

## AN OLD-TIME ARCHITECT.

**THE LIFE OF PIERRE CHARLES L'ENFANT. MEMORIES OF THE MAN WHO DESIGNED FEDERAL HALL, NEW YORK, AND LAID OUT THE CITY OF WASHINGTON—ARCHITECTURE OF THE EARLY DAYS OF THE REPUBLIC—SKETCH OF THE RISE AND FALL OF ROBERT MORRIS—BRIGHT CAREERS ENDED AMID SHADOWS.**

About five miles from the City of Washington, on what is called the Sligo Branch of the Anacostia River—otherwise the Eastern Branch of the Potomac—is the large stone mansion of George Riggs, the Washington banker. It replaces a frame building two stories and an attic high, and of long and peculiar construction, which was torn down some time previous to 1850. Here lived, through the closing months of his life, Major Pierre Charles L'Enfant, the first architect and civil engineer of any consequence in the United States.

It was he who designed the Federal Hall in New-York City, or rather transformed an old building which had stood there, and adapted it to the uses of Congress, in 1789. The artistic resources of the new Government were then so poor that it was thought fortunate that there was in America a man with the capacity to put up an architectural facade. For that work he was given ten acres of ground in the city commons, comprising some of the richest real estate in the world, and undoubtedly worth millions, perhaps tens of millions now; yet by that system of oversight and ingratitude so often noted in popular Governments, the old man never actually received a foot of the ground, and no money, for his pains.

A few weeks or months hence, in accordance with a recent act of Congress, a statue of Washington will be raised on the steps of the Sub Treasury at the head of Broad-st., New-York, to commemorate the oath Washington took there in front of the Federal Hall. But if there still exists the curiosity to see the head of the architect on the die or base of the statue, there is probably no portrait of him extant.

L'Enfant also was sent to France by the Society of the Cincinnati, on one of the vessels of Robert Morris, to arrange for the engraving of the gold badge of that society, and he received its thanks in an elaborate paper, sealed with its seal, making him a draft for a sum of money. The writer has held the paper in question within a day or two, and the old man has written on the corner: "The draft voted was never drawn, nor any equivalent to it."

The next step of Major L'Enfant was to design and commence the erection in Philadelphia of the most ambitious house which had then been put up in any city of the country—that of Robert Morris, the financier. It gives the first instance ever seen on the Western Continent of Mansard roofs, which a century afterward became so common here. The building was never finished, the estimates being too small, and the owner's money too irregularly forthcoming. While he was at work on this house, the President and Secretary of State selected him to plot the site of the Federal city, which he had completely done on paper and partly done on the landscape when he became involved in quarrels with the rapacious lot holders of Washington and was discharged because he would not let them take advantage of his design and buy where they pleased to the prejudice of future public architecture.

The last work of Major L'Enfant was to design the fort now called Washington, on the Potomac River nearly opposite Mount Vernon, during the war of 1812. While here, his acquaintance with the proprietor of the ground, Mr. Thomas Digges, became intimate, and at the close of the war he remained on his farm as the superintendent and friend of the owner, and had nearly reached his seventieth year when his infirmities were relieved by death, and he is now buried in the garden of Riggs's farm, among myrtle vines, under some cedar trees.

### A PROPHET WITHOUT FAME.

The prominence of Major L'Enfant's name, as the planner of the Capital City—which plan for so long a period was condemned as utterly extravagant, and has more recently been as extravagantly praised, as its perspectives and landscape effects come out in the tracery of houses and trees, may have led the reader to suppose that all the particulars of his life are well known. On the contrary, he is one of the most obscure characters in American annals. Although appointed by President Monroe professor of Engineering at West Point, the industry of General Cullum, in his three large volumes of the biography of the institution, has been unable to tell his birthplace. At his death, his letters and papers were appraised, with all his other effects, at the total value of some \$42, and instead of falling into the hands of the Government, they were taken at the valuation by Mr. William Dudley Digges, and probably few persons have ever looked them over.

The writer's interest in the subject arose from a desire to write a Christmas story on the pathetic circumstances of the old Major's lonely decease, and fearing that from ignorance offence might be offered to some of the descendants of his protectors, inquiry was made if any of the Digges family was still alive. L'Enfant died in the spring of 1825, and in the interval of fifty-six years it was probable that the Digges family had been no exception to the usual mortality of old people on the western peninsula of Maryland, who are commonly said to die on the spot of their origin, preceded by the tumbling ruins of their old tobacco sheds. It was found, however, that a Mr. Digges was living under the benevolent care of one of the pretty institutions which have sprung up around the Capital City. Another direct descendant of the family was the wife of Dr. James E. Morgan, a prosperous physician of Washington. Calling at this house, arrangements were made for the writer to look over such portions of the L'Enfant papers as had been arranged, and he was told that there was a large bag full not yet ransacked.

### THE OLD ARCHITECT'S HISTORY.

Examining these papers several hours one evening, the story of the old man began to take lineaments and associations. It does not appear from what portion of France he came, but that he was a young officer in the French line—probably born 1758—who came to America some time about or after 1777 is plain. He was wounded at the assault on Savannah under the Count d'Estang, thrown into the ditch and made prisoner, and in 1782 was exchanged for Lieutenant De Heyden, of the Auspach Yagers. His parole in French and English is extant. As most of the French contingent set sail from America soon after this time, Lieutenant L'Enfant became in a measure distinguished as a voluntary resident, perhaps citizen, of the country, with a variety of ornamental knowledge, more taste than was fashionable, and considerable suggestiveness as to public monuments. He became Major of Engineers 1783.

At that time Philadelphia was the most flourishing city in the country, and had become the seat of what was virtually the United States Bank, the creation of Robert Morris, to supply the Government with money and promote investment and exchange.

### THE BANKER OF THE REVOLUTION.

Mr. Morris was an English boy from the vicinity of Liverpool, whose father had arrived in the country several years before him and settled on the eastern shore of Maryland, at the small wharf or bay port of Oxford, where he engaged in the tobacco export. Soon after the son came out his father was killed by a salute fired from one of his own vessels, and now lies buried in an obscurity resembling that of the French officer under notice. Young Robert was put in a mercantile house at Philadelphia as a clerk, and displayed one of the earliest instances of that business precocity now so common in the United States. Seeing that the price of corn had gone up abroad, he bought and stored large quantities of it at Philadelphia without authority, and his employers reaped the benefit of the advance. They made him a partner in the house, and he was considered at the outbreak of the Revolution one of the most sagacious and intuitive merchants in America. Some of his transactions would appear to indicate the method in vogue a century afterward, of procuring early information and taking advantage of fluctuations. Morris was a man of travel and had been to the West Indies as a supercargo more than once, and no doubt to Europe. He established correspondents at the different foreign ports, who were constantly sending him news, political or commercial, to influence his speculations. When

the battle of Lexington took place, Mr. Morris assisted to put Pennsylvania in accord with the wishes of the other colonies, but he was for some time opposed to the Declaration of Independence, though he finally signed it. During the Revolutionary war he was at once the Salmon P. Chase and Jay Cooke of the Government, conceiving the schemes of credit and borrowing money with his own hand to execute them, and meantime he was a merchant also, and must have had a great advantage over his private contemporaries. Although his honor remains unquestioned, many of his processes were subject to investigation and not all the efforts of his historical executors are able to obliterate the fact that he finally passed into obscurity in that City and State of which he had been the first Senator to the United States, and, as there seems to be no doubt, the nominator of Alexander Hamilton for General Washington's Cabinet.

#### A GR AT DOWNFALL.

It seldom happens that a man with the unlimited powers of a Fiscal Minister in time of war is able to conduct his private business at the return of peace with the frugality and coolness that had marked him before the conflict. Morris was no exception to the rule; nearly everything he undertook after the peace seemed to be extravagant and unsuccessful. The immediate cause of his downfall and imprisonment for debt was his reckless speculation in the public lands of the different States, which were hastily disposed of under the Government of the Confederation. He possessed the finest tracts of land both in Western New-York and Western Pennsylvania, and, living on the scale of his prospects, he planned an elaborate mansion on Chestnut-st., Philadelphia, taking up the whole square between Eighth and Ninth-sts., and back to Sansom and Walnut-sts. Major L'Enfant, then no more than thirty years of age, undertook to build this marble mansion for Mr. Morris for the sum of \$60,000, though it appears that no contracts were made. The marvelling diary-keepers of the period say that the cellars under the house were "three stories deep," probably an exaggeration of the idea that good provision was made for wine there. Pictures extant of the house show an oblong building altogether unlike the houses of that day, but much like those of the present, with pavilion projections at the corners, recesses for architectural porticos and the steep French roof of the present date. Long before the house was done, its owner was in jail, and the correspondence between him and Major L'Enfant shows that he had invested the latter's salary and emoluments in the shares of the bank, where they were lost in the common ruin. At this time, however, the young Frenchman was too much engaged in the gay society of foreign speculators and American politicians and promoters who thronged Philadelphia, to exclaim against his loss. In after years he wrote bitter letters to Robert Morris, who was then lying in the public sponging house, harassed between his hopes of profit and his fears of the smallpox—which had broken out in the jail—and his letters to the Frenchman show a humble though polite spirit.

#### ARCHITECTURE IN OLD NEW-YORK.

When the new Constitution was adopted and about to go into operation, in 1789, New-York was at first selected to be the seat of Government, and the people resolved to transform their old City Hall, at the head of Broad-st. in Wall-st., then about ninety years old, into a Federal Hall to accommodate Congress. The occasion required a man of quick eye and executive talent. L'Enfant stepped forward. Wall-st. had been made important by the City Hall, which originally was a two-story building with a cupola surmounted by a clock and with low guard windows in the roof. The portal was low to the ground, or about three steps above the pavement, and consisted of three arches, over which was an open balcony on which the central window opened like a door. The corridor below extended to the rear, and on the left, going in, was a fire engine and a dungeon behind it for criminals, and on the right was a stairway and behind it the keeper's room. The centre of the second story was a court room, with a jury room above the engine house and the Common Council room on the other side. The debtor's prison was in the garret. Right opposite the front of the building, across Wall-st., were a cage, pillory and stocks.

Major L'Enfant took this recessed building and filled up the centre with a portico of two stories and a pediment, over which was an eagle. He raised the upper story and gave it the appearance of an attic, and heightened the roof and extended it back, and also deepened the building, and crowned the whole with a more effective cupola of two stories. It was on the balcony of this central portico that General Washington appeared before the crowd and took the oath in the presence of such men as John Adams, Oliver Ellsworth, Robert Morris, Fisher Ames, Daniel Carroll and Charles Carroll. This first capitol of the United States was torn down about 1812, while the present City Hall was in course of construction, and the lots on its site were sold for about \$8,000 apiece four years later. The corner lot became first the site of a bookstore, next a Custom House, and finally the Federal Treasury. The Mayor of New-York, William Duane, wrote a most complimentary letter to Major L'Enfant on behalf of the freemen of the city, making him a freeman and giving him, as has been said, ten acres of ground on "the commons." At that time this land was not considered immediately available, and the young Frenchman did not take it up, but seems to have preferred a money compensation instead, and there are various letters from Alexander Hamilton, Robert Morris and other men of note, counselling him about his compensation. It would appear that he finally got next to nothing, if anything, for his pains.

#### L'ENFANT IN THE QUAKER CITY.

The capital was removed from New-York to Philadelphia, and with it New-Yorkers lost their interest in the architect and sense of gratitude to him. In Philadelphia, L'Enfant was the most privileged guest of Morris, who had deepened and improved his acquaintance in New-York when attending the 1st Congress. The building of the great house called Morris's Folly was the result of this acquaintance. Its materials were finally used to build other houses, and the unfortunate projector never inhabited it. There is no doubt, however, that the example of L'Enfant had a considerable influence upon the public taste of the colonies, and brought rivals into the field. About that time the Philadelphia Library, which still stands on Fourth-st., at the corner of Library-st., was designed by William Thornton, an Englishman and a clerk in one of the public Departments. Mr. Jefferson was then Secretary of State and ambitious to be regarded as an authority in matters of taste and construction.

#### "ALONG THE POTOMAC."

The moment it was resolved to build a capital on the Potomac River, Morris and half a dozen business men who took the "point" from him, jumped into the speculation for lots there, and they perhaps relied on Major L'Enfant to advise them as to the best grounds to select. In the interim the relations between Morris and L'Enfant had become extremely intimate. The Society of the Cincinnati was too poor to pay the Frenchman's expenses to Paris, and Morris had got him passage on one of his packets. The Major had returned April 28, 1784, to New-York, after a voyage of forty-three days. His promotion to be the engineer of the new Capital City awoke in L'Enfant emotions of vanity and insubordination, partly to be ascribed to his self-confidence and partly to his disgust at the universal rapacity which considered him as a mere auctioneer of lots to serve the greed of tradespeople and farmers. Although the site of Washington looked very engaging to the eye of the tourist from the opposite hills—who imagined that its flatness would dispense with costly grades and engineering—yet it was in reality a mere gully, the alluvial overflow from the hills of Maryland, brought down by the heavy rainfalls and creeks. Much of it was a swamp, and the engineers were persecuted with insects and malaria, with mud and extortion, with foolish questions and more insolent criticisms. The principal parties on the work were Ellicott, the surveyor, and his assistant, the negro almanac-maker, Banneker, and Major L'Enfant, the engineer, and his corps of officers. One of these, a young man named Roberdieu, drawing his impulses from L'Enfant, was guilty of numerous acts and words of recklessness which went to the prejudice of his superior. L'Enfant was considered a mere plotter of the profile and draft of the city, and he was responsible to three Commissioners, generally resident in the neighborhood, and interested in the land.

#### GETTING INTO HOT WATER.

The celebrated family of Carroll, which had overspread Maryland and become opulent through the influence of one of their number who was surveyor to Lord Baltimore, possessed a large estate called "Daddington" immediately around the new Capitol building. Without any regard to the plans of the engineer, they had begun the construction of a large brick house in the middle of one of his streets. Considering himself a military officer, responsible only to the Government and not under obligation to go to Marlborough or Annapolis and await justice in the State courts, L'Enfant and his assistants attacked the new house and razed it to the ground.

whereupon came grave letters from General Washington, warning Major L'Enfant that he and everybody were subordinate to the common and neighborhood law. There are a number of such letters in the hands of Dr. Morgan, all valuable autographs and indicative of Washington's quality of mind. There were also letters from Jefferson, written in his delicate style, pleading with the engineer to understand and subscribe to the condition of things. Even old Davy Burns, who owned the farm where the White House and Treasury stand, is on record among these letters.

Finally L'Enfant lost his place, though he had finished the plot of Washington, by refusing to give up his plan to be examined by the community, that they might buy lots at the regular sales wherever they listed. The Frenchman's criticism was that they would immediately leap upon the best lands in his vistas and architectural squares, and raise huddles of shanties which would permanently embarrass the city. Such insubordination Washington was in no frame of mind to permit, and at his order Jefferson wrote to the architect that his services were at an end.

#### ALMOST IN OBLIVION.

A period of twenty years now ensues, in which this unfortunate genius almost disappears from sight, except through the medium of these letters. Hamilton writes him several times to come to dinner or supper, and discuss some question of taste. Secretary of State Monroe is particularly solicitous to lift the old man out of his misfortunes and give him a reliable support. The Society of the Cincinnati had never settled L'Enfant's claim, and the various officers of it write kind but ineffectual letters, bemoaning his condition. Monroe appointed him a professor at West Point and earnestly entreated him to accept the situation, giving him at the same time his old rank of major of engineers, but on the copy of his commission the old man has scrawled the words: "Not accepted, but not refused." With a delicate artistic and military nature, he would seem to have been constantly fearing that he might do something to disparage his rank, and he preferred that the country should be ungrateful to him, rather than take less than his due. He was not without money all the time, and the schedule of his effects and bills shows a liberal allowance for wines at the army and social clubs of that day. He was for a while particular in his attire. In one of his bills is mentioned a surtout of light brown dufty and a satin vest, lined with flannels. He had many suits of nankeen. Most of the time, however, he wore a long surtout of blue or green, with a bell-crowned hat. He was a bachelor and could get along on a small amount of money, especially under the hospitable conditions of that day, though the decline and poverty of slavery were rapidly bringing about a new generation possessed of neither the delicacy nor the means of their predecessors.

When the war of 1812 broke out and the British appeared on the Potomac, it became necessary to build a strong fort on that river, about ten miles below Washington. Secretary Monroe selected L'Enfant, and particularly cautioned him that "his critics had said he was too expensive and too slow" in his constructions. The Major planned the work, but in a short time became restive under some of the surrounding conditions and finally he was mustered out of the service. Thenceforward, for about seven years, he remained most of the time at Warburton Manor, the seat of Thomas Digges, within a few rods of the fort he had built. Some of the bricks and stones of the Digges house are still to be seen near Fort Washington, and also the graves of the proprietors, buried according to custom in one of the fields.

#### AN OLD MARYLAND FAMILY.

The Digges family is one of the most historical in Maryland, and intermarried with many other leading families, such as the Carrolls, the Atwoods, and the Brents. In Dr. Morgan's house are portraits by Sir Joshua Reynolds, of unquestioned validity, of both Thomas Digges and his brother. Thomas Digges was in England at the outbreak of the Revolutionary War, and his neighbor, General Washington, utilized his absence to obtain from him political information. The Whigs of that part of Maryland, however, endeavored to confiscate the Warburton property because Mr. Digges was absent. At a critical moment General Washington stepped forward and showed that he was really abroad in the interests of the insurrection. Digges had plenty of slaves, land and animals, ran his own vessels, and led the life of a gentleman of the world. He was descended from Sir Dudley Digges, Master of the Rolls of Charles I., whose portrait by Vandyke is at Dr. Morgan's. Thomas Digges died in 1821, and then began the old Major's troubles with collateral members of the family. Among them was Mr. Digges's sister, who laid claim to a part of the estate, and finding L'Enfant querulous or in the way, she made it unpleasant for him, whereupon the late Mr. Digges's nephew, William Dudley Digges, who lived at Green Hill, to the north of Washington, wrote to the Major to make his home at the latter house. He sent horses and a wagon to transport his effects, and about 1824 the old officer, then on the verge of seventy years, repaired to Green Hill, which is described as a frame house, with its front to the south, built about 1801, with a long piazza in the front, abundant domestic buildings in the rear and the negro quarters scattered around. The lower floor was composed of three large rooms, between two of which ran a hall. The house stood on grass terraces, below which was a circular drive, banks of flowers and steps of grass, a sun-dial and a large Le Notre garden, perhaps conceived by the Frenchman, with borders of box and clusters of peach and plum trees. There in the spring of 1825, Major L'Enfant was buried, and in the latter months of his life he is remembered walking around the garden, smelling of the flowers and looking at the sky. No stone has yet been put over his remains. Near by him is buried an army officer, the son of the lady who claimed Warburton Manor. This young man gave promise of great legal ability, but from some cause unknown he lost his peace of mind and cut his throat. He is interred by the side of the engineer of the Capital, who will, perhaps, at some future day, be the subject of a public statue in one of the squares of Washington.