

THE ROTUNDA

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

Jefferson's Rotunda, as it exists today, is the result of a remarkable series of circumstances and events. The intent of this historic structure report is to gain an understanding of the evolution of this significant American architectural icon. To accomplish this, the team undertook a thorough visual inspection of all exterior surfaces, as well as each interior space. Each surface and feature was analyzed to determine its place in the evolution of the Rotunda complex, as it evolved over some one hundred and eighty years. This evolution began before the construction process commenced. From Jefferson's initial concept for the university, that did not include a structure of the scale and in the location of the Rotunda, to suggestions made by Thornton and Latrobe that gave birth to the prominent centrally positioned building, the structure evolved and continued to evolve during construction and later.

EARLY DRAWINGS OF THE ROTUNDA

To understand the Rotunda as it now exists and as it existed prior to the 1895 conflagration, it was necessary to thoroughly study the few original documents, both drawings and written material, that were from the hand of Jefferson and his favored craftsmen. The plans, section, and south (front) elevation drawings produced by Jefferson between about 1818 and 1819 are all that survive from the design process that must have produced many more detailed drawings [*see Figures 5-13*].

Information from Jefferson's drawings is supplemented by conditions revealed in drawings produced by John Neilson at the time of construction [*Figures 20-22*], and in much later drawings from the end of the nineteenth century, immediately after the Rotunda fire. The plans produced by McDonald Brothers Architects and McKim Mead & White [*Figures 64-73*] provide information about pre-1895 conditions that confirmed some of the plan features shown on the original Jefferson drawings.

There is remarkably little visual information concerning the Rotunda as it appeared after completion in 1827, and as it evolved until destroyed in the 1895 fire. The earliest image, actually predating the construction, is the handsome, tinted ink drawing of the