Why the Hotel? Liberal Visions, Merchant Capital, Public Space, and the Creation of an American Institution

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The hotel has for two hundred years been a familiar place on the American landscape and in the popular imagination. Beginning in the 1790s, the hotel in its various incarnations proliferated across the expanding national territory, its increasing ubiquity reflected in innumerable nineteenth-century drawings, maps, city directories, and photographs. Well before midcentury, hotels could be found in practically any settlement of more than a few thousand inhabitants, and by 1930 the United States was home to over 17,000 hotels employing nearly 300,000 people and producing $1 billion in revenue annually [Boorstin, 1965, p. 145; Bureau of the Census, 1931, pp. 2-8]. Meanwhile, the hotel's easy recognizability and its varied and evocative imagery—as travelers' haven and criminal hideout, wedding location and trysting ground, ritzy cocktail lounge and skid-row residence—made it a frequent referent in literature, music, and visual art. Generations of observers saw the hotel as an institution which so perfectly epitomized American life that it surely held the key to understanding the national character. Henry James described the hotel as "constituting for vast numbers of people the richest form of existence" in American life, leading one to "see the hotel as itself that life;" and Joan Didion, who made the hotel setting an integral part of her novels, wrote of an institution that was "not merely a hotel but a social idea, one of the few extant clues to a certain kind of American life" [James, 1906, p. 299; Koestenbaum, 1997].

Academic historians, however, until quite recently displayed only occasional interest in the hotel. Influential cultural and social histories have made note of hotels as symbols or venues [Leach, 1993; Chauncey, 1994], and a growing literature on travel and tourism has touched upon the hotel as an important concomitant of human mobility [Brown, 1995; Spears, 1995]. Treatment of the hotel as a worthy historical subject in its own right, though, was for decades the nearly exclusive province of antiquarians, who produced a mountain of decontextualized and anecdotal books and articles which neither engaged ongoing historical debates nor addressed larger theoretical issues. The only exceptions to this rule were brief but highly suggestive excursions which served as the grounding for subsequent scholarly inquiry [King, 1957; Boorstin, 1965;

BUSINESS AND ECONOMIC HISTORY, Volume Twenty-eight, no. 2, Winter 1999.
 ISSN 0894-6825

Harris, 1976]. The past few years have seen a revived historical interest in hotels, with full-length efforts devoted to their service as housing stock [Groth, 1994], their importance to technology [Berger, 1997], and their role in class formation [Brucken, 1997]. These monographs are limited, however, by their thoroughgoing functionalism, which leads them to define hotels exclusively by one or another particular use to which they are put; moreover, the two most recent treatments elide the crucial first three decades of American hotel development.

The most fundamental question—Why the hotel?—remains not only unanswered, but unaddressed. Perhaps because hotels are everywhere in the modern world, their form and presence are taken for granted rather than problematized. The existence of the hotel as a distinct institutional type is not self-explanatory, however; it needs to be accounted for, as does its particular physical and social character. The now-standard form of the hotel was the contingent product of people who lived in a particular time, place, and culture: specifically, the cities of the United States in the early decades of the republic. The hotel did not just appear fully-formed—it was the outcome of a gradual process of development which was by no means a natural or necessary one; a proper account of this development would require far more than a brief excursus. The purpose of this article is to foreground such an account with an explanation of why the men who built or planned the first American hotels did so; and of how their and their neighbors' values and imperatives shaped the character of the emergent institution. The nation's first hotels appeared rather suddenly, with five separate structures built or planned in five different cities between 1793 and 1797. The fact that a substantial number of Americans chose to invest their money, efforts, and hopes in a new and largely untested institutional form reveals a great deal about how the rise of liberal capitalism and the contentious political culture of the 1790s shaped the built environment of the early republic.

Defining the term "hotel" is necessarily the first task at hand.[1] While all wayfaring cultures have created their own forms of institutionalized hospitality, such as the *xenodochium* of the ancient Mediterranean, the *caravansarai* of the medieval Islamic world, the Germanic *Gasthöfe*, and the *posadas* of Spain and Latin America, the hotel represented a distinctive mode of public accommodation, and the one which became a global standard of sorts [Pevsner, 1976, p. 176; Groth, 1994, p. 38]. The hotel's unique character was a function of its physical configuration and the social construction of its interior space. Physically, hotels were purpose-built, architecturally distinct structures combining private quarters and public rooms; socially, they were freely accessible to the nonmarginalized citizenry and served as important deliberative and civic spaces which were constitutive of a bourgeois public sphere [Habermas, 1962].

[1] The word "hotel" entered English usage in the 1760s to refer to a superior kind of inn; the French hôtel whence it came was a generic term for a large public building or nobleman's residence [O.E.D., 1989, p. 427]. For the purposes of this article, "hotel" is a heuristic device which conforms closely to a specific vernacular architectural form but makes no claim to bright-line, transhistorical determinacy.

The hotel as it developed in the United States did have architectural precursors in early modern Europe and particularly in late eighteenth-century England, but these served principally as extensions of the royal court, providing privately-subscribed spaces for self-display [Pevsner, 1976, pp. 169-173; Ison, 1948, pp. 92-98]. Likewise, while a thriving public sphere had existed in American taverns for at least a century before the creation of the hotel, the newer institution's imposing presence on the urban scene—its physical mass, splendid architecture, elaborate interior spaces, and intensely public and mixed-gender sociability—made it widely and explicitly recognized as a distinct category of public space by contemporary Americans and foreigners alike [Conroy, 1995; Boorstin, 1965].

The cornerstone of the nation's first hotel was laid on the Fourth of July of 1793 in a public ceremony which reportedly attracted 1500 onlookers to the still-unbuilt Federal City on the Potomac River. The plans for the Union Public Hotel delineated a building of three and a half stories, 120 feet wide and 60 feet deep. The structure was Georgian, constructed of brick with stone embellishment, and incorporated a row of columns topped by a pediment. Internally, it would contain several public meeting rooms on the lower floors and guest rooms on the upper stories. "The whole," predicted one Philadelphia journalist, "will form the most magnificent building in America" [Atkins, 1981, pp. i-9]. The Union Public was a dramatic departure from contemporary American norms of public accommodation. The inns and taverns of the day were humble establishments usually kept in converted wooden dwelling-houses indistinguishable from surrounding habitations. The contrast is ably illustrated by the cost of the hotel, which at over $50,000 was ten times greater than most public houses and four times more than even the nation's finest inns [Boston Records Commissioners, 1890; Wilson, 1892, pp. 150-151]. The hotel was financed by a nationally-advertised $350,000 lottery, the grand prize of which was to be the completed hotel. The Union Public was for years rivaled only by the two other significant buildings in Washington: the White House and the Capitol.

Even as it remained unfinished, the hotel became one of Washington's preeminent civic spaces. The large rooms on the ground floor were regularly used for public meetings. Notices in local newspapers often named the hotel as a gathering-place: on October 7, 1796, for example, residents were "requested to meet at the HOTEL...for the purpose of drafting a petition to the Assembly of the State of Maryland, to grant such regulations as may tend to promote the peace and prosperity of the City of Washington" [*Washington Gazette*]. Articles and advertisements from the 1790s constantly used the Union Public as a point of geographical reference and also indicated the accretion of printers, publishers, and other concerns around the structure [*Gazette of the United States*, 13 April 1795; *Washington Gazette*, 22 July 1796]. A few years later, the hotel housed the national capital's first theater performance when 300 people packed into one of the public rooms to see "Columbus" and "Fortune's Frolic" [Arnebeck, 1991]. The building's role as a place of public deliberation actually transcend-

ed its intended but never realized use as a hotel. The Union Public served for some time as a post office, a function which was formalized in 1810 when the federal government bought the structure and made it the national headquarters of the Postal Service [John, 1995, p. 65]. Moreover, after British forces destroyed the Capitol in 1814, the United States Congress was moved into several of the hotel's large public rooms, where it held session for more than a year [Atkins, 1981, pp. 9-12]. The combination of impressive architecture, large assembly rooms, and, most importantly, a well-established pattern of use as a public forum, had made the nation's first hotel building a part *par excellence* of an emergent national public sphere.

The Union Public was the first institution of its kind, begging the question of where the idea of building such a structure originated. The hotel was the brainchild of Samuel Blodget, Jr., a New England merchant and financier who conceived, arranged, and executed the project after securing himself the post of supervisor of buildings and improvements at Washington. Blodget had made a sizeable fortune in the East India trade and later been among the founders of the nation's first capitalized insurance corporation, and his family had been involved in trade and transportation for at least two generations. Blodget's grandfather was an innkeeper and a proprietor of the Charles River Bridge, his father established two stagecoach lines and a canal in Massachusetts and New Hampshire, and Blodget himself promoted canal projects in Philadelphia and Washington [Samuel Blodget Papers]. The Blodgets were keenly aware of two key requirements of a domestic commercial economy: facilities for the efficient transportation of goods and public accommodations for the people who traveled with those goods. Blodget was also something of an architectural enthusiast. He had twice traveled to Europe and been strongly impressed by its architecture, particularly the elaborate Georgian buildings of England's eighteenth-century urban renaissance [Jackson, 1931, pp. 301-302]. This probably explains his hiring of the Irish architect James Hoban, who also designed the White House, to draft a plan for the hotel. Perhaps most importantly, Blodget had a very personal stake in the future of Washington: he owned 500 acres of undeveloped land in the middle of the new city, making him one of its largest real estate speculators; indeed, a week after the city commission's approval of the hotel project, he had increased his holdings by purchasing an estate in what would later become known as Dupont Circle [Atkins, 1981, p. 3].

The architectural and spatial form of the Union Public Hotel was emblematic of the commercially-oriented vision of the merchant who created it. In its most basic functional sense, the hotel would provide accommodations to travelers at a time when most travel was trade-related; it was thus part of an integrated national transportation network which three generations of Blodgets had endeavored to establish through their promotion of internal improvements. The hotel's public spaces also served an economic purpose, providing meeting-places for a merchant class long accustomed to doing business in public houses (and particularly Blodget's chosen business of insurance—Lloyd's of London

had, after all, originated in Edward Lloyd's coffeehouse). The exalted external architecture of the structure served the symbolic purpose of glorifying the activities pursued within, and moreover of inscribing upon the national capital's landscape the importance of commerce to the young republic. In this connection, of course, the Union Public was also intended to have the more immediate effect of raising the value of the surrounding land, thereby making its owners, Blodget prominent among them, a tidy profit (notably, it was for this apparent impropriety that Blodget was dismissed from his federal job) [Jackson, 1931, p. 303]. The nation's first hotel, which had been advertised heavily in such leading commercial newspapers as the *Columbian Centinel* and the *Gazette of the United States*, may furthermore have served as inspiration and model for subsequent structures, as hotel projects were soon undertaken elsewhere in the United States.

In January of 1793, ten of New York City's leading merchants formed themselves into a committee to purchase the City Tavern, the finest public house in the city; and having paid the owner a consideration of £6,000, they promptly demolished it. The motives of the New York Tontine Hotel & Assembly Rooms Association, as the committee was known, were made clear that autumn, when its chairman announced a prize of twenty guineas for the best design for a hotel to be built on the site of the old tavern [Stone, 1872, p. 320]. The City Hotel, commenced in the opening months of 1794, was a red brick building fronting 80 feet on Broadway and extending 120 feet back toward Temple Street to the west. It contained 137 rooms—an extremely large number at a time when public houses more commonly had between six and ten—and stood five stories tall, its main façade featuring forty-one windows to admit the morning sun [Evans, 1952, pp. 382-384]. By century's end the hotel remained one of the two most expensive privately-owned structures in New York City [Wilson, 1892, pp. 150-151].

The members of the NYTHARA came from a wealthy, well-organized, and self-conscious class of merchants bound together through common economic activities, social networks, and political affiliations. All ten drew their personal income from oceangoing trade, and half were scions of the city's leading mercantile clans. Most were members of the Chamber of Commerce, four were directors of the Bank of the United States, and several sat on the boards of other banks and insurance companies. They were overwhelmingly Federalists, with several holding or having run for city, state, or federal office on the party ticket [N.Y. City Directory, 1790-1794; Wilson, 1892, pp. 39, 75]. New York's merchant elite identified strongly with the city, particularly insofar as they could credit themselves for its improving fortunes: after all, by century's end, fully one-third of the overseas trade of the entire United States passed through New York and was tended by their fleets, banks, exchanges, and insurance companies [Burrows and Wallace, 1999, p. 334]. In a municipality where representation had long been apportioned on the basis of property rather than population, it was by no means a logical stretch for its most prosperous businessmen to assume that they should lead in politics as well as trade.

New York's Federalist merchant princes were not shy about declaring their fitness to govern, and while the party of Hamilton had entered the 1790s with a political lock on the city, it was garnering a reputation for elitism and self-interest. The involvement of leading party men in rehabilitating Tories, maintaining neutrality toward republican France, and especially in precipitating the huge financial scandals of 1790-1792 led to the formation of a popular opposition. Democratically-minded fraternal societies pursued a politics of explicit class antagonism, warning that the city was threatened by an "overgrown monied importance" and "the baneful growth of aristocratic weeds among us;" they also took to the streets in conscious emulation of the French Jacobins, holding regular parades of hundreds of radical republicans. The Federalist elite was appalled at such out-of-doors populism, complaining that "demagogues always fix their meetings at the hour of twelve in order to take in all the Mechanics & Laborers—over whom they alone have influence and who in public meetings have a great advantage as they are not afraid of a black eye or broken head." The breakdown of social hierarchies which had begun in the Revolution had proceeded apace, and by the 1790s it was clear that even the city's most eminent gentlemen no longer commanded the habitual deference of the people [Burrows and Wallace, 1999, pp. 315-323].

The construction of the City Hotel was part of a collective response by patrician New Yorkers who mobilized their wealth to remake the urban landscape by creating an elegant, exclusive social space which permitted both separation from the urban riffraff and easy access to their places of work around Wall Street. The merchants who controlled municipal government in the late 1780s had already beautified lower Broadway, and the City Hotel marked a further extension of the avenue's opulent character. The nature of the project was by no means lost on plebeian New Yorkers and their radical spokesmen, one of whom characterized the grand opening celebration at the hotel as having been attended "particularly by those who are attached to the ancient Colony system of servility and adulation"[*New York Journal*, 25 February 1797]. The *Journal* was perhaps justified in its cynicism, since during the 1790s many of the city's wealthiest families had built huge mansions along Broadway. Indeed, this had not been the first time that the city's merchant elite had deployed grand architecture to establish order in New York. Only two years before the start of construction on the City Hotel, a group of five leading merchants, including two of the hotel's backers, formed a committee in the aftermath of the securities scandal and panic of 1792 [Stone, 1872, pp. 318-319]. This committee constructed the expensive and impressive Tontine Coffee House on Wall Street to impose discipline upon the chaotic stock trading of the day by moving brokers off the street and into the re-established New York Stock Exchange inside the building. Just as this structure was intended to restore respectability and order to the city's much-maligned financial markets, the City Hotel represented an effort to entrench the preeminence of the wealthy and powerful on the streets of New York City.

Neither the motives of the hotel's creators nor the outcome of their efforts, however, was quite so simple. The Tontine Coffee House and the City Hotel were also key elements in a larger effort to prepare New York City for a new economic age. The wealthy entrepreneurs of the Tontine associations were engaged in a collective endeavor to update a commercial infrastructure inherited from the recent mercantilist past by creating successor institutions more appropriate to a rapidly-developing capitalist system of free trade and travel. The buildings' imposing architecture meanwhile served to celebrate their vision of a commercial future for the still agrarian republic. The City Hotel did represent an elite effort at social control, though whether it actually served that purpose is highly questionable. The political strength and public presence of New York's radical republicans continued to increase, augmented over the course of the 1790s by an influx of politicized émigrés, especially Blacks from the West Indies and French Jacobins, joined later by English Levellers and United Irishmen. Notices in contemporary newspapers reveal that members of republican associations like the Democratic Society, the Patriotic Republican Sawyers, and the Caledonian Society increasingly held their public meetings just down Broadway from the City Hotel in taverns which had themselves begun to be referred to as "hotels" [Quinn Hotel Collection, Folders 1794-1800]. Notwithstanding elite efforts to establish a bulwark against the *canaille,* Broadway remained the city's preeminent locus of egalitarian politics.

The first generation of hotels in the United States also included three structures that were planned, proposed, or designed but which ultimately went unbuilt. Their stories nevertheless have much to say about the imperatives and inspiration behind the creation of a remarkably durable American institution. The planning of Newport, Rhode Island's first hotel suggests how local merchants conceived of the project as a way to extend the town's commercial prosperity in a new economic environment while simultaneously equating their business interests with the general welfare of the community. Thanks to the residual effect of its royal privileges within the colonial economy, Newport was in 1790 still the seventh largest seaport in the United States; but the disruption of commerce occasioned by the Revolutionary War and the destructive force of recent storms had left its trading links weakened and its waterfront a shambles [Bayles, 1891, p. 514]. In January 1795, the Rhode Island General Assembly granted incorporation to thirty-six Newport merchants—practically the town's entire mercantile leadership—and authorized them to conduct a lottery to raise $25,000 "for rebuilding the Wharf in Newport, commonly called the Long-Wharf, and for building a Hotel in the said Town." The merchants pledged that once they had revived the port, they would use the profits from the wharf and hotel to fund public schools in Newport [*Acts,* 1795]. Having secured the necessary permission from the legislature, they publicized the lottery with broadsides and in Newport's leading commercial newspaper; they held the drawing, collected the proceeds, and distributed the prizes the following May. The hotel, however, was by all accounts built only many years later, if at all [*Newport Mercury,* 15 September 1795 and 5 May 1796;

Meeting Minutes of the Proprietors of Long Wharf, 1800-1863]. The merchants of Newport apparently considered both the wharf and the hotel vital to the town's welfare, not only as a matter of linked commercial infrastructure, but also in terms of the common good. The inclusion of both the wharf and hotel in the same application suggests that the merchants believed (or at least thought the state legislature could be convinced) that both structures were necessary for the promotion of trade: the wharf to facilitate the movement of goods, the hotel to accommodate the people who supervised it. Meanwhile, the deliberate linkage of these commercial structures with the public benefits of education was emblematic of the merchants' vision of a postcolonial Newport. They imagined a community that would devote its resources to the pursuit of trade, which in turn would provide the material basis for an integrated and harmonious social order supporting the twin virtues of entrepreneurial activity and informed civic participation.

Charles Bulfinch and Benjamin Latrobe, the two most important American architects of the early national period, both devoted their efforts to hotel projects early in their careers. Bulfinch's 1796 proposal for a hotel for Boston inscribed city merchants' trade and cultural links with Europe and manifested a view of the centrality of commerce to the nation's future. Bulfinch was the grandson of Charles Apthorp, a merchant who made his fortune in transatlantic commerce and who in the 1750s was reputed to be the wealthiest man in Boston. It was in Apthorp's architectural library that the young Bulfinch first encountered editions of Palladio and Vitruvius, and the family's wealth paid for a two-year tour of England, France, and Italy which confirmed his career aims and provided the aesthetic inspiration for his designs [Kirker, 1969, pp. 1-3]. In the years after his return, Bulfinch undertook a number of projects, including a hotel; its sole remaining trace is a notice in the *Columbian Centinel*, the Boston mercantile newspaper which three years earlier had carried advertisements for Blodget's hotel lottery. It read simply: "A subscription is filling for building a large and elegant Public HOTEL, for the accommodation of strangers, from a plan lately presented by CHARLES BULFINCH, Esq. Its cost is estimated at £21,000 divided into 200 shares"[14 September]. Bulfinch's projected budget for the hotel was an enormous sum to spend on any structure, especially a public house. Indeed, it far exceeded the initial cost estimate for the Massachusetts State House, Bulfinch's next project, for which the state legislature initially allocated only £8,000 [Kirker, 1969, pp. 101-108]. Simply put, in terms of the built landscape, the structure which represented commerce and travel was to be much larger and finer than the one which represented democracy. Bulfinch's vision of a hotel for the city of Boston, much like Blodget's for Washington, dictated that it would be one of the most magnificent buildings in the city and a fitting and explicitly public forum for greeting important visitors to the community. At the same time it would be a massive physical monument to the importance of commerce to the city of Boston.

A hotel was among the first architectural projects which Benjamin Latrobe undertook after emigrating from England. In late 1797 he turned his attention

to designing a grand public building for the Virginia state capital at Richmond. Latrobe conceived a single, architecturally integrated structure which comprised three distinct elements: a theater, assembly rooms, and a hotel. The theater occupied the center of the building, with the hotel and assembly rooms in pavilions on either side. The hotel's interior was elaborately subdivided to include a wide variety of functionally distinct spaces. The ground floor included a substantial foyer, a grand dining hall, public parlors, sitting rooms, a coffee-room, and a bar. Upper floors housed the guest rooms, as well as waiting rooms, subsidiary lobbies, and large front rooms which, the plans indicated, could be hired out for private events [Latrobe, 1797; Hamlin, 1955, pp. 117-120]. The large size and exalted architecture of the structure were powerful expressions of the tremendous importance of a site in which so many types of public space were combined and concentrated; this was not to be simply another public house, but rather the leading public place in Richmond. As such it included a number of spaces which characterized a thriving public sphere. The hotel's coffee-room and bar reproduced two of the most characteristic deliberative spaces of eighteenth-century Anglo-American urban life, the coffeehouse and the tavern. It also juxtaposed them in such a way as to suggest the interconnectedness of the two primary uses of such spaces as Latrobe had known them in London and Virginia: for political discussion and for the exchange of important commercial intelligence and other news. Latrobe shared with the other creators of the American hotel a commitment to internal improvements, as revealed by over two decades of activity endorsing and constructing canals, bridges, and waterways, most notably in collaboration with Albert Gallatin, the republic's leading transportation visionary [Hamlin, 1955, pp. 55-68]. The hotel project can thus be understood as part of Latrobe's conception of the proper organization of local and national space in a growing country.

The first hotels were artifacts of commercial republicanism, a hybrid social theory which served as the entering wedge of liberal capitalism in American culture. In the two decades after the end of the Revolutionary War, the conviction that the republic could only be preserved by a virtuous and self-sufficient citizenry was increasingly challenged by proponents of a modified ideology which feared isolation and backwardness more than the contagion of Old World corruption. Commercial republicanism thus turned away from the anti-commercial and even autarkic prescriptions of the Revolution, instead looking to trade, especially with Europe, to provide the American populace with profit incentives which would compel them to labor [McCoy, 1989, pp. 76-104]. The imperatives which animated the first hotel-builders were part and parcel of this tension between republicanism and liberalism, wherein lies at least a preliminary answer to the fundamental question—Why the hotel?—posed in this article. The merchant origins and entrepreneurial pursuits of its creators suggest that the hotel was first and foremost part of a larger vision of American development which saw an interconnected system of public improvements, transportation innovations, and accommodations that would bind the United States together and integrate them into the international economy. The grand

architecture of the first hotel designs, meanwhile, made the new institutions imposing monuments to this vision of the future. In this sense, these hotels represented the merchant elite's effort to valorize the pursuit of trade through the deliberate crafting of the built environment—a particularly effective approach at a time when large parts of the nation's cities still lay in ruins from the British occupation and when the merchant class had unrivaled access to the capital needed to build on a grand scale. Yet this vision was not without internal conflicts between republicanism and liberalism which manifested themselves in behavior and architecture. The creation of the hotel as a place of public resort and a new architecture of liberalized trade was also marked by older republican traditions of privilege and hierarchy—whether in the form of Samuel Blodget's scheme to make speculative profits an emolument of his government office, the NYTHARA's opposition to egalitarianism on the city streets, or the Newport merchants' efforts to make public enlightenment contingent upon their successful pursuit of trade. Indeed, these tensions were also expressed in the way the hotel builders championed a forward-looking liberal vision by deploying the architectural idioms of classical antiquity. This ideological dissonance foreshadowed struggles over equality, citizenship, and civil rights which for well over a century to come would characterize both American life and hotel space. For the hotel, like the American nation itself, was at once a product of an ascendant liberalism and a contested terrain on which the implications and limits of that liberalism had yet to be determined.

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