may with more advantage
be built of brick. - It will be objected that
Limestone is so pervious to Water, that no
Plastering will stand upon it. - I do not know
that it is more so than common brick, but
if it were, I must observe, that no material
whatsoever, unless the wall be 2 or 3' thick will
prevent the damp appearance of the Walls to-
wards the North aspects, unless they be battered
& plastered upon Lath. By battens are meant
strips of 1 1/2 inches thick fixed & about 2 inches
wide

wide, which are fastened by Wall-hooks, upright
to the Walls, at the distance of 15 inches from
each other, upon which laths are nailed as
upon framed work. No such precaution is ne-
cessary upon ^{(The air thus enclosed between} the internal walls. ^{Between}
the Plastering upon Laths, & the solid Wall
~~there remains a space of air, which be-~~
ing a non conductor, prevents either ^{the} heat
or the cold of the external wall from ma-
terially affecting the temperature of the room,
and the Plastering itself will always be dry.
This method has also the advantage that the plas-
tering ^{on} the external Walls is easily made
fair & straight, - whereas the roughness & irre-
gularity of a stone Wall, is not easily got over
by plastering.

I have said thus much in order to give
the Trustees an opportunity, - should they adopt
the plan proposed, - of procuring their princi-
pal materials at once. - ^{But} Should they contem-
plate to carry it ^{into} execution either with or
without alteration, I shall expect that you

will have the goodness to apprise me of their resolution in the course of this month, that I may furnish such working plans as will be immediately necessary.

I beg leave also to suggest to you and to the Trustees, - that it will be impossible to conduct your building with success, economy, & satisfaction, unless some intelligent, experienced, & honest Man, - as superintendant of the Work, have controul over every part of it. - This situation is often given to some respectable, but superannuated Workman, from motives of benevolence. Such a superintendant is indeed adequate to the counting of bricks, the measurement of stone & lime, the keeping an account, & often to the decision on the quality of the materials & the goodness of the Workmanship. But these things though necessary, - are not all that are wanted. The great & useful business of a Superintendant, - or as he is commonly called, a Clerk

of the Works, consists in so directing & combi-
ning the labors of a variety of Workmen, that
they shall all produce the building, without
Loss of time or waste of material, or dispute
among themselves, or disadvantage in the
performance of their contracts, by want
of material, or the necessity of waiting for
each other. Such an office requires vigor of mind
& body, as well as ^{mechanical} knowledge & manual skill,
and ~~that~~ ^{whether} you may meet with a person
capable of filling it, the ^{liberality or} economy of com-
pensation will in part determine. I do not

think you will get a fit man under from
12 to 15 Dollars ^{per Week}. - We pay here 18 ^{or 20} Dollars
at the public works.

I beg to repeat what I before mentioned
to you, - that as I conceive it to be the ^{interest &} duty of
every good citizen to promote, - quoad civile,
the education, and civilization of the society
in which he & his children are to live, I will
with pleasure contribute to the reestablishment

of Dickerson college, every possible gratuitous
personal assistance:— and should you accept
of this sort of contribution;— nothing will ^{be} charged
against ^{you,} but such actual expenses as may arise
in the course of my giving it to you.

I am with true respects,

Yours truly

Henry Labroe,

Surveyor of the U. States buildings at Washington.

Philadelphia
May 18th 1803.

I must request that you will excuse the
evident marks of haste in this letter; which would
have been more explanatory, had not the time
to which you have limited me, been so short.

[Editor's Note: All strike-throughs and misspellings have been retained.]

Philadelphia, May 18th 1803.-

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angle rooms will accommodate 3, and each of the other, 2 Students; in all 14 on each floor.

The Hall is intended to occupy two stores. Above the hall a room of equal size may be appropriated to a Library, or may furnish 4 or 6 Students rooms, ~~2 or 3~~ 2 or 3 to the South and as many to the North. –

The usual mode of planning colleges, by arranging the rooms on each side of a long passage, has many disadvantages, – the chief of which are the noise, & the necessary darkness of the Passage, and the bad aspect of one half of the rooms. – These inconveniences do not, I believe exist in the plan I present to you, & should at a future period, the celebrity of your institution increase the number of your students, as it no doubt will, – it will be better to erect new accommodations, than to obtain room by connecting the wings, in order to save expense; as has often been done. –

In respect to material, – I would, certainly, recommend that you should build ~~of your~~ your external walls of the lime stone of your Valley, rather than of brick. The internal Walls, may with more advantage be built of brick. – It will be objected that limestone is so pervious to Water, that no Plastering will stand upon it. – I do not know that it is more so than common brick, but if it were, I must observe, that no material whatsoever, unless the wall be 2f 6i thick will prevent the damp appearance of the Walls towards the North aspects, unless they be battened and plastered upon Lath. By battens are meant strips of 1½ inches thick ~~fixed~~ & about 2 inches wide wide, which are fastened by Wall-hooks, upright to the Walls, at the distance of 15 inches from each other, & upon which laths are nailed as upon framed work. No such precaution is necessary upon the internal walls. The air thus enclosed between – ~~Between~~ the Plastering upon Laths, & the Solid Wall [expunged and illegible] being a non conductor, prevents either, the Heat or the cold of the external wall from materially affecting the temperature of the room, and the Plastering itself will always be dry. – This method has also the advantage that the plastering ~~of~~ on the external Walls is easily made fair & straight, – whereas the roughness & irregularity of a Stone Wall is not easily got over by plastering.

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I beg to repeat what I before mentioned to you, – that as I conceive it to be the interest & duty of every good citizen to promote, – quoad virile, the education, and civilization of the Society in which he & his children are to live, I will with pleasure contribute to the reestablishment of Dickinson college, every possible gratuitous personal assistance: – and should you accept of this part of contribution, – nothing will be charged against you, but such actual expenses as may arise in the course of my giving it to you.

I am with true respect
Yours truly

B Henry Latrobe
Surveyor of the U. States buildings at Washington

Philadelphia May 18th 1803

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