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America's First Cathedral

John G. Waite Associates restores Baltimore's Basilica of the Assumption according to the intentions of architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe.

By [BRADFORD MCKEE](#)



Jeffrey Totaro/Esto

In essence, the preservation architects at John G. Waite Associates, Architects, had not one but two clients while restoring the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, otherwise known as the Baltimore Cathedral. The ostensible client was the Basilica Historic Trust, affiliated with the Archdiocese of Baltimore and led by Cardinal William H. Keeler. But ever in the background was another, phantom client: the original architect, Benjamin Henry Latrobe (1764–1820), who also designed parts of the U.S. Capitol under Thomas Jefferson and who never lived to see his full intentions for the Baltimore structure carried out.

Given the pains Latrobe took from 1805 until his death to perfect the cathedral (grandly, he quit twice on his client, Archbishop John Carroll), he'd have quailed at the numerous decorative insults it later sustained. During the 19th and 20th centuries, successive church leaders tried out their own various notions of Catholic expression inside the imposing granite building to impress the bishops' councils that periodically gathered there. The cathedral's interior was remodeled at least a dozen times between the Civil War and 1946, leaving it dark, lugubrious, and more than a little Gothic.

“None of these changes [was] successful,” says John G. Waite, who is principal of the eponymous Albany, N.Y., firm and who led the restoration, “which is why they kept redecorating, because they didn't understand what Latrobe's architecture was trying to do.”

On a hill that then dominated the Baltimore skyline, Latrobe and Carroll saw the building as a touchstone of religious freedom, which Roman Catholics of the era had reason to regard as a privilege rather than as a human right. For the first cathedral built in the independent United States, they chose a neoclassical language to make the point, stirred with subtle notes of the picturesque and sublime traditions in the way the structure's great dome and oculus carry light. And as Stephen F. Reilly, Waite's project manager, says, “the power of the neoclassical relies on light. It's three-dimensional and has gravity, and you have to use light to reveal it.”

But the light, like many of the cathedral's original qualities, was gradually stolen. Around the main dome, which followed designs by the 16th century French architect Philibert Delorme and soars 87 feet high, the 24 skylights were painted black during World War II and eventually removed. The tall, translucent windows that illuminated the nave were replaced with stained glass that eclipsed daylight. White marble floors were exchanged for earthy green; dark wood pews were installed; and the reflective brightness of the interior paint scheme turned gloomy.

Those were among the more obvious mistakes Waite's firm identified and fixed during its eight-year, \$32 million forensic renovation job. Before touching the building, the firm completed a historic structure report dating and detailing “every square inch” of the building, Waite says. The discovery process involved nondestructive methods such as X-ray, radar, and ultrasound, he says, to find problems such as rotted timber or masonry voids. The architects also combed through both private and government archives to uncover clues to the construction.

For the client, there were few surprises in the end, although Mark J. Potter, the trust's director, recalls his not having expected that the air ducts feeding new diff users in the church floor would need to thread through a series of knee walls beneath the floor. “That was a negative surprise,” Potter says. Yet ultimately, he adds, “I can't imagine we could be any happier.”

Within the church and in the preservation world, Waite's job may be seen as controversial. Rather than retrofit the cathedral to meet modern ecclesiastical requirements, Waite says that Cardinal Keeler insisted on going “back to basics”—to the integrity of Latrobe's design. “A lot of people said at first that this doesn't meet the secretary of interior's standards” for historic preservation, Waite says. “In the end, it did, but people didn't understand it at first.”

Waite believes that neither bringing back the cathedral to some exact place in its history nor pretending that everything about the building was historic would have worked. While the misguided accretions took time, so did fulfilling Latrobe's own design. The pair of towers holding Saracenic domes—as stipulated by Latrobe—was completed by 1837 (under the direction of Latrobe's son, John H.B. Latrobe), the portico was done by 1864, and the apse was extended—as Latrobe evidently thought necessary—by E.F. Baldwin in 1890.

But Latrobe never called for a shed roof. His roof, which sloped low behind a parapet, was conspicuously replaced in the mid-1800s by a “roof of convenience,” as Reilly calls it. A surviving watercolor working drawing helped the architects restore Latrobe's intended roof form and lower the parapet to its original height. Waite's team, however, initially thought the wood shingles they found may have been

temporary, though William Allen, the historian in the architect of the Capitol's office, assured them that wood shingles also appear in the Capitol and were "Latrobe's material of choice," Waite recalls. The undercroft beneath the sanctuary, where Latrobe meant to place a chapel, helps tell the story of his exacting vision and the ways in which it was thwarted. Latrobe resigned once because the builders disregarded his specifications and didn't sink the foundation piers deeply enough. When Carroll persuaded him to return, he compensated with inverted brick arches, visible in the undercroft, to carry the massive dome's load, much as spread footings might today.

Latrobe resigned a second time when, again, his design was ignored and wood joists were installed to support the church floor instead of a vaulted brick ceiling in the undercroft; that time, Carroll ordered the work redone with Latrobe's vaults. Even so, the space became too shallow for a chapel. Waite's team was able to test the depth of the piers and foundation walls with radar and underpin them to deepen the undercroft. After they removed the old, intrusive mechanical systems that filled the space and placed them outside the building in a new vault dug beneath the north yard, they were able to create the forsaken chapel.

The revelations of the most recent work have cast a certain irony on previous judgments of the building. In an essay accompanying the historic structure report, Charles Brownell, a professor of art history at Virginia Commonwealth University, cites the historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock's opinion that "internally, at least, this is one of the finest ecclesiastical monuments of Romantic Classicism."

Hitchcock, however, took less pleasure from the exterior, believing that the Saracenic domes were "not of Latrobe's design." Yet it is likely that Hitchcock, whatever he found inside the church, was not even viewing Latrobe's genuine article, whereas those onionlike domes with their slender finials—set perhaps to contrast and amplify the spherical power of the main dome—were entirely the architect's own. "For the first time, we know how Latrobe was putting together buildings, what materials he was using, and how inventive he was," Waite says. "It's not only his masterpiece, but his best-preserved building."

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