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Main content

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Thomas Jefferson's (1743-1826) architectural library is of great interest for the study of his architecture, and for the knowledge of the architectural culture to which he belonged. The purpose of this article is to give a general account of Jefferson's collection of books on architecture with special reference to the relationships between printed sources and his own architectural designs. Having received no academic training and having no first hand knowledge of either ancient Roman or modern European architecture before 1784, Jefferson relied heavily on books as a source of inspiration for his earliest designs, and as an aid to the formulation of his architectural ideas. He continued to use these sources in his later career. Benjamin Henry Latrobe summarized this architectural practice when he complimented Jefferson's talents to a correspondent in 1805: "Jefferson was an excellent architect out of books ... I am cramped in this design to his prejudice in favor of the architecture of old French books, out of which he fishes everything". (1) Similarly, a letter of 23 February 1816 written by Colonel Isaac Cole to John Cocke, who had asked Jefferson to design his house at Bremo, witnesses the importance of books in Jefferson's architectural practice and design process:

He [Jefferson] had sent all his books &c. &c. to Washington, or he would have drawn yr. house for you--it would have been a pleasure to him--but now he could not undertake to do it before the fall, when he expected other books from Paris. (2)

Fiske Kimball wrote that "to know what architectural books were at hand is important in Jefferson's case on account of his dependence on them for his inspiration" (3) Kimball was the first architectural historian to try to relate Jefferson's architectural books to his designs. Descriptive catalogues of Jefferson's architectural books were published by Emily Millicent Sowerby in 1952-1959 (4) and by William B. O'Neal in 1976, (5) but since then little has been written on the subject, except for an essay by Richard Guy Wilson published in 2001. (6) This last study is the first to discuss the order of the books in Jefferson's own catalogue of the library he sold to Congress in 1815. Since 1976, several studies by William L. Beiswanger, Frederick Doveton Nichols, Gene Waddell, Charles E. Brownell, and Douglas L. Wilson throw light on individual aspects of Jefferson's architectural library. (7) In what follows, a synthesis of research on the subject is provided along with an examination of Jefferson's continental and English sources and how these are manifested in his buildings.

The Shadwell Library and its Books on Architecture and Gardening. Jefferson's architectural books were compiled in at least three different libraries. The first, collected before 1770, contained about four hundred books which he either inherited from his father, Peter Jefferson, or purchased in Williamsburg in 1760-1762 while attending the College of William and Mary, and later while studying law under George Wythe. These books were kept at Shadwell, his father's house. On 1 February 1770 a...

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