



In Jefferson's Shadow: The Architecture of Thomas R. Blackburn

Bryan Clark Green

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In 1999, historians at the Virginia Historical Society acquired three curiously bound volumes of drawings and documents created between 1821 and 1858 by a long -- and unjustifiably -- forgotten architect named Thomas R. Blackburn.

Further inspection revealed that these were, in fact, no ordinary documents, but a unique window onto the life of a distinguished builder and his revered master: Thomas Jefferson. In these extraordinary books, we find Blackburn, at first a young carpenter, engaged in the construction of Jefferson's famed "academical village" at the University of Virginia. He simultaneously embarked on an ambitious program of architectural study, guided, it appears, by Jefferson himself. The drawings he executed in the four decades that followed -- extraordinary ink and watercolor explorations of his many residential and civic commissions -- bear witness to his emergence as a mature and prolific architect in his own right.

In Jefferson's Shadow is a unique document of the relationship between an unknown but highly skilled country builder and the American statesman widely considered this nation's first gentleman architect. But it is also an indispensable resource on the little-understood practice of architecture in the early and mid-nineteenth century.

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