

II. Hudson, Delaware, and Susquehanna River Competitors

Congress bitterly debated the location of the capital in October 1783, December 1784, and September 1789 before it finally decided on a Potomac River site in July 1790. The chosen location was by no means a foregone conclusion for competition was fierce. Between 1782 and 1790 more than thirty sites between Newburgh, New York; Norfolk, Virginia; and the Ohio River were named as possibilities.

Advocates spared neither superlative nor imagination. Environmental detail such as climate, relief, scenic grandeur, soil and water, drainage, healthiness, and defensibility received attention. So too did economic base—accommodations, hinterland, transportation, labor, relationship to other urban areas, and the availability of energy sources and building materials. The preponderant considerations, however, were centrality and accessibility to both the West and the Atlantic Ocean. The outpourings of “Ohioisms” and reasoned geographical analyses in favor of various sites had significant impact only when proponents had the political clout to back them up.

The North and South disagreed on the definition of centrality, and politicians proved adept at portraying it in the manner which best justified their choice. Northerners based their definition on population, arguing that equal access by the citizenry ranked paramount in a republic. The 1790 census centered population southwest of the Susquehanna River in Maryland at a point closer to the falls of the Potomac than to the falls of the Delaware. In the absence of a census, however, the North insisted that the population center lay northeast of the Susquehanna in Pennsylvania, while the South believed it to be below the river and ever moving southwestward. Southerners considered centrality of territory on the Atlantic Coast more important than centrality of population. Congress could more effectively apply the reins of government over the American Empire if no one part of it were more distant from the capital than any other. Such a consideration did not appeal to the North because the midpoint between the St. Croix and St. Marys rivers—the northern and southern boundaries of the United States—was known to be on the Potomac River between Georgetown, Maryland, and Alexandria, Virginia. Although a

few northerners consequently dismissed geographic centrality altogether, others pointed out that the admission of Canada to the Union would shift that center northward, or that centrality of wealth should also be weighed.

The South's insistence that future westward growth of the Union be taken into account in seating the capital fueled sectional disagreement. By 1790 the American people were migrating westward beyond the Appalachian Mountains. Pennsylvanians were peopling the Ohio River; New Yorkers moved toward Lake Erie. The western extremes of Virginia and North Carolina soon would have enough residents to qualify for admission to the Union as the states of Kentucky and Tennessee. And five thousand American citizens lived north of the Ohio River. Certain northerners were apathetic if not hostile toward western needs. Because southerners resented this attitude, they exaggerated the possibility of the West seceding from the Union and made retaining it a key argument in their strategy for establishing the capital on the Potomac.

The question of whether the capital should have a tidewater harbor related closely to the criteria of proximity to the West. Almost everyone believed access by water to the Atlantic to be necessary, but many thought an inland site above tidewater on a river with potential for navigational improvement would be sufficient.

Talk of locating the capital above tidewater close to the West raised another issue. Should it be placed at, or at least tied to, an already existing population center, or should it be an undeveloped site? Those Americans who believed that cities were by definition antirepublican insisted that the United States abandon European precedents of placing capitals in large cities. On the other side of the issue, men argued that a preexisting population and economy were essential to the growth of an infant capital and that a rural site was too utopian. The social amenities of a city would heighten the dignity, glory, and importance of the capital in the eyes of both citizens and foreigners. Others pointed to availability of financial and commercial resources as the most forceful reason to situate the capital in an existing city and reasoned that Congress should go no further from the Atlantic commercial cities than necessary to find a defensible position in case of invasion. Some politicians turned the old republican argument against cities on its head: A large city would provide the best protections for liberty because its population and newspapers would ensure close ob-

servation of the actions of government officials. The possibility that Congress might shun the Atlantic commercial cities prompted ridicule as well as serious discussion, for those who supported a coastal city found it useful to equate undeveloped sites above tidewater with "wilderness" or wasteland.

All of the undeveloped sites that Congress considered connected closely with existing towns or major transportation routes. It did not discuss any site truly adjacent to wilderness, although at least two men thought it should. In 1783 a Rhode Island congressman privately suggested that Congress temporarily sit at or near Pittsburgh, well west of the nation's major population centers. He thought such a decision would raise the price of federal lands in the West and thereby help pay off the public debt. In 1787 Manasseh Cutler, lobbyist for a land company that had settled Marietta in the Northwest Territory, argued that the seat of empire should be on the Ohio River. He urged Congress to postpone action until the claims of the Ohio could merit serious discussion. Not long after the adoption of the Constitution, a jocular writer proposed that it be amended to prohibit the location of the capital in an Indian wigwam or in the howling wilderness.

A final geopolitical argument stressed the importance of siting the capital in such a manner as to facilitate the economic development of the rising American Empire. At stake was which one of the great midcoastal rivers—the Hudson, the Delaware, the Susquehanna-Chesapeake, or the Potomac—would become the route to the West. The sites given the most serious consideration lay on the latter three rivers, often at major obstacles to navigation. When these sites adjoined state boundaries they had stronger force of argument, for they tended to unite votes by offering to share benefits.

The issue of a permanent postwar seat for Congress first came before it in the spring of 1783 when New York offered the town of Kingston, picturesquely situated below the Catskill foothills eighty miles above the mouth of the Hudson River. Kingston promised to donate to Congress a square mile of land for federal buildings, but the legislature offered Congress only limited jurisdiction.

New York's offer especially chagrined Lewis Morris, a signer of the Declaration of Independence. He wrote to Congress in September 1783 proposing instead that it choose his manor on the Harlem and East Rivers just above Manhattan Island, the pres-

ent-day South Bronx. Here Congress could have a territory separate from New York State and over which it held absolute jurisdiction. The site could be reached without lengthy voyages up bays and rivers. New England and the adjacent counties in New York could quickly provide a larger force of fighting men than could be raised at any other place in America, for there were no Quakers with religious scruples or slaveholders who had to keep guard at home. The manor lay eight miles from fortified New York City, the best harbor in the United States, where Congress could establish a federal arsenal and navy yard as well as transact its commercial business; nevertheless, the manor was far enough from the city to protect Congress from the mobs and tumults associated with large cities.

Four years later at the Federal Convention his half-brother Gouverneur Morris privately suggested that the Constitution establish the capital at easily defended Newburgh and New Windsor on the Hudson, sixty miles above New York City. He abandoned his proposal because it would have defeated the Constitution in several states south of New York. No place in the state figured as a competitor after the adoption of the Constitution in 1788. Instead, New York congressmen promised their votes to supporters of other sites who offered in exchange the longest temporary residence for New York City.

Sites in the Delaware River watershed seriously claimed the attention of Congress between 1783 and 1789. In June 1783 the citizens of a 12.5-square-mile area of Nottingham Township in New Jersey asked the state legislature to grant Congress whatever jurisdiction over them it saw fit. Nottingham included the village of Lambertton and sat on what was then the southern boundary of Trenton. New Jersey promised the federal government whatever jurisdiction over a twenty-square-mile district that it deemed necessary. In addition, the state pledged \$75,000 to purchase land and erect buildings and urged other towns in the state to petition Congress directly if any wished to be the U.S. capital. Newark, New Brunswick, and Elizabethtown all made proposals but received little serious consideration. Princeton never sent a formal invitation to Congress but was understood to figure in the competition once Congress moved there in June 1783.

In September 1788, New Jersey, following the recommendation of its ratification convention, offered Congress jurisdiction over any ten miles square within the state. Nevertheless, the only

place proposed to the First Federal Congress was at the falls of the Delaware River near Trenton. Being astute politicians, the Trenton and Lambertton promoters realized that a joint offer with Pennsylvanians across the river would have a greater chance of success. Landowners on both sides of the Delaware from Bordentown up to Howell's Ferry near Washington Crossing reached agreement to place themselves under the exclusive jurisdiction of Congress, leaving it to determine on which side of the river to place the federal buildings. The location became a major off-the-floor contender in the 1789 congressional session. Senator Robert Morris of Pennsylvania, the most prominent speculator at the site and its most aggressive advocate in Congress, began acquiring land there just before the 1789 residence debate. Morrisville, Pennsylvania, and Federal City Road, northeast of Trenton, are reminders of the aborted effort to locate the federal city at the falls of the Delaware.

Despite the efforts of Delaware's congressional delegation on behalf of Wilmington in 1783, no offer came from its citizens. Nevertheless, in December 1787 Delaware became not only the first state to ratify the Constitution but also the first to offer Congress a ten-miles-square district. Wilmington, the favored site, again did nothing on its own behalf and Congress ignored it.

Midway between the falls of the Delaware and Wilmington lay Philadelphia. The Pennsylvania Ratification Convention in December 1787 agreed that, when the new government began to function, Pennsylvania would grant it jurisdiction over any place within the state except its capital: the port city of Philadelphia, the contiguous district of Southwark, and a portion of the adjacent township of Northern Liberties (below present-day Girard Avenue). Consequently, Philadelphia could only be considered for the temporary residence.

In September 1783 and again in October 1787 Germantown, a mere seven miles northwest of Philadelphia, proposed that Congress move there. Its second petition delineated an area ten miles square that included most of the Northern Liberties; Frankfort; Kensington, including its piers and shipyards on the Delaware River; the falls of the Schuylkill River; and Chestnut Hill as well as the village of Germantown itself. In September 1789 the inhabitants of Philadelphia, Bucks, and Montgomery counties asked Congress to establish the permanent residence at Old Philadelphia on the Delaware River, the place originally designated

for William Penn's great city. This site centered on Byberry at the mouth of Poquessing Creek, the Philadelphia-Bucks County line. In the minds of many, both suburban sites were merely other names for Philadelphia.

A final Delaware River watershed site was Reading, fifty miles up the Schuylkill from Philadelphia. Its chief claim to consideration was its position at the head of the Great Valley, which ran from Pennsylvania to the Carolinas, and at the mouth of Tulpehocken Creek, which some Pennsylvanians advocated as a transportation link from Philadelphia to the Susquehanna and the West.

Many Pennsylvanians believed that the U.S. capital should be nearer the center of the state, in the Susquehanna River watershed. The Susquehanna's claim was powerfully argued on the floor of Congress in September 1789: its centrality to territory and population; its proximity to commercial cities; its defensibility; its potential navigational ties to the Delaware, Chesapeake, and Ohio; and, in contrast to the Potomac, its adequate flow for navigation even during the summer. The riverbanks, however, did not provide good harbor for shipping.

Although Congress received no petitions for a location on the banks of the Susquehanna River in 1789, it discussed three sites. Peach Bottom, the southernmost ferry on the river, had little support. A member of the House of Representatives moved that a district including Middletown and Harrisburg be chosen. The real Susquehanna contender, Wright's Ferry, lay forty-five miles above the river's mouth. Midway between Lancaster and York, it served as the major ferry crossing after the 1720s. In 1788, Samuel Wright renamed his town Columbia in hopes of enticing Congress.

Three towns on creeks connected to the Susquehanna petitioned Congress in 1789. Americans recognized Lancaster, ten miles east of the Susquehanna, as the most populous interior town in the United States. Consciously seeking to transcend generalities, Lancaster's petition included a treasury of economic statistics, listing the number and kinds of artisans, the distance by road to major towns and ferries, the accommodations, the prices of food and firewood, and the nature of available building materials.

York, twelve miles west of the river, also petitioned Congress. Soon after arriving at New York to take his seat in the first House

of Representatives, Revolutionary War general Thomas Hartley anonymously published *Observations on the Propriety of Fixing upon a Central and Inland Situation for the Permanent Residence of Congress* in order to put his hometown's claim before Americans. Hartley argued that the site would long provide for the exigencies of an increasing and widely extended people, renew the confidence of Americans in their government, recover lost credit in Europe, and encourage American manufacturing.

Carlisle, in the Great Valley west of South Mountain, lay seventeen miles west of the Susquehanna. Far from being a frontier town, Carlisle had been established by the Penns twenty years before the War for Independence and by 1790 could boast of Dickinson College, a newspaper, and plans to open a textile factory.

The Susquehanna River emptied into the Chesapeake Bay in Maryland. The bay might well have been named Susquehanna had it not been for the fact that it was settled before the river and by different proprietors. The economic relationship between the upper bay area and the states of Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Delaware, and its location midway between the falls of the Delaware and the falls of the Potomac, rendered it an attractive contender. In the fall of 1783 two Maryland sites at the head of the bay received a flurry of publicity. Citizens of the economically depressed county seat of Charlestown petitioned Congress to send a committee to view their town. The Baltimore press recommended Havre de Grace, a surveyed town site named in honor of America's ally, France. When Elkton, Maryland, Federalists celebrated the adoption of the Constitution in July 1788, they proposed a toast that Congress fix its seat at the high, healthy junction of Maryland, Delaware, and Pennsylvania, between Elkton and Newark, Delaware.

As early as November 1782, a broadside signed "Aratus" had suggested that the legislature deed the State House and the governor's mansion at Annapolis to the federal government. Maryland would retain ultimate jurisdiction, but Congress could be granted immunities. In May 1783 the citizens of Annapolis resolved to place the town's 300 acres under the jurisdiction of the federal government. The legislature responded by promising Congress the State House, the governor's mansion, \$32,500 with which to build a hotel for each state delegation, and whatever jurisdiction over the town and its inhabitants that Congress found necessary for its "honor, dignity, convenience, and safety."

Maryland's generous offer was the idea of Baltimore merchant George Lux, Jr., probably the author of *Aratus*. Lux had suggested to Congressman Theodorick Bland of Virginia that the seat of federal government should be "a distinct independent territory totally under the government of Congress; but so narrow in that respect are the prejudices of most of the states, that I think such a measure cannot be effected in any one of them." Thus, at least seven months before the soldiers' demonstration at Philadelphia, at least one American envisioned an independent territory under the exclusive jurisdiction of the federal government.

Shortly after Maryland ratified the Constitution in 1788, a newspaper writer suggested that the legislature revise its 1783 offer to include a district of ten miles square around Annapolis. Repeating many of the arguments Lux had used when he first proposed the idea, the author declared the town well suited for the American Hague. A decision by Congress in favor of Annapolis would make Baltimore the state capital and the American Amsterdam.

By 1789, however, Marylanders residing on the upper Chesapeake Bay had united behind Baltimore on the Patapsco River as the premier Maryland site for the federal capital. Since mid-century when the town became a major milling center, it and its deep and never-frozen harbor had penetrated Philadelphia's hegemony over the Delmarva Peninsula, central Pennsylvania, and northern Virginia. The Baltimore newspapers launched an aggressive campaign in January and February 1789, asserting the city's claims to the federal seat of government. Unmatched by propaganda for any other place until the Potomac's supporters sent out their missives after the 1789 congressional debate, the campaign described Baltimore as a prosperous, beautiful, militarily invincible port destined to become the key to the western door. In 1790, when it became clear that the capital would be established south of the Mason-Dixon Line, New Englanders, seeking to unite their political interests with those of the upper Chesapeake Bay, swung their support to Baltimore and away from the Susquehanna River.