For nine months the
town of York, Pennsylvania,
served as the Nation's Capital.

Dr. Robert Fortenbaugh, who narrates this
episode in the Revolutionary War, is Adeline Sager Professor
of History at Gettysburg College, and author of The Nine Capitals
of the United States.

YORK AS THE CONTINENTAL CAPITAL:
SEPTEMBER 30, 1777—JUNE 27, 1778

By Robert Fortenbaugh

Y ORK, or Yorktown as it was called in its earlier days, was
the oldest town in Pennsylvania west of the Susquehanna
River. It had been laid out in 1741, and had a reasonably rapid
growth for an inland town at that time. When the County of
York, the fifth in Pennsylvania, was erected in 1749 Yorktown
was made the county-seat, and remains that today. That distinc-
tion, together with its location on one of the principal roads lead-
ing into the back-country from the Susquehanna River, the
Monocacy Road, contributed to its growth and prosperity. In
1754 it had 210 houses, with a new courthouse in process of
building on the central square. This was to continue to be the
home of the county government until 1841. In 1777 the town had
286 houses and a population of about 1,800.

York’s chief claim to fame in our earlier national history rests
upon the more or less fortuitous selection of the town as the seat
of the Continental Congress from September 30, 1777, to June 27,
1778. How this came to be is authoritatively related by John
Adams in a letter dated “Tuesday, 30th of September, 1777,”
from “Yorktown”:

In the morning of the 19th instant, the Congress were
alarmed in their beds by a letter from Mr. Hamilton, one
of Gen. Washington’s family, that the enemy was in
possession of the ford over the Schuylkill and the boats, so that they had, in their power to be in Philadelphia before morning. The papers of Congress belonging to the Secretary's office, the War office, the Treasury office, etc., were before sent to Bristol. The President and all the other gentlemen were gone that road, so I followed with my friend, Mr. Marchant, of Rhode Island, to Trenton in the Jerseys. We staid at Trenton until the 21st when we set off to Easton, upon the forks of the Delaware. From Easton we went to Bethlehem, from thence to Reading, from thence to Lancaster, and from thence to this town, which is about a dozen miles over the Susquehanna River. Here Congress is to sit. In order to convey the papers with safety, which are of more importance than all the members, we were induced to take this circuit, which is near 180, whereas this town, by direct road, is not more than 88 miles from Philadelphia. The tour has given me an opportunity of seeing many parts of this country, which I never saw before.¹

The Congress held a session on Saturday, September 27th, in Lancaster. The record of its deliberations does not quite fill a page of the printed edition of the Journals of the Continental Congress, all of the business being solely related to military matters as might be expected under the exigencies of the day. Adjournment was voted "to Yorktown, there to meet on Tuesday next, at 10 o'clock." The situation in Lancaster would doubtless have been favorable but the general situation was so threatening that it was the part of wisdom to put the broad waters of the Susquehanna between the enemy and the seat of the government.

When the Congress arrived in York, to be followed by all of the offices of the government, great demands were made upon the town's resources for quartering and entertainment. This was true even in the face of the presence of more than a dozen public inns and taverns necessary for the ordinary business of caring for the traveling public. Many private homes were therefore pressed into service. John Adams, Samuel Adams, Edward Rutledge, Benjamin Harrison, R. H. Lee, F. L. Lee, Elbridge Gerry, and Henry Laurens were guests in the largest mansion in the town, which had been rented by General Daniel Roberdeau, a member of

York as the Continental Capital

Congress. This house was situated on the present site of the Colonial Hotel. John Adams, in a letter to his wife, complained of his hampered and straitened quarters, though he admitted that he was more favorably situated than many others. He also complained of the food and the cookery, but commended the churchgoing of the people. He noticed the tenacity with which they clung to the use of the German language. John Hancock, the president of Congress, occupied the house of Colonel Michael Swope on West Market Street, near the Square. This was furnished him at public expense.

The courthouse provided adequate quarters for the meeting of the Congress, while the Board of Treasury had its office in the residence of Archibald McClean, at the northeast corner of George Street and the Square, where Michael Hillegas, treasurer of the United States, distributed the public money. The Board of War held its meetings in the law office of James Smith, adjoining his residence on the west side of South George Street near the Square. The Committee of Foreign Affairs also occupied Smith's office. Tom Paine was secretary of that committee and is said there to have written several numbers of "The Crisis." In a building at the southwest angle of the Square several different committees met from time to time.
The courthouse, for nine months the capitol of the United States, had been in use since 1755. It was of brick and was 55 feet long and 45 feet wide. One account describes it thus:

The main entrance, through double doors, led from South George Street. The judge's desk, at which the President sat, was at the western end of the building. Back of this, on a small pedestal, perched a plain image representing a statue blindfolded holding the scales of justice. Two rows of seats for jurors extended along the walls to the left and right of the judge's desk. Several tables and desks rested on the floor within the bar, immediately behind which stood a large ten-plate wood stove with an eight-inch pipe extending upward and then back to the east wall. The rows of seats to the rear of the bar inclined upward to the eastern end of the building. At the rear of the court room was a small gallery reached by winding stairs. There were six windows on each of the sides facing north and south George Street, and four windows each at the east and west ends of the building. Every window contained two sashes and every sash 18 small panes of glass. The second story of the Court House was used for public meetings, entertainments and at times for school purposes. In the original Court House there were only two gable ends, one facing east and the other west Market Street. The gables facing north and south George Street were placed there when the Court House was remodeled in 1815.

A bell had been obtained for St. John's Episcopal Church, on North Beaver Street, a few years before. There was no belfry on this church and no suitable place to hang the bell, so it was hung on a pole in Centre Square and there rung for religious services and for town meetings. When the news of the Declaration of Independence was officially brought to York, James Smith and Archibald McClean ordered that this bell be put in the cupola of the Court House. In response to notification this historic bell was rung loud and long for liberty and independence. After the Revolution this bell was removed to the cupola of St. John's Episcopal Church. . . .

In this setting the Continental Congress began a period of deliberation during which some of the most momentous develop-

ments of the whole war took place. The sessions at York have not only local interest; the record of their business is of the greatest significance in our national history. Yet it was a gloomy prospect which confronted the members of Congress when they hurried into this place of refuge, and some were ready to give up the struggle in despair and accept the overtures of peace offered by the British government. However, fortunately not all were of this frame of mind. John Adams wrote in his diary about this time:

The prospect is chilling on every side, gloomy, dark, melancholy and dispiriting. When and where will light come from? Shall we have good news from Europe? Shall we hear of a blow struck by Gates against Burgoyne? Is there a possibility that Washington may yet defeat Howe? Is there a possibility that McDougall and Dickinson shall destroy the British detachment in New Jersey? If Philadelphia is lost, is the cause of independence lost? . . . No, the cause is not lost. Heaven grant us one great soul. One leading mind would extricate the best cause from ruin that seems to await it. We have as good a cause as ever was fought for. One active, masterly capacity would bring order out of this confusion and save our country. 3

It was indeed darkness before dawn as the experience of the nine months during which York was the capital was to reveal.

Only some twenty congressmen came to York in a body for the opening of the session, set for Tuesday, September 30th. The Journal of Congress notes that they “Met and adjourned to 10 o’clock to Morrow.” Others must have arrived soon, for the record for Wednesday, October 1, 1777, shows that business was transacted. Among the decisions of the day was the following:

Ordered, That, until further order, Congress shall meet precisely at ten o’Clock A.M. sit to one, then adjourn to four, P.M.; then to meet and proceed to business.

The first matter of genuine significance to engage the attention of the body was the resignation of John Hancock from the presi-

3 Prowell, op. cit., I, 293-294.
dency of the Congress. He had served in this high office for about two and one-half years during troublesome days, and desired to retire that he might soon visit his home in Boston. On October 25th a committee reported that his accounts had been audited, and there was yet due him $1,392, which was ordered to be paid. Upon his last appearance before Congress he delivered a farewell address and soon afterwards took up his homeward journey. However, he returned to York to take his seat again as a delegate from his state in May, 1778. In his place Henry Laurens, of South Carolina, was chosen president on November 1st by unanimous vote; he served in that capacity until he retired on December 10, 1778.

The first month of the Congress' long stay in York was brightened by news of the military victories in the north. First, on the very day that Congress first met, came the news of the engagement at Bemis Heights, which led on to the second great piece of news which reached York on October 21st. This concerned the surrender of General Burgoyne at Saratoga. In appreciation of these blessings, on October 31st President Laurens appointed a committee of Congress to draft a national proclamation of Thanksgiving. This was written by Richard Henry Lee, a member of the committee, and on November 1st the committee's report was unanimously agreed to. This set Thursday, December 18th, as the day for observance, and President Laurens wrote letters to the governors of all the thirteen states suggesting their cooperation.

In the epoch-making set of resolutions that had been adopted by the Continental Congress on July 2, 1776, the third proposed "That a plan of confederation be prepared and transmitted to the respective colonies for their consideration." This was taken most seriously, and a committee was appointed to prepare a plan of confederation to be entered into by the several states. The committee was composed of one delegate from each state, with John Dickinson of Pennsylvania as chairman. On July 12, 1776, this committee reported a draft of Articles of Confederation. Almost daily discussion was carried on in Congress on this draft until on August 20th the report was laid aside and not taken up again until the following April. During the next six months the matter was very much alive, and after the Congress was seated in York
discussions were continued almost daily from October 7th until the final adoption on November 15th. By vote of Congress the Articles of Confederation were to be submitted to the legislatures of the several states for action. They were sent to the proper officials of the states in printed form, accompanied by a communication requesting the legislatures, as they approved, to instruct their delegates in Congress to ratify in the name of the states. A committee was appointed on November 29th to make a translation of the Articles into French. The French version was sent to Benjamin Franklin and the other commissioners in Paris who were laboring for recognition of the American Republic by the government of King Louis XVI.

Another desired objective in the resolutions adopted July 2, 1776, was realized while the seat of the government was in York. The second of the three resolutions had set forth: "That it is expedient forthwith to take the most effectual measures for forming foreign alliances." Efforts were made in several countries in Europe to secure open alliances with the rebelling Americans. At first all that could be had was secret aid which was more of the nature of a tribute to jealousy of Britain's power than of sympathy with the American cause. France was the best prospect for an alliance since she had the greatest reason to be jealous of Britain and to fear continued British dominance. However, the French officials made it quite plain that they were loath to support what might turn out to be a losing cause. Clearly, some stroke of significance in demonstration of the Americans' success was needed. Such a stroke was the victory at Saratoga, and the American representatives at Paris, then headed by Franklin, made the most of it. Consequently, on February 6, 1778, a treaty of alliance was signed by the King of France. News of this diplomatic triumph came to York on the afternoon of Saturday, May 2nd. Congress had adjourned for the week, but the bell in the cupola of the courthouse was rung to summon the members to immediate attendance in a special session. There was great rejoicing among all the delegates and all the people of the town, for this was news which went far toward assuring the final victory. On Monday, May 4th, the Treaty of Amity and Commerce and the Treaty of Alliance were unanimously adopted by the Congress. A committee was
appointed to prepare a form of ratification of the treaties and the following resolution of appreciation was adopted:

This Congress entertain the highest sense of the magnanimity and wisdom of his most Christian majesty, so strongly exemplified in the treaty of amity and commerce, and the treaty of alliance, entered into on the part of his majesty, with these United States, at Paris, on the 6th day of February last; and the commissioners, or any of them, representing these States at the court of France, are directed to present the grateful acknowledgements of this Congress to his most Christian majesty, for his truly magnanimous conduct respecting these states, in the said generous and disinterested treaties, and to assure his majesty, on the part of this Congress, it is sincerely wished that the friendship so happily commenced between France and these United States may be perpetual.

The Congress had to deal with serious problems of government in all its branches, particularly those necessary for the conduct of the war. York was the center of all these interests and to it came many having business, either civil or military. All the leading figures came at one time or another except Washington who was carrying on under the bitter conditions of Valley Forge. He had not yet established himself as the peerless leader, and those who opposed him for one reason or another found opportunity at York to advance their opposing interests. General Horatio Gates, the hero of Saratoga, had his supporters in a scheme to put him into Washington's high position. Congress invited Gates to York to become the president of the reorganized Board of War, and that put him at advantage with many influential people who sincerely believed him superior to Washington. But, what was worse, it put him in close touch with those who were disaffected with Washington and who plotted his removal. The "Conway Cabal" was originated, and, so far as it ever was a serious threat to Washington's position, considerably advanced in York. It is also believed that it suffered its death-blow in York at the hands of those who were loyal to Washington who also gathered there.

Shortly thereafter Washington began to vindicate the confidence which these men had placed in him. The bitter winter at Valley Forge was not without its value, for out of it came a well-
discovered and effective fighting force which the British were to learn to respect. Much of improvement of the army by the spring of 1778 was the work of Baron Steuben, a professional soldier who had held high rank and had had wide experience in the Prussian Army. As one thoroughly competent to train the Continental Army, he had been induced to come to America, arriving in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, on December 1, 1777. Five days later he addressed a letter to Congress in York offering his services. On January 14, 1778, Congress unanimously passed the following resolution:

'Whereas, Baron Steuben, a lieutenant-general in foreign service, has, in a most disinterested and heroic manner, offered his services to these states in the quality of a volunteer;

Resolved, That the president present the thanks of Congress, in behalf of these United States, to the Baron Steuben, for the zeal he has shown for the cause of America, and the disinterested tender he has been pleased to make of his military talents; and inform him, that the Congress cheerfully accepts of his service as a volunteer in the army of these states, and wish him to repair to General Washington's quarters as soon as convenient.

On February 5th Steuben and his suite arrived at York and remained there, at the expense of Congress, until the 19th. At York he was interviewed by a committee of Congress which heard his terms and conditions of service. The committee was favorably impressed and reported his proposition to Congress which unanimously accepted it. On the 19th Steuben left for Valley Forge where he immediately began his program of training and discipline which bore fruit shortly in the campaign of the summer of 1778.

The British force that had captured Philadelphia led a different kind of life from that of the patriot forces at Valley Forge. The Loyalists had opened their homes for festivities and there were parties, balls, theatricals and cock-fights for entertainment. General Howe was replaced by Sir Henry Clinton, who shortly came to the conclusion that nothing was being gained by the occupation of Philadelphia. The evacuation was, however, delayed until the arrival of commissioners from England who were sent to ne-
gotiate a treaty of peace and conciliation. These commissioners came and their communication was read to Congress in York in mid-June. The basis of their offer of a treaty was so unsatisfactory that Congress approved a letter draughted by a committee of that body rejecting the offer, thus putting an end to the efforts toward peace at that time and under those conditions.

On June 20th joyous news reached the Congress: the British Army under Clinton had evacuated Philadelphia on the 18th. York was wild with enthusiasm; bonfires were built on the public common; the courthouse was illuminated, and military companies paraded the streets. This news was received by what was very likely the most eminent group of American military and civil leaders yet to gather in York during its days as the capital.

Philadelphia was, however, always thought of as the preferred continental capital, and now it was safe again to convene the Congress and to re-establish the public offices there. On Wednesday, June 24th, it was resolved that the Congress adjourn on the next Saturday “from this place to meet at Philadelphia, on the 2 day of July next.” Another resolution was adopted at the same meeting to appoint a committee of three to “take proper measures for a public celebration of the anniversary of independence, at Philadelphia, on the 4 day of July next.” On Saturday, the 27th, the final entry in the journal of the Continental Congress in York was: “Adjourned to Thursday next, to meet at the State House in Philadelphia.”

Thus ended a period of great historical significance in our national history, and one of justifiable pride to the present-day residents of York. Memories of those great days still linger in “Continental Square,” and by way of the many markers on sites whose historic interest originated in 1777 and 1778. Although the cause of independence was far from won in June, 1778, when Congress departed from York, enough of promise had happened in the nine months just passed to clothe a quotation from the opening lines of Shakespeare’s King Richard III with a certain curious propriety:

Now is the winter of our discontent
Made glorious summer by this sun of York.