

William F. Thornton

(1759 – 28 Mar 1828)

Thornton. At his residence in F Street, after a tedious confinement, by malady, which he bore with unruffled resignation, the highly gifted Doctor William Thornton, one of the oldest and most respectable inhabitants of this City, and who, for many years past, presided at the head of the Patent Office, in the Department of State. His funeral will take place on Sunday next, precisely at one o'clock, when his friends, and the friends of the family, are respectfully requested to attend.

The National Intelligencer, April 4, 1828

The Late Doctor William Thornton



The funeral of the late Doctor Thornton took place last Sunday; and on that occasion, every honor that could be shown, either by citizens or strangers, to solace his amiable and bereaved family, and evince the sincerity of public regret for his merits and memory was manifested. His body was accompanied to the place of interment by the President of the United States (John Quincy Adams), the Heads of Departments, members of Congress, and functionaries of the Corporation. And, on this melancholy occasion, the associates of the Columbian Institute having voted to wear badges of mourning for him, were joined by the medical and other learned societies to which he belonged, and by other respectable citizens who all discovered unusual sympathy, in paying this last tribute of respect to his remains. If the practice of lavishing obituary praise, in all our public journals, had not almost broken down the distinctions between merit and mediocrity, and depreciated the value of any expressions of public opinion, it would be a sadly pleasing employment to sketch the biography of Doctor Thornton, whose genius most certainly has not a thing of every-day growth. But, the abuse to which we allude, will confine us to the meager detail of a few obituary and broken sentences. Doctor William Thornton was an adopted American citizen. He was born in the British West Indies, in a family affluent and respectable. He was educated in classical learning, and for his profession, in the best schools in Edinburg. Here, after a residence of some years, he took his medical degrees, extolled for gifts and attainments. After travelling subsequently for several years in Europe, he returned, in the bloom of manhood, to America; and, having happily married in Philadelphia, this country thence forth became the land of his choice. During the first Administration, he was introduced to President Washington, whose regard he conciliated, and by whom, having been appointed a Commissioner for laying out this Metropolis, and fixing his future residence here, he may be considered as one of its founders. As soon as the Patent Office in the State Department became established in Washington, he was invited to preside over its important duties, a function, which, during four successive Administrations, he has ably fulfilled. Doctor Thornton was distinguished by a clear understanding, a tenacious memory, and an exuberant imagination. Highly gifted by nature, those gifts were exalted by an excellent education. His benevolence expanding into philanthropy, was active and boundless. Witness the early, eager, and disinterested effects of argument and eloquence which are embodied in his memorials, some of which preceded public opinion, and probably contributed to incline its tardy prudence in favor of Greek liberty, and South American Independence. To try, indeed, to do great good to great members of unhappy

men, constituted the ruling effort of his life. His temperament was highly sensitive, and of course, his character was not exempt from those alloys that are blended with genius, and which we must take with it, or be content to live without it. He was constant and warm in his friendships, open and, decided in his enmities. His love of knowledge was great; his love of liberty greater; but his greatest love was that of truth. Truth he incessantly sought, through every avenue of science or literature, and fearlessly pursued through the whole course of his career with unabated ardor. In every relation of social life, and emphatically in all its endearing charities, he was exemplary. In fine, a more fervent patriot and philanthropist never existed; nor a kinder kinsman, more devoted husband, or truer friend. C.

Perley's Reminiscences, p. 60

Prominent as an adopted citizen of Washington and as a personal friend of President Adams was Dr. William F. Thornton, Superintendent of the Patent Office, who had by personal appeals to his conquering countrymen, in 1814, saved the models of patents from the general conflagration of the public buildings. He was also a devoted lover of horse-racing, and on one occasion, when he expected that a horse of his would win the cup, Mr. Adams walked out to the race-course to enjoy the Doctor's triumph, but witnessed his defeat.

McMahan, Virgil E. *The Artists of Washington, DC, 1796-1996*. The Artists of Washington, Washington, DC, 1995.

THORNTON, WILLIAM

Architect, draftsman and painter born in Tortola on his father's West Indian plantation in 1759. He came to the mainland in 1787, and worked in Philadelphia, PA from 1788-1794. He then came to DC, where he was commissioner of the District of Columbia, architect of the U.S. Capitol and then, from 1802-1828 head of the U.S. Patent Office. In addition to the Capitol, he designed and built a number of other buildings in DC, including the Octagon House, Tudor Place, Woodlawn and two houses for George Washington. He was also an engraver and portrait painter in oils and miniature, his subjects including George Washington and Mrs. James Madison, as well as watercolors of himself and his wife, Anna Maria, who was also an amateur painter. He died in DC in 1828. His portrait by Gilbert Stuart, was included in the exhibition, "Makers of History in Washington 1800-1950" at the National Gallery of Art in 1950. REFS: Clark, Allen C., Records of the Columbia Historical Society of Washington, DC, (Vol. 18, 1915); FAIRMAN; FORD; GROCEE, MALLETT 2; NGA 3; PROVINE; WP "A Capitol Idea Getting By with No Help from His Enemies," 18 Jan 76, p. D17 and "A Society Architect in the Federal City," 18 Jul 76, pp. K1-3.

The Washington Post, May 31, 1928, p. 5

Architects Pay Honors to Capital's Designers

Members of the American Institute of Architects yesterday morning held memorial services for Dr. William Thornton, designer of the Capitol Building, in the Congressional cemetery. Later they journeyed to Arlington National Cemetery and held similar services in memory of Charles Pierre L'Enfant, designer of the city.

David Lynn, architect of the Capitol, and Waddy B. Wood, of the American Institute of Architects, lauded the work of Dr. Thornton. He was born in 1761 in the West Indies of English parentage. At the age of 31 he designed the Capitol. Among his other creations are the Octagon House, the Tudor Place in Georgetown and Woodlawn Mansion recently acquired by former Senator Oscar W. Underwood.

Glenn Brown eulogized the service rendered Washington by L'Enfant in an address in Arlington Cemetery. Wreaths were placed upon the tomb of L'Enfant by members of the Fine Arts Commission, the National Capitol Park and Planning Commission and the American Institute of Architects. The members of the committee on arrangements were: Louis Justement, Gilbert B. Wood, Francis P. Sullivan, Percy Adams, William Partridge and Horace W. Peaslee, chairman.