

IV. Congress Debates the Issue, 1783–90

Even before the June 1783 soldiers' demonstration outside the State House in Philadelphia, Congress had determined to select a permanent postwar capital. Considering the implications of such a decision, it should not be surprising that all of the states except New Hampshire and Georgia attended Congress in October 1783 for what portended to be a major sectional battle. New Englanders favored a site at Trenton, New Jersey, located at the lower falls of the Delaware River. Trenton offered convenience, a healthy climate, and centrality as to wealth, population, and number of states. The site also offered access to the resources of Philadelphia while at the same time keeping the federal government away from what New Englanders perceived as the city's dangerous influence. Southerners supported Maryland, citing its geographic centrality and its access to the West. But they could not agree on a specific location. Annapolis, Baltimore, and the Potomac River each had support.

Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts, who remained active in the congressional fight over the location of the capital until it was resolved in 1790, moved that Congress establish a federal town either on the Delaware River near Trenton or on the Potomac near Georgetown. Reflecting the inability of Congress to decide the degree of jurisdiction it should exercise over the district, his resolution stated that Congress have "the right of soil and an exclusive or such other jurisdiction as Congress may direct." The seven states north of Maryland formed a simple majority, and they voted for the Delaware River, thus eliminating the Potomac from contention.

Southern congressmen were angered and frustrated by the decision. Such a location meant that the South would not experience the increased economic and political power that it expected a Potomac site to generate. In hopes of securing reconsideration of the issue, southerners met with New Englanders and presented several arguments. In response New England proposed that a second federal town be built on the Potomac and that Congress alternate between it and the federal town on the Delaware. Several well-informed sources later asserted that Gerry suggested the compromise. New Englanders, whose state capitals tended to be mobile,

recognized theoretical as well as practical benefits in the proposal. In their view one federal town would result in a concentration of wealthy citizens, generally neither the most virtuous nor the most patriotic of Americans, who would use their influence to establish an American aristocracy. Two residences—even if that caused delay and difficulty in transacting business—meant greater obstacles to a consolidation of political and economic influence at the seat of federal government.

The seven New England and southern states agreed to support the dual residence proposal despite New England's recognition of the South's goal to buy time for a single federal town on the Potomac. Although Elias Boudinot described the seven-state coalition as the most heterogeneous imaginable, it was not unfamiliar. The same alliance had dominated congressional politics during the early years of the Revolution. Congress adopted a resolution for a second federal town at or near the lower falls of the Potomac or Georgetown. Until construction of the Delaware and Potomac River capitals, Congress would alternate between temporary residences at Annapolis and Trenton. Congress then adjourned to Annapolis. The dual residence plan surprised the public. Nevertheless, considering the sectional division of the Union and the southern threats, it was a realistic compromise at a critical point in American history. With the common British threat removed, little existed to hold the United States in union.

Residents of the Middle states found the plan utterly preposterous. A satirical essay by Francis Hopkinson of Philadelphia helped render the dual residence plan ridiculous in the public mind. How should Congress resolve the contradiction between its earlier decision to erect an equestrian statue of George Washington at its place of residence with the fact that it now had two such places? Let the statue move; indeed, make it large enough to transport the congressmen from the Delaware federal town to the Potomac federal town. Such a Trojan horse could even contain a little closet in its rectum for the secret papers of Congress.

Congress had appointed committees to choose the two specific locations. The committee to view the Delaware recommended either Lambertton, New Jersey, or a site on the highlands in Pennsylvania just above Trenton Falls. The Potomac committee undertook its mission at the end of May 1784. The members toured both sides of the Potomac to about four miles above Little Falls. They did not find a suitable spot north of Georgetown, and

their instructions prevented them from looking at the level banks above Great Falls. The committee employed Charles Beatty, a Georgetown landowner, to survey two sites adjacent to the town and recommended them to Congress. The first was a 600-acre tract of rising ground on the northwest side, encompassing all or portions of Frogland, Conjuror's Disappointment, and Rock of Dumbarton land grants. The lines ran approximately from present-day 34th and M streets north to Davis Place, west to Glover Archbold Park, south to the Potomac, and southeast to the starting point. The second site was a 750-acre tract below Georgetown that included all or portions of the Vineyard, Widow's Mite, and Little Prevention land grants, as well as the platted but unsettled town of Hamburg. Its approximate boundaries extended north from the Potomac up present-day 18th Street to Florida Avenue, southwest to Rock Creek, down the creek to the Potomac, and back to the starting point.

Agreeable to the dual residence decision, Congress adjourned in June 1784, resolving to reconvene at Trenton early in November. Congressmen began arriving at Trenton at the end of October, but it was another month before a quorum formed. This delay provided delegates with time to reflect on the present and future status of the federal government. Some advocated the immediate convening of a constitutional convention as the best solution to the existing problems. Instead, a consensus formed to support several actions to revitalize the Union under the Articles of Confederation. Central to the consensus was the belief that a single federal town should be chosen and, until completion of the buildings, Congress should sit in a large city where it would not suffer the inconveniences experienced in small towns.

The northern states were poorly represented when Congress made a quorum at the end of November; consequently, a report spread through the press that the South would likely draw Congress back across the Delaware River to Philadelphia. Sarah Jay, shocked by the possibility of yet another change of residence, observed to her congressman husband, John, that it was fortunate for the reputation of the female sex that none served in Congress. Philadelphia, however, at last had a rival that matched its merits in most respects except centrality and did not suffer from the stigma of having been the Revolutionary seat of government. The New York legislature had just urged Congress to come to New York City.

By late December enough northern delegates had arrived to assure that the vote to leave Trenton would take the federal government north to New York City. Congress formally rescinded its dual residence resolutions, and Gerry proposed an ordinance that called for a single federal town on the Delaware. The ordinance as adopted provided for three commissioners to locate, within eight miles of the falls of the Delaware at Trenton, a district for the federal town of not less than four nor more than nine square miles in area. Such a district could lie on either or both sides of the river approximately between Washington Crossing and Bordentown, New Jersey. The commissioners were authorized to spend up to \$100,000 to purchase the land, erect an elegant federal house for Congress, and provide residences for the executive officials. Congress would remain at New York City until the federal town had been completed. By passing over the still controversial question of jurisdiction, Congress implied that the states retained it.

Public reaction to the ordinance was mixed. The French chargé d'affaires in the United States declared the matter settled until such time as new western states removed Congress from the Delaware. In the meantime, the decision strengthened the federal government: having its own territory earned it a higher place in the American mind, while its intention to remain at New York gave it immediate stability and order. The ordinance was, he concluded, one of the most fortunate actions Congress had ever taken.

Although pleased to have avoided Philadelphia and to have the troublesome question removed from the congressional agenda, New Englanders nevertheless complained about the expense, particularly since there was no guarantee that a future Congress would not move the permanent residence elsewhere. Southerners such as George Washington disapproved of the decision to place the permanent seat of government on the Delaware. As to the temporary residence at New York, many Virginians likely agreed with Jefferson. Until such time as enough western states joined the Union and moved Congress to Georgetown, he instructed Congressman James Monroe, it was in Virginia's interest that it remain at New York and that the federal town not be built.

Among its first business at New York, Congress elected three commissioners to locate and oversee construction of the federal town. One declined to serve, and attempts to replace him seemed futile in light of a growing movement to block the first \$30,000

appropriated for the federal town. Virginian William Grayson, who disliked the Delaware location and wanted Congress at Philadelphia until enough votes materialized for a permanent capital on the Potomac, led the appropriation fight. He was jubilant in September 1785 when Congress struck the appropriation from the budget. Washington, who had encouraged his former aide-de-camp in his efforts to buy time in the interest of a future Potomac River site, must have been delighted.

The decision to locate a single federal town near Trenton proved just as ephemeral as the earlier dual residence plan, although both had important side effects. The expeditious 1783 compromise maintained the Union at a critical point in the Revolution, while the 1784 decision to move to New York City helped to revitalize the federal government. Congress did not discuss the location of its permanent residence again until 1789. In the meantime, the adoption of the Constitution of 1787 had complicated the legislative process and settled the debate over jurisdiction and other issues that had prevented the 1783–85 struggle from being merely a sectional contest.

Congressmen were clearly aware of the Union's sectional divisions when the First Federal Congress convened at New York in April 1789. Nevertheless, the Federalist consensus of 1787–88 proved strong enough to withstand the stress until September, when Congress took up the question of a permanent capital. The familiar and fundamental division between North and South, which had played so prominent a role throughout the course of the American Revolution, reached a new level of intensity. That public debate marked the opening volley that led to the Compromise of 1790.

Congress began debate with a motion "that a permanent residence ought to be fixed for the general government of the United States, at some convenient place, as near the center of wealth, population, and extent of territory as may be consistent with convenience to the navigation of the Atlantic Ocean, and having due regard to the particular situation of the western country." Congressmen portrayed the capital as the grand link in the federal chain and argued that the future tranquillity and well-being of the Union depended as much on the capital's location as on any other question that ever had or ever would come before Congress. They could not agree, however, about where to locate it. The debate climaxed with a speech by Madison in which he publicly announced

for the first time his reservations about the new Constitution that he had worked so hard to achieve.

Near the end of September, the House, after a month of intense bargaining and debate, adopted the seat of government bill by a vote of 31 to 17. It provided for the location of a district up to ten miles square on the banks of the Susquehanna in Pennsylvania and authorized the borrowing of up to \$100,000 to purchase land and construct buildings. Congress would remain at New York until completion of the new capital. Finally, the bill granted extraordinary powers to the president, who would appoint three commissioners—without the consent of the Senate—to report to him, rather than to Congress, their decision on the most eligible site for the capital. Under the president's direction, they would purchase and accept grants of land and construct within four years suitable buildings for the federal government. In the meantime Congress would remain at New York.

When Pennsylvania Senator Robert Morris had the audacity to ask Washington for his opinion of the House debate, the "Great Personage" appeared even more reticent than usual. He had good reason. If the Susquehanna bill passed Congress, he would have to pass judgment on it. Representative Richard Bland Lee of Alexandria hoped Washington would veto it as partial and unjust. So, too, did the president's closest confidant at home, Dr. David Stuart, the man whom Washington relied on to oversee his business interests in his absence. Stuart wrote Washington anxiously from Alexandria, reminding him that its residents' expectations of the capital being on the Potomac had always been centered in him. Because Washington's opinion had long been known on the subject, Stuart urged him never to concur with the bill. Circumspectly, Stuart suggested procedural grounds for a veto: The bill should not have been discussed without previous notice, nor before Rhode Island and North Carolina rejoined the Union.

Robert Morris assumed floor management of the bill when it reached the Senate; his goal was to bring the capital to the Delaware River, as close to Philadelphia as politically possible. He would try first for the Philadelphia suburbs of Germantown and the Northern Liberties. If that failed he believed the falls of the Delaware would surely carry. On 26 September the Senate sent back to the House a radically revised bill to locate the capital. The chosen site was Germantown, not the Susquehanna River.

The coalition that had pushed the Susquehanna bill through the House believed it should accept the Senate changes. Many of them believed the precise location of the capital made little difference so long as it was north of Maryland. The South, on the other hand, saw postponement as the only way to save the Potomac. The inflamed Marylanders threatened a division of the Union if the bill passed, but a motion for postponement failed by a vote of 29 to 25. Madison saved the day for the Potomac by convincing the House to amend the bill to provide that the laws of Pennsylvania remain in effect at the site of the federal capital until Congress provided otherwise. As the Potomac's supporters expected, the Senate postponed the bill until the next session. Although it was widely assumed that Madison had tricked the Susquehanna's supporters, postponement of the decision and remaining at New York had been New England's goal all along. The South, as in 1783 and 1785, had successfully prevented a northern capital and bought time for the Potomac.

That the First Federal Congress in its second session finally settled the divisive question of the location of the U.S. capital resulted from an opportunity as unique as that which had caused Congress to leave Philadelphia in 1783. From January through May 1790 the issue that dominated the attention of Congress, particularly the House, was payment of the Revolutionary War debt. Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton proposed a long-term funding system to pay off both the foreign and domestic debt. In addition, he called on Congress to assume into the federal debt most of the war debt of the states, expecting that such an assumption would cement more closely the union of the states and wed state creditors to the success of the federal government.

Congress supported all of Hamilton's program save assumption, the political implications of which exacerbated the sectional tensions left by the 1789 residence debate. Northerners welcomed the proposal as a means of escaping their state debt and as a force for political stability. Southerners (except for South Carolinians) feared consolidation and viewed assumption as an unconstitutional seizure of state authority. Week after week, despite every effort of the primarily northern forces supporting assumption, Madison effectively prevented the House from including it in the funding bill.

Southerners confirmed the growth of sectional tension. The 1789 residence debate had created apprehension in the minds of

many of the warmest friends of the federal government in Virginia. One concluded after the debate that, if the conduct of the New England states and New York was pursued, Virginia should no longer look to the Union as the rock of salvation, nor consider whispers about separate confederacies as treason. Before the 12 April vote against assumption, most public discontent with the federal government lay in the South. That vote, however, brought forth fundamental questioning of the new government in the North. One disgusted Connecticut assumptionist, incorrectly concluding that the debate over the slave trade had caused southerners to oppose assumption, grouched that Congress should prefer the white people of this country to the blacks, and that when they had taken care of the former, they might amuse themselves with the latter.

With talk of disunion on the rise in Congress and the states—especially at such proven seats of radical solution as Boston and the Potomac, with the South and Pennsylvania fuming over the continued residence of Congress so far north and the North angry over the refusal of Congress to assume the state debts—a fundamental compromise of almost constitutional magnitude appeared the only solution. From April to June various congressmen sought to resolve the assumption and residence issues by linking them in a compromise between North and South.

By mid-June, after five months of intense debate and politicking, Congress had finalized nothing in regard to either funding-assumption or the location of the capital. Congress had reached its first impasse under the new Constitution. Dissolution of the Union, perhaps even civil war, not compromise, seemed to some people the only solution.

Three politically astute Virginians pondered the congressional impasse and the fact that Pennsylvanians, New Yorkers, and New Englanders were talking through Alexander Hamilton about the terms of yet another residence-assumption bargain. The success of such a scheme would doom their dream of an American Empire on the Potomac. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison recognized the moment at hand and within ten days had secured the votes to place the U.S. capital on the Potomac.

Washington's exact role in the bargain is unclear, given his concern for discretion and Madison's and Jefferson's willingness to honor it. Several factors, however, indicate that the two men

worked closely with the president as the bargain evolved. Madison had kept Washington informed about the politics of previous congressional debates over the capital's location. The president's aides had been involved in various stages of the pre-June bargaining, and they showed their delight from the House gallery when the Potomac residence bill finally passed Congress. Even more indicative of Washington's evident role in the bargain were his central importance to the political process, his expressed displeasure in 1784 when the falls of the Delaware was chosen the permanent residence, his Potomac Fever, and his detailed attention to the capital's development from the moment the bill passed until his death.

At the end of the week of 13 June, during which the Senate had postponed both the residence and assumption questions, Jefferson encountered a distraught Hamilton. The latter raised the subject of assumption and its necessity, stressing that New England would make it a *sine qua non* for continuation of the Union. Hamilton asked Jefferson to seek southern support for the measure. Hamilton knew from a Madison proposal to Massachusetts that votes might be procured, given the right agreement on the residence question. The two secretaries parted, with Jefferson promising to consider the matter. Soon after reaching his lodgings, he invited Hamilton and Madison to dine alone with him the next day so that they might seek a resolution. Over dinner, Madison agreed to provide the necessary southern votes to adopt a modified assumption. In return Madison sought assurance that the capital would be placed on the Potomac. He did not need any votes for a Philadelphia-Potomac residence bill. What he needed from Hamilton was his influence with the New Englanders to prevent them from interfering with an existing agreement between Pennsylvania and the South.

Hamilton needed three votes in the House and one in the Senate. Madison naturally looked to the Maryland and Virginia delegations. The fabulously wealthy Senator Charles Carroll, whose 10,000-acre estate lay just off the Potomac south of Frederick, agreed to provide the necessary vote in the Senate. The easiest House member to convince was Richard Bland Lee, who received a promise that Alexandria, the chief town of his congressional district, would be included within the federal district. Madison also secured the vote of Alexander White, who represented Virginia from Harpers Ferry westward to the Ohio River.

Madison next went to the Maryland representatives. By implication at least, he assured them that the public buildings at the capital would be restricted to their side of the Potomac. Daniel Carroll of Rock Creek, who represented a district that included Georgetown and all of western Maryland, agreed to shift his vote. He surely expected or received assurance that Georgetown would compose part of the federal district. Although Madison had found the three votes Hamilton needed, he also procured the vote of Maryland Representative George Gale for security.

On 22 June, Hamilton informed several of his Massachusetts supporters that assumption would be added to the funding bill if a Philadelphia-Potomac residence bill passed Congress first. What Hamilton wanted from the Massachusetts congressmen was a promise that they would not, as in 1789, support efforts to block the Philadelphia-Potomac scheme with a counteroffer to Pennsylvania. For Hamilton and the Massachusetts delegation, the funding system, including assumption, remained the primary national objective and anything else could be sacrificed. Indeed, establishing the national capital on the Potomac was the only way to achieve it. The Massachusetts delegation agreed to Hamilton's request.

On 28 June the Senate took up its postponed residence bill. A motion to place the capital on the Potomac between the Anacostia River and Conococheague Creek at Williamsport carried. The location of the temporary residence produced impassioned debate, but the Potomac-Philadelphia coalition prevailed and the Senate voted to place it at Philadelphia. On 1 July the Senate passed the bill by one vote. The bill provided that state law remained operative in the district until Congress provided otherwise. Further, the bill created a presidential commission modeled after the one proposed in 1789: The president could appoint—without the necessity of Senate consent—a three-man commission to survey a district, purchase or accept as much land on the Maryland side of the Potomac as the president deemed necessary, and supervise the construction of public buildings. Finally, the president could accept money for purposes of the act, but Congress appropriated only the “sufficient sum” necessary to transfer the capital to the Potomac in December 1800.

The House opened debate on 6 July. The ripe rhetoric, dire predictions, and personal attacks entertained the packed galleries. Madison led a majority which insisted that the bill be adopted

without amendment; under no circumstances could it be returned to the Senate. Claiming the Potomac too far South, Aedanus Burke of South Carolina described most of the proposed area as desert and questioned whether Congress really preferred a place in the woods to a populous city. New York City's John Laurance insisted that the bill threatened the existence of the Union. Elbridge Gerry, the only member from Massachusetts to argue strongly against the bill, believed that the Virginians planned to include Alexandria within the ten miles square, despite their repeated speeches in favor of going as far west as possible. To divide the Virginians and the Pennsylvanians, he moved unsuccessfully that the House require its inclusion. On 9 July the House adopted the bill by a vote of 32 to 29. No representative north of East Jersey voted in the majority, and only five southerners voted with the northern minority.

The bill went to Washington for his signature. No one questioned the president's support for a Potomac capital, and he soon found himself confronted with an appeal to, and attacks upon, his honor. A newspaper article addressed to the president argued that the Constitution gave Congress the sole power of adjournment and that therefore the residence bill, which required his consent to the adjournment to Philadelphia at the end of the session, was unconstitutional: "The Constitution is the rock of our political salvation . . . our only bond of Union; . . . every citizen who has taken an oath to support the Constitution, violates that oath if he silently suffers any law to pass which appears to him, in the smallest degree, repugnant to it." On 16 July another newspaper described the president's situation as delicate and observed that bets remained open as to what he would do. Washington stopped such speculation when he signed the bill that day. "The Holy Name of the P——t is not much respected in the mouths of the profane," as New Yorkers began to condemn him. One newspaper writer referred to him as formerly America's favorite guardian and deliverer; another declared that his ruling passion had been made clear by his signature.

A few hours after Washington signed the residence bill, the Senate voted to add to the House funding bill a provision for the assumption of state debts. The vote was 14 to 12 because Charles Carroll, as promised, changed his position. On 24 July the House agreed to assumption when Alexander White, Richard

Bland Lee, Daniel Carroll, and George Gale switched to its support.

New Yorkers, of course, complained bitterly about the compromise. The newspapers' treatment of Congress and the president was harsh and abusive. Several stinging political cartoons circulated on the streets of the city in July. One showed Senator Robert Morris, led by the devil, en route to Philadelphia with Federal Hall on his shoulders. A Philadelphia prostitute promised pleasure ahead, as did a man in women's clothing who identified himself as Congress' procuress. The most significant cartoon appeared after Washington signed the residence bill. In the cartoon, Congress had chosen to follow Morris and the southerners in the ship *Constitution* over a waterfall to Philadelphia. A member of the northern minority, being pulled behind in a small boat, suggested that the rope which tied it to the *Constitution* be cut as soon as the ship appeared in danger, while another declared it best to do so immediately since the Constitution was going to the devil. The cartoon further accused Washington of signing the residence bill for reasons of self-gratification.

Influential national leaders saw the Compromise of 1790 as the only means of preserving the Union and urged support for it. Northern leaders proclaimed assumption—and legislative acceptance of the constitutionality of its implied powers—to be the final cementing of the Union and downplayed the implications of a southern capital. Southern leaders heralded the decision to place the capital on the Potomac and stressed those provisions in the funding act that most benefited the South. The Constitution survived its first major crisis because of the willingness of the American public to accept the compromise worked out by the executive and legislative branches of the federal government in 1790. The first publicly fought compromise in American history, it marked the end of the American Revolution, for it resolved the two most difficult and lingering issues: payment of the war debt and the location of the capital.