

Imagining James Hoban: Portraits of a Master Builder

WILLIAM B. BUSHONG

*J*ames Hoban has been honored through the years as the Irish-born architect who built the White House. Most histories and architectural histories pass him by with a scant mention, however, his fame lies in his major achievement, a house today known around the world. Finding out about the man personally is a task, but clues do turn up from an extensive search. Seeking what he looked like is even more difficult, but in both instances, we know a few things.

In his lifetime Hoban was a leading citizen of Washington, a well-known builder who got his start with the public buildings until 1802, when President Thomas Jefferson replaced him as the government's principal architect with Benjamin Henry Latrobe. Hoban had moved to Washington toward the close of 1792 to build the White House. In his wake, in Charleston, South Carolina, the newspaper extolled him for being selected for the work:

On this occasion we think it but justice to observe, that Mr. Hoban, as a man of abilities, is unassuming and diffident. When a mere boy, he received a

mark of distinction from the royal society of Dublin, which none else could then achieve. . . . When the President of the United States honored this city with a visit last year, Mr. Hoban was introduced to him as a man of merit and genius under the patronage of general Moultrie, Mr. Butler &c. And we may safely add that it is no small matter of universal satisfaction to the citizens of Carolina, that their fellow citizen, Hoban has succeeded in the enterprize.¹

Hoban had not been in Washington for a year when he was instrumental in organizing Federal Lodge Number One of Freemasons, September 6, 1793, one week after President Washington laid the cornerstone for the Capitol, a ceremony in which the Masons participated. He was married, for the second time, his new wife being Susana Sewell of a prominent Maryland family. He was in Washington to stay. The Hobans probably built and lived in several houses before finally settling into a fine two-story brick house on the north side of F Street, between 14th and 16th, not far from the White House. It was a house not unlike some still seen today along Kilkenny streets that Hoban knew well.²

At the center of Hoban's neighborhood stood Rhodes Tavern, the first commercial building erected in downtown Washington. It was the hub of city life in the days before other buildings were built to absorb urban needs. The two-story brick tavern, which stood fairly much intact until its demolition toward the close of the

The only known life portrait of James Hoban is a small wax bas-relief in the White House collection attributed to the German-born artist John Christian Rauschner, c. 1800.



twentieth century, served as an unofficial city hall where the local courts and a variety of organizations regularly assembled for business. Indeed the commission that supervised the building of the White House and Capitol met there regularly, so Hoban knew Rhodes Tavern from the first. His name frequently appears in early newspaper notices of meetings he attended or even chaired related to the militia, civic and political activities, urban improvements and services, and educational and charitable organizations.³

Hoban's public involvements included, in addition to the Masonic lodge, the founding of Saint Patrick's Roman Catholic Church, 1794, and convincing Father Anthony Caffry to come to America from Ireland to lead it. Hoban formed the city's first militia company, 1796, which had a profound influence upon the maintenance of law and order in the young community. Intimate to the efforts of Washington citizens to make Congress notice their local needs, and when limited municipal government was organized, Hoban was elected to the city council, on which he served for twenty years. He was also involved in establishing an early neighborhood civic association, the F Street Inhabitants and Proprietors Association, foreshadowing urban life to come. The group promoted civic improvements and even assessed themselves to pay for sidewalks and curbs, gutters and gravel for the streets. The result was a very desirable neighborhood, with big houses like his, alongside rows of lesser wooden houses, painted fences, and gardens.⁴

Hoban was active in what we would call the real estate business all his life. Rental property, land, and construction were all within the scope of his enterprises. In 1805 he advertised his own house for rent:

To be rented

For one or more years, as may be agreed upon, the house at present by the subscriber fronting F Street north near the President's square, it contains four rooms, with fire places, 2 garret rooms and a kitchen—on a lot immediately in the rear is a stable, carriage house, coalhouse and garden. Also the house adjoining the above and on the same lot, containing 4 rooms with fireplaces, kitchen and servant's room, with a good dry cellar.

The whole of the above property would accommodate a large genteel family or they will be

rented separately. Possession may be had after the last day of May next. The situation is healthy and pleasant.—James Hoban.⁵

Proud of his Irish heritage, Hoban was significant in giving a voice in local politics to the great number of Irish immigrants in Washington who worked both as skilled and unskilled laborers, draymen, tavern keepers, blacksmiths, grocers, and boarding house proprietors. He founded the Society of the Sons of Erin in 1802, largely to help Irish-born workers who needed housing, food, and medical services, but also to promote naturalization. Meetings of the Sons of Erin were held at Rhodes Tavern, and the society organized parades and musical entertainments and promoted the wearing of shamrocks each year on Saint Patrick's Day.⁶

Hoban seems always to have kept a building crew available, if not in operation. In this he was served in part by slaves. He had owned slaves in Charleston, skilled carpenters. The 1800 census records four slaves and by 1820 Hoban owned three male slaves under the age of 14, two between 14 and 26, and one between 26 and 40. By 1830, shortly before his death and while he was building the North Portico to the White House, he owned only two slaves. They may have been house servants, and one African American in his household was free. Hoban himself was opposed to slavery, at least in the District of Columbia, for he signed a petition to that effect in 1828.⁷

Hoban's wife, Susana Sewell Hoban, bore him ten children, losing one in infancy and herself dying young. Their two teenage daughters Helen and Catherine died within a year of their mother in 1822 and 1823.⁸ The Italian sculptor Giuseppe Valaperti, who executed the marble eagle on the frieze of Statuary Hall at the Capitol, pronounced Helen Hoban "the most beautiful female he had ever seen" and implored her to pose for him for one of the Capitol statues. She modestly declined.⁹ Other children lived longer lives, two sons Edward and Francis becoming officers in the U.S. Navy. Henry became a Jesuit priest and doubtless the pride of his father. The best known was James Hoban Jr., a powerful orator and respected Washington lawyer, who climaxed his career as district attorney for the District of Columbia.¹⁰

What James Hoban looked like is entirely transmitted in a wax image that came down in his family. He



At the center of Hoban's F Street neighborhood was Rhodes Tavern, the oldest commercial building in downtown Washington, which served as an unofficial city hall. Most of the meetings Hoban attended relating to militia, political, civic, and charitable organizations regularly assembled for business here. Drawing by the Baroness Hyde de Neuville, 1820.



James Hoban's residence was located just to the east of Rhodes Tavern on the north side of F Street between 14th and 15th Streets. This watercolor, painted from the rear of the house on a wintry day in 1874, captured its appearance a few years before it was razed in 1880.



The Royal Dublin Society Medal presented to James Hoban in 1780 for “Drawings of Brackets, Stairs, Roofs, &c” is now in the collection of the Smithsonian Institution.

BOTH PHOTOGRAPHS: NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN HISTORY, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION



According to family lore, James Hoban Jr., pictured at right, was the “spitting image” of his father. An orator and attorney, author, and 1840 mayoral candidate, he died suddenly during a yellow fever outbreak in 1846. Lithograph after a daguerreotype taken by William J. Corcoran in 1844.

THE ARCHITECT OF THE CAPITOL

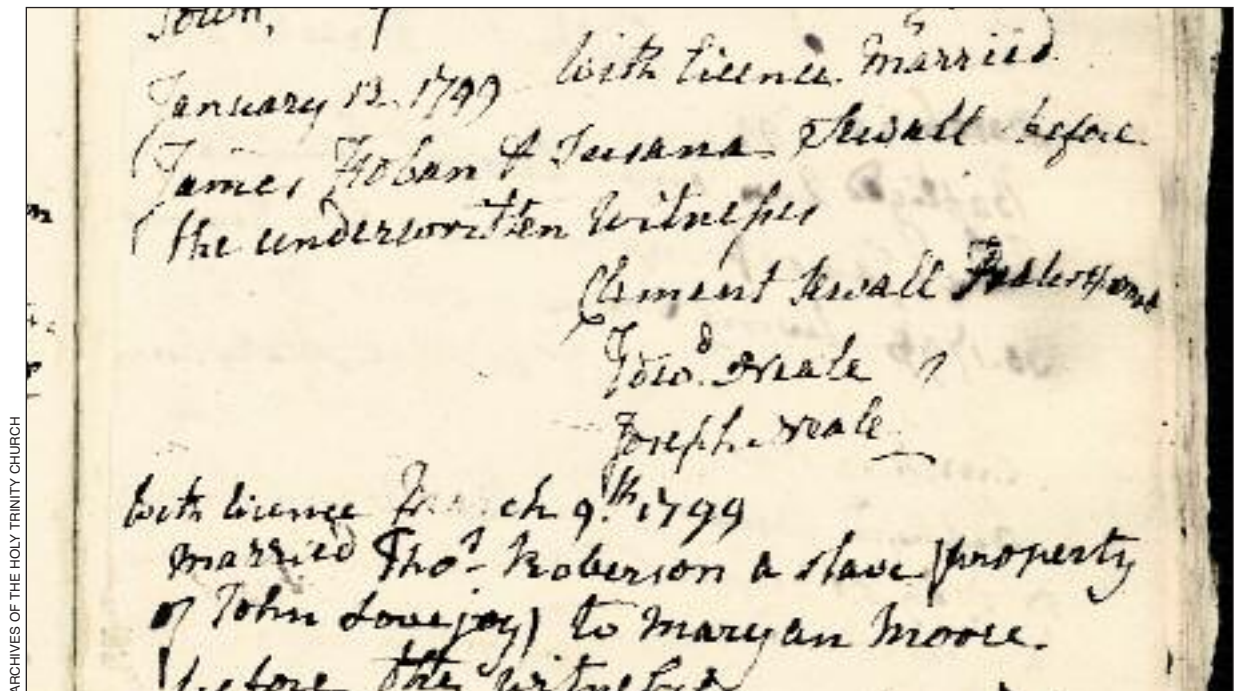
The marriage of James Hoban to Susana Sewall, January 13, 1799, is recorded in the marriage registry of Holy Trinity Church, in Georgetown, Washington, D.C.

probably sat for the profile portrait. Curators attribute the miniature bas-relief to German-born John Christian Rauschner. It is in color, showing a youthful profile, thick brown hair, and a rosy complexion. The broad shoulders and chest suggest a hardy physique not alien to work with his hands, just as one might expect. Hoban just missed the age of the photograph, and thus we are without the accuracy of the camera.

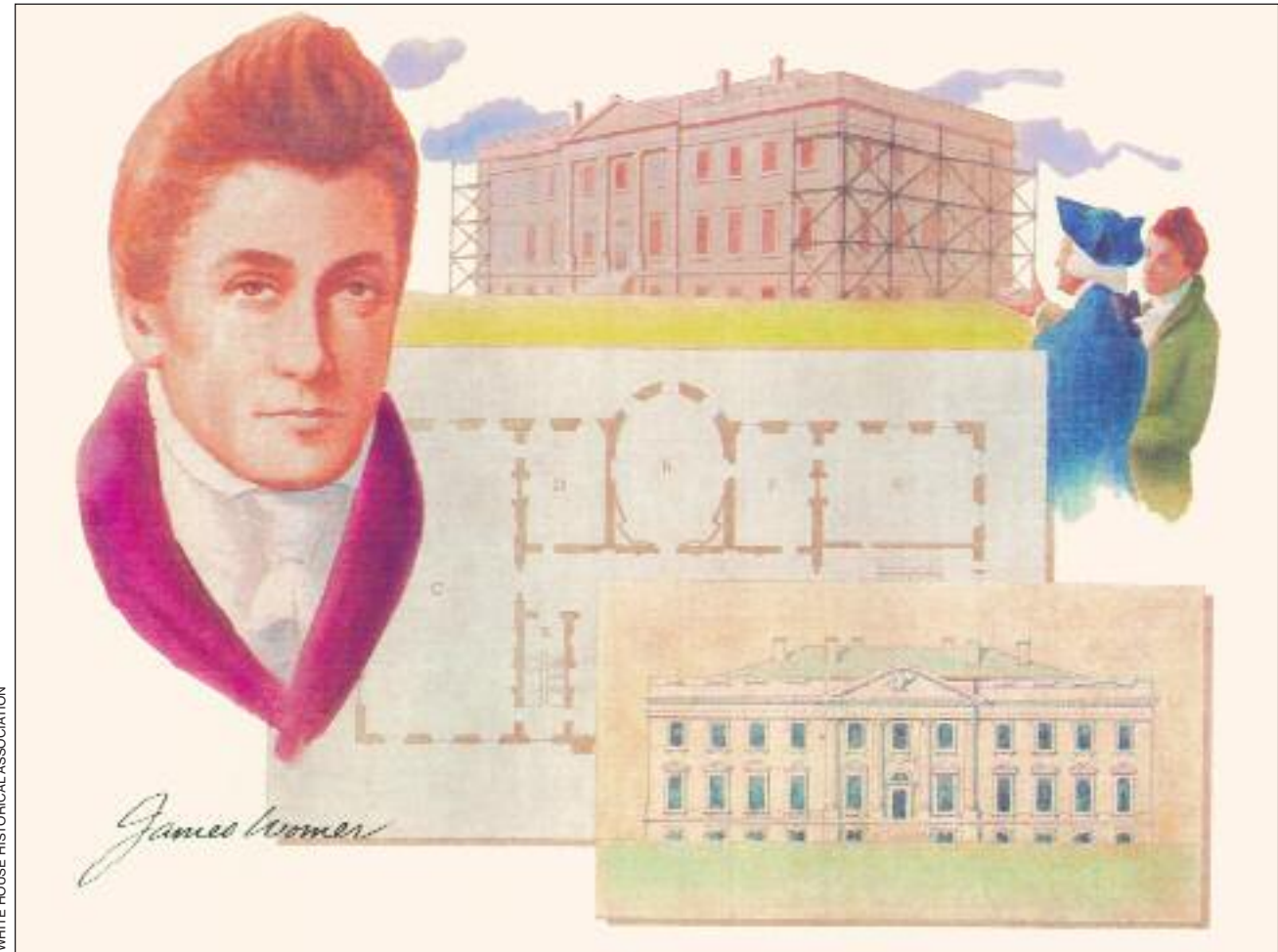
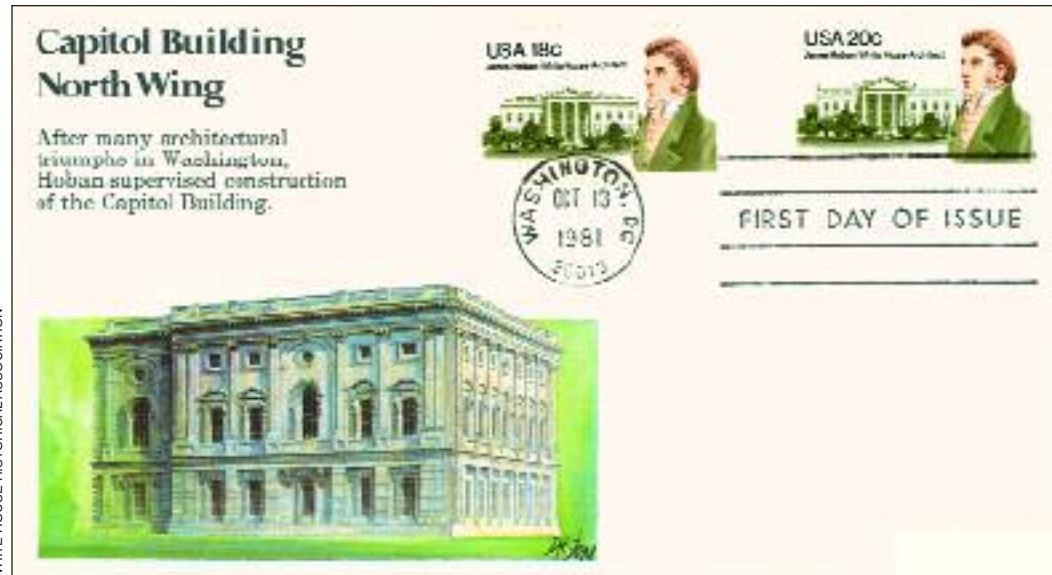
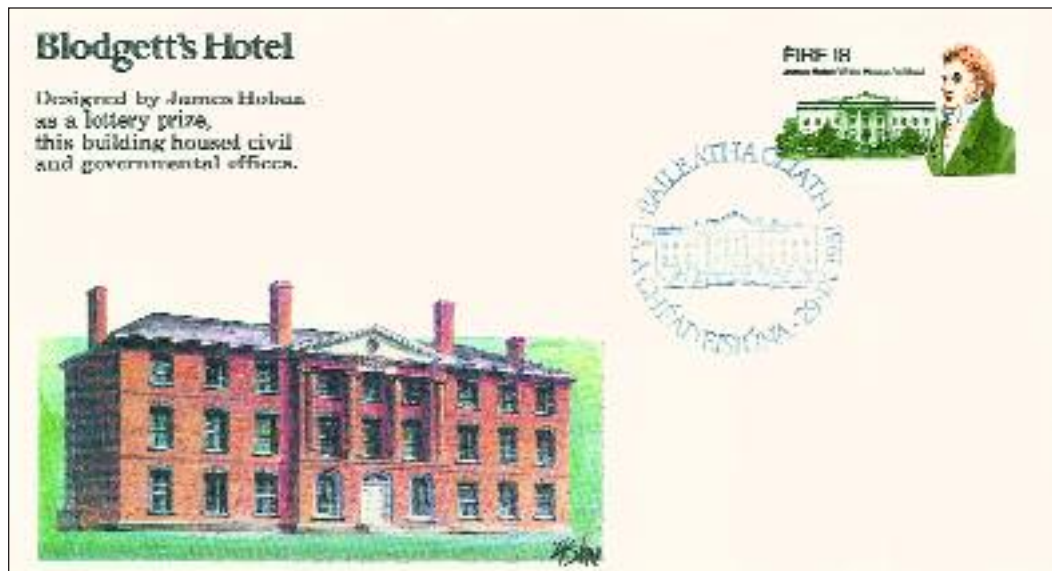
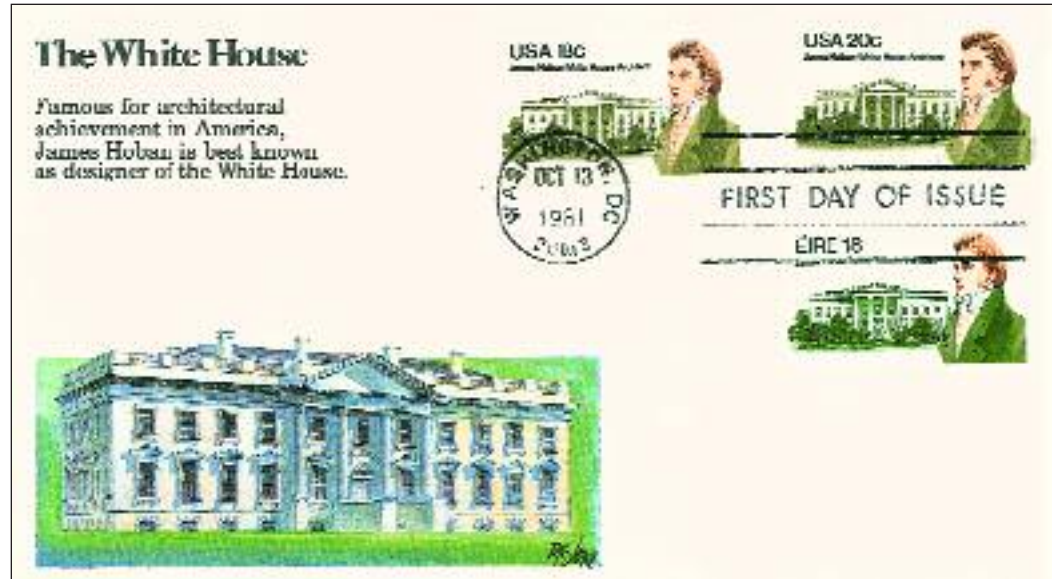
Hoban died in 1831, having completed the North Portico and thus the White House. He left a large estate of more than \$60,000 in value, with property both in the city and farms outside in Maryland. His children shared most of the estate. The slaves were to be sold. James Hoban, the son, and Thomas Carbery, probably a nephew of Susana’s, but at the time mayor of Washington, were the executors. A special bequest was made to his brother-in-law “Mr. Stone and his two daughters Nancy and Martha,” 3 acres upon which they

resided and \$400 with which to build a new house.¹¹ Hoban was buried beside Susana in the old graveyard at Saint Patrick’s Church. The graves were moved in 1863 to the new Mount Olivet Cemetery on Bladensburg Road, in Washington, where they remain.¹²

James Hoban’s obituary noted that he had been architect of the White House and a superintendent of construction at the Capitol, and that he was an Irish émigré who had settled in Charleston at the close of the American Revolution about fifty years before. The notice continued: “Captain Hoban possessed, in a very high-degree the esteem and confidence of his fellow citizens. He was hospitable, generous, and charitable. In his regard for the just claims and feelings of others, he was scrupulously nice and particular. Such men are the blessings to society whilst they live, and, even after death instruct by example.”¹³

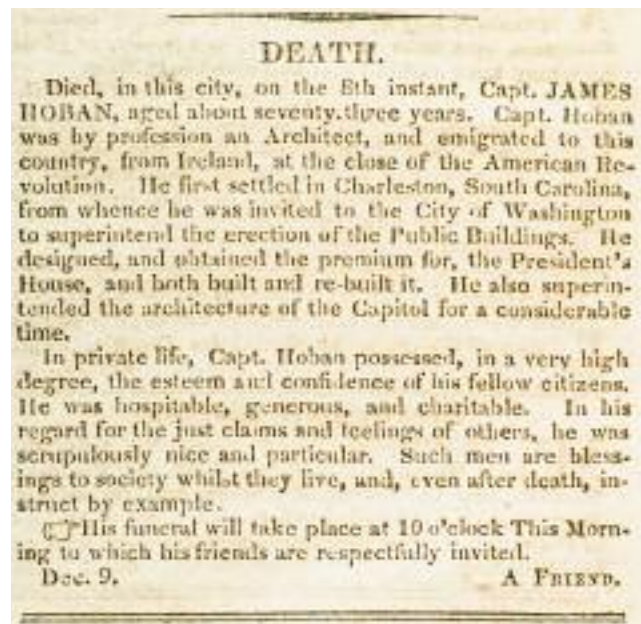


ARCHIVES OF THE HOLY TRINITY CHURCH



WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

In 1981, the United States and Ireland both issued commemorative stamps to mark the 150th anniversary of Hoban's death. A collection of first day covers (opposite) feature several of Hoban's designs, including the White House (note both the Irish and U.S. stamps), Blodgett's Hotel, and the U.S. Capitol. The commemorative poster from 1981 (above) features an idealized portrait of a young James Hoban, grouped with a sketch of his meeting with President Washington during the construction of the White House and copies of his only extant White House drawings, a 1792 floor plan and a 1793 north elevation.



WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION



WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

James Hoban's obituary ran in the *Washington National Intelligencer* on December 9, 1831. He was reinterred in 1863 in Mount Olivet Cemetery in Washington, D.C., with his wife Susana. This monument marks their gravesite.

Hoban's prominence as architect of the White House grew in the twentieth century with the interest that accompanied the various renovations that took place. When researchers started trying to find about him, one of the greatest obstacles—one that still remains—is the misfortune that his business and personal papers were lost in a fire in the 1880s. The only written material that can be found is scattered through federal papers and related to public buildings. Newspapers also provide occasional notices, as he did lead, locally at least, a life of public involvement.

Engineer Frederick Owen studied Hoban's White House design in 1889 when First Lady Caroline Harrison proposed drastic additions to the house. Owen praised Hoban for seeing the house built in spite of "scarcity of labor and other obstacles almost insurmountable."¹⁴ During the renovations and reconstruction

carried out by President Harry S. Truman from 1948 to 1952, Hoban's name again appeared. Truman's architect sought information on the man, but the furthest Lorenzo Winslow seems to have gotten was to sense his presence as the house was gutted.¹⁵

Hoban the builder had already become part of American history. Before the wax image was discovered among Hoban family heirlooms in 1959, the famous illustrator N. C. Wyeth had created a poster for the Pennsylvania Railroad to coincide with the George Washington Bicentennial Celebration sponsored by the Congress in 1932. Basing the subject of the painting on the personal interest President Washington took in the building of the White House, he devised an imaginary scene of Washington touring the construction site with Hoban.¹⁶ A subsequent honor came during World War II when the *James Hoban*, a 10,500 ton ship, was

launched.¹⁷ In 1981, the United States and Ireland jointly issued a commemorative stamp.¹⁸ In 2005 Charles De Antonio, a Charleston artist, painted an interesting portrait of Hoban for the Charleston County Courthouse, using the wax image and imaging software.

Yet with all the words, fragments of fact, and images that profile James Hoban, we still know relatively little about him. His thoughts and ideas, beyond what we can surmise from business letters and his activities, remain pieces of a puzzle largely incomplete. The most significant concept representing him and his ability is the White House.

NOTES

I would like to thank Sally Sims Stokes, Hillary Crehan, Amy Quesenbery, Gloria Beiter, and Martha Rowe for their research contributions to this article.

1. From a Correspondent, *The Mail; or, Claypoole's Daily Advertiser*, August 8, 1792, 3, digital version available by subscription online at www.newsbank.com, © Newsbank and/or the American Antiquarian Society, 2004.
2. Martin I. J. Griffin, "James Hoban: The Architect and Builder of the White House," *American Catholic Historical Researches* 3, no. 1 (1907): 35–52. Griffin interviewed James Hoban, the grandson of the White House architect, who was the source of biographical facts and the story of the destruction of Hoban's personal and professional papers by fire in the 1880s. See also William Seale, *The President's House* (Washington, D.C.: White House Historical Association, with the cooperation of the National Geographic Society, 1986), 1:40.
3. Nelson F. Rimensnyder, *James Hoban: Overlooked Civic Life of a Distinguished Washingtonian, 1792–1830*, 1992, Pamphlet Collection, Historical Society of Washington, D.C.; William W. Warner, *At Peace with All Their Neighbors: Catholics and Catholicism in the National Capitol, 1787–1860* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1994), 149–51, 153, 161–62.
4. Warner, *At Peace with All Their Neighbors*, 153, 161–162. See also Morris J. McGregor, *A Parish for the Federal City: St. Patrick's in Washington, 1794–1994* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 1994), 42–44.
5. *Washington Federalist*, March 16, 1805, 3–4.
6. McGregor, *Parish for the Federal City*, 42–44.
7. For information on Hoban's slaves, see Hoban's notice concerning a runaway slave carpenter named Peter, *City Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, January 17, 1789, 3–4, transcription in the research files of the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts, Winston-Salem, N.C. Hoban received the wages as owner for slave carpenters working on the White House. See Robert J. Kapsch, "The Labor History of the Construction and Reconstruction of the White House, 1793–1817" (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 1993), 392–93. See also U.S. Census, 1800, 1820 and 1830, Washington, D.C., Population Schedule, National Archives, Washington, D.C., also available online at www.ancestry.com. Finally, for the petition for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia, see *Norwich Courier*, April 9, 1828, 7:2, digital version available by subscription online at www.newsbank.com © Newsbank and/or the American Antiquarian Society, 2004.
8. Griffin, "James Hoban," 39–40. Death notices for Susana, Helen, and Catherine Hoban can be found in the *Washington National Intelligencer*, September 4, 1822, July 30, 1823, and December 22, 1823.
9. "Beauty and Modesty," *Providence Patriot*, December 31, 1823, digital version available by subscription online at www.newsbank.com © Newsbank and/or the American Antiquarian Society, 2004.
10. Griffin, "James Hoban," 39–40. See also John E. Norris, *Eulogy on the Life and Character of James Hoban, Esq.* (Washington, D.C.: W. Blanchard Printer, 1846), 5–16.
11. Wesley E. Pippenger, comp., *District of Columbia Probate Records, Will Books 1 through 6, 1801–1852 and Estate Files, 1801–852* (Arlington, Va., and Westminster, MD: Family Line Publications, 1996), 169.
12. Griffin, "James Hoban," 47.
13. *Washington National Intelligencer*, December 9, 1831, also quoted in Griffin, "James Hoban," 51.
14. Frederick Owen, "The First Government Architect: James Hoban of Charleston, S.C.," *Architectural Record* 11 (October 1901): 587. Study of Hoban's contributions to the public architecture of Washington had been well established by influential studies by George Alfred Townsend, *Washington Outside and Inside: A Picture and a Narrative of the Origin, Growth, Excellences, Abuses, Beauties, and Personages of Our Governing City* (Hartford, Conn., and Chicago, J. Betts and Company, 1873), 64; Glenn Brown, *History of the United States Capitol* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1900), 1:94–95.
15. Winslow held séances and claimed to have spoken to the dead, including former presidents. See Seale, *The President's House*, 2:1031.
16. "Artist Draws Washington at White House," *Washington Post*, May 22, 1932, M5, digital version available by subscription online at www.proquest.com, © ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
17. "Liberty Ship Named for Builder of White House," *Washington Post*, October 21, 1942, 13, digital version available by subscription online at www.proquest.com, © ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
18. "Stamps and Coins," *Washington Post*, October 25, 1981, G6, digital version available by subscription online at www.proquest.com, © ProQuest Historical Newspapers.