

THE ROTUNDA

INTRODUCTION

When Thomas Jefferson completed his second term as President of the United States, after four decades of public service, he returned to Monticello. There, until his death in 1826, he was occupied with the creation and construction of what became the University of Virginia.

Situated near Charlottesville, Virginia, the new university was designed by Jefferson with the consultation of Benjamin Henry Latrobe, the first professionally trained architect in the United States and Jefferson's Surveyor of Public Buildings (a position that later developed into the Architect of the Capitol). Jefferson also conferred with Dr. William Thornton, an amateur architect who designed the United States Capitol, on the layout of the university. The buildings designed by Jefferson were constructed beginning with Pavilion VII in 1817 and ending with the completion of the Rotunda in 1828.

The Academical Village, designed by Thomas Jefferson for the University of Virginia, occupies a twenty-eight acre site in the rolling hills east of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The original U-shaped complex of buildings is situated on an elevated site with a gentle slope extending down toward the south. At the northern end of the complex, the Rotunda, originally housing classrooms and the library, dominates a greensward, or Lawn. Two rows of buildings with five pavilions each and connecting dormitory rooms fronted by colonnades, form the east and west sides of the Lawn and terminate at the foot of the Rotunda. Beyond the East and West Lawn are parallel lines of buildings, or Ranges, each consisting of three Hotels, or dining rooms, with connecting dormitory rooms fronted by arcades.

The Academical Village has been called the "physical, intellectual and emotional center of the institution" by David J. Neuman, Architect for the University. As the head of the Academical Village, the Rotunda has become the symbol of the University of Virginia and is one of the most recognized architectural icons in the United States. The history of the Rotunda reflects the development of the University as a whole.

The idea for a central Pantheon-like central building for the university was suggested by Benjamin Henry Latrobe who sent Jefferson sketches and drawings not only for the Rotunda, but for the pavilions as well. After Latrobe's untimely death in 1820, Jefferson

developed the design for the library and construction began in 1823. It was not completed until 1828, two years after Jefferson's death.

By 1850, it was apparent that the university had outgrown the original buildings, and plans were formulated for the construction of a large classroom annex to the Rotunda. Designed by architect Robert Mills, who had been associated with both Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Henry Latrobe, the four-story annex extended north from the Rotunda. It was constructed between 1851 and 1854.

One of the most significant events in the history of the university occurred on October 27, 1895, when the Annex, which housed the law school as well as the schools of physics and modern languages, caught fire. The fire extended to the Rotunda, and reduced both buildings to a smoldering ruins with only the brick walls standing. Stanford White, of the New York architectural firm of McKim, Mead & White, was selected to rebuild the Rotunda and to design classroom buildings that terminated the south end of the Lawn. Initially, White intended to rebuild the Rotunda as it was originally designed by Jefferson, but for functional reasons he created an interior consisting of a single, two-story library space. White also designed a monumental portico and staircase on the north elevation, which did not exist in the Jefferson design. The Rotunda, as rebuilt by Stanford White has been the subject of considerable discussion and controversy over the past century.

In 1973, in an attempt to return the building to Jefferson's design, the McKim, Mead & White interior was demolished. The new interior generally followed Jefferson's design; however, twentieth century materials were utilized and modifications were made to address modern functional and building code considerations. Today, much of the work done as part of the 1973-1976 renovation, particularly the installation of mechanical and electrical systems, and the construction of a new sheet metal roof, have reached the end of their serviceable lifespans and need to be replaced before serious damage occurs to the building. Other components of the renovation work have been questioned as to their accuracy and appropriateness.

In 2006, in order to evaluate the Rotunda and present options for its future treatment and use, this historic structure report (HSR) was commissioned by the University. The Rotunda Historic Structure Report is part of the comprehensive evaluation of the original Jefferson buildings, which began with the preparation of a historic structure report for Pavilion I in 1988 and continued with reports for Pavilion IV (1991), Pavilion II (1992), Pavilion V (1994), Pavilion VII (2002), and Pavilion III (2006).

The Rotunda Historic Structure Report is the most comprehensive yet undertaken for a building at the University of Virginia. This is because of the Rotunda's significance as the central building, and focus, of the Academical Village, as well as its complex construction history consisting of the initial building campaign, the addition of a large annex, and two major reconstruction projects. Building on previous studies, the Rotunda

HSR includes a detailed history of the original design and construction, as well as the subsequent modifications and periods of reconstruction. Detailed architectural descriptions of the entire structure, including all exterior features and room-by-room summaries of the existing conditions were prepared. Reference was made to previous periods of construction where relevant, and building evolution studies were developed. All of the elements of the building’s fabric were examined to determine what physical problems currently exist and to develop a scope of needed repairs, renovations, or improvements. An evaluation of existing, and historic uses of the building was undertaken. Interviews with university staff members provided a better understanding of the Rotunda’s problems, current shortcomings, and possible long-range uses. Measured drawings of existing conditions and sketches of historical conditions have been prepared. Modern photography, as well as historical illustrations, are included in the report as well.

A significant departure from previous university historic structure reports is the inclusion of major sections on the assessment of structural, HVAC, electrical, plumbing, and fire protection systems. An evaluation of the landscape history in the vicinity of the Rotunda has also been incorporated in this report. These sections were prepared not only because of the larger size of the Rotunda compared to the pavilions, but also because of the complicated construction history.

John G. Waite Associates, Architects PLLC was engaged to prepare the Rotunda Historic Structure Report, along with the following consultants:

Mount Ida Press	architectural historians
Plus Group Consulting Engineering, PLLC	mechanical, electrical, plumbing engineers
Robert Silman Associates, PLLC	structural engineers
EDAW	landscape architects

The historic structure reports for Pavilion I, Pavilion IV, Pavilion II, and Pavilion V were prepared by Mesick-Cohen-Waite Architects, the predecessor firm of John G. Waite Associates, Architects. The core team responsible for the preparation of these reports for MCW Architects, dating back to 1988, consisted of Clay S. Palazzo, Douglas G. Bucher, Chelle M. Jenkins, and John G. Waite, who were the principal team for the Rotunda report. This same team also prepared historic structure reports for Rouss Hall and Cocke Hall, two of the three McKim, Mead & White buildings constructed when the Rotunda was rebuilt after the 1895 fire. Members of the team also were responsible for the preparation of historic structure reports, as well as directing the restoration, of the

Baltimore Cathedral and Davidge Hall (University of Maryland), both designed by Benjamin Henry Latrobe; The Octagon, designed by William Thornton; and the Venetian Room, Greenwood Plantation, and Schenectady City Hall, designed by McKim, Mead & White Architects. Diana S. Waite of Mount Ida Press served as architectural historian for all of these reports as well.

This breadth of experience dealing with other Jefferson designed buildings, as well as structures designed by other architects associated with the Rotunda, enabled the architectural team to efficiently deal with the history, building fabric, and problems of repair for the Rotunda. The architectural team, being familiar with the work of the craftsmen who originally built the Rotunda and who had worked on the pavilions, was able to evaluate elements as diverse as molding profiles and roofing details to determine whether they were historically accurate and technologically appropriate. This approach provided the information needed to evaluate in a meaningful way the current state of the Rotunda and make sound recommendations for its future treatment.