In the story of Pennsylvania's various state capitals, we see mirrored, as one succeeds another, the territorial expansion and economic development of the Commonwealth.

PENNSYLVANIA'S STATE HOUSES AND CAPITOLS

BY HUBERTIS CUMMINGS

FOR long after the founding of Pennsylvania in 1682 and the Charter of Privileges granted by William Penn to the Province in 1701, colonists took little active thought of where their Assembly should have a fixed place of meeting. Year after year members of that legislative body gathered officially in an inn, a meeting-house, a coffee-house, a market-house, or the commodious residence of some more well-to-do legislator. But, although legislation functioned capably enough with them, despite the lack of a fixed place of assembling, it functioned most regularly within the City of Philadelphia; and Philadelphians grew used to having it there.

It is not surprising, then, that eventually the Assembly had presented to it, on February 20, 1729, a petition praying that that "House would by a law impower" the City and County of Philadelphia to "build a Market and State House in High Street, near the Prison." If this was promptly laid on the table on that day, at the least it served to germinate an idea.

Nine weeks later, on May 1, it emerged in a motion calling for an appropriation of £2,000 which carried unanimously and paved the way for further debate and procedure.

The State House, or "House for the Assembly of this Province to meet in," came slowly. Andrew Hamilton, eminent lawyer and for many years Clerk of Assembly, became chief proponent of a
site and type of structure. Chestnut Street below Sixth replaced High Street as the location. Hamilton had building materials gathered together for it, executed a rough drawing of his concept of how it should be constructed, and pressed preparations. In the summer of 1736 John Penn, "the American," only son of the Founder born in Pennsylvania, made a payment of five pounds to Edmund Woolley for his more expert designs for the new Provincial State House, then in its broader proportions completed. In late September of that same year Mayor William Allen of Philadelphia entertained there at a great banquet of citizens. In October, a few weeks later, the Assembly of Pennsylvania had its first meetings in a building the interior of which would not be fully paneled and wainscoted for five more years, which would not have its great bell installed for summoning members until 1753, and not be pronounced complete with a tower before 1758.

All that was a commonplace and modest evolution for an edifice which in the course of time would become the most famous State House on the American Continent. Even more dull was the fact that the Minutes of Assembly in 1736 made no mention whatever of its gathering there. Government, not place of it, it seemed, was the only important point.

Not until 1775, when the second meeting of Continental Congress occurred in it, or until July 4, 1776, when the Declaration of American Independence was signed in it, was the old Pennsylvania State House to mount into lasting fame. And not until long after that was it to be popularly known as "Independence Hall." Here, however, met the Convention which shaped Pennsylvania's Constitution of 1776; and here in September, 1777, the Assembly of the new State was meeting when Washington's loss of the Battle of the Brandywine threatened Philadelphia with the advance upon it of General Howe's army. Then on the 14th of that month the House ordered its papers and records, under the direction of its Clerk, John Morris, Jr., to be carried up the Delaware River "on board the brig Sturdy Beggar to Col. Kirkbride's, and there kept, or carried further." Two days later the House realized that "all active friends of American liberty were obliged to leave" Philadelphia, account having come that "the enemy's army was in full march for this city"; and on the 18th of September it adjourned
as a body, with resolution to meet in the Borough of Lancaster on Thursday, the 25th.

Their records saved by prompt action, Assemblymen got to the inland city as punctually as they severally could; but it was not until the morning of October 6, two days after Washington had retired from the Battle of Germantown, that a quorum of members could be assembled. After that, during the fateful winter when Washington's soldiers suffered with him at Valley Forge, the government of Pennsylvania functioned, somewhat precariously to be sure, at Lancaster; and the Assembly held its meetings in the uncomfortable early brick Court House of that old county seat until May 25, 1778. On that date the body adjourned with plan to gather again, place unnamed, on September 9, only to have the happy experience of being summoned by the Supreme Executive Council of the Commonwealth back to Philadelphia, a month earlier than that, in August. When on the 7th of that month they met again with proper quorum, it was in a State-House considerably marred internally by the British occupation but capable of restoration for their use for another twenty-two years.

Indeed, that structure of Andrew Hamilton's and Edmund Wooley's designing, known everywhere as the State House of Pennsylvania, was to remain the physical seat of government for the Commonwealth until 1799. To its early eminence as the site of the signing of the Declaration of Independence it was to add in 1789-1790 the honor of being the place where the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1790 was shaped.

After 1800 strange temporary eclipse was to come upon it.

For on the approach of the nineteenth century, back county influence had become strong in the State. Philadelphia had long ceased having a geographically central position in Pennsylvania. Inland citizens argued there was danger that the local government of that city was likely to become more and more a dominant factor in State affairs. It was convenient to them to add that legislators who went there unhappily exposed themselves to epidemics of yellow fever. The old habit of wanting government nearer their own midst persisted among mid-state folk.

Men proposed for its seat Carlisle, Reading, Wright's Ferry, Harrisburg. Debate in the Assembly returned intermittently after
1795. In April, 1799, Governor Thomas Mifflin approved an Act of the House of Representatives and the Senate, the Assembly of Pennsylvania having became bi-cameral under the Constitution of 1790, and by force of it directed the seat of government to be removed to Lancaster in the next November.

Preparations were made more leisurely now than in 1777. The summer beheld frequent spectacles of wagons moving forwards from the city on the Delaware to Lancaster. Accounts for the hauling of desks, books, papers, and records came in great numbers to Commissioners Jacob Strickler, Matthias Barton, and Thomas Boude. On the appointed date, November 1, 1799, Lancaster became the capital of Pennsylvania for a second time; and its new second brick Court House, replica of the earlier one in which the Assembly sat in 1777-1778, became the State House of that Commonwealth to remain such for thirteen years.

But legislators were not yet satisfied that the seat of Pennsylvania's law-making bodies had been made satisfactorily central. In fact, in February, 1810, in the term of office of Governor Simon Snyder, another act was formulated, and, despite the objections of Northumberland County and Philadelphia City and County assemblymen, passed. Harrisburg, on the Susquehanna,
was to be made the seat of government in October, 1812. For a third time, then, the scene of removal of government was re-enacted in the latter year.

This time, however, conditions were different. Two Fire-Proof Buildings, with great stone porticoes on their front elevations, had been built to receive the books and records of officers of state like the Surveyor General, the Auditor, and the Treasurer. The fifteen-year old Dauphin County Court House on Market Street had been renovated by master carpenter Stephen Hills to accommodate the two Houses of the Legislature. The Clerk of the House of Representatives, George Heckert, conducted sale of the furniture which that body had used in its chamber in Lancaster, and helped increase funds for new desks, tables, and record shelves in Harrisburg. Young men of that borough and the neighboring countryside drove covered wagons to Lancaster to load up with libraries, records, legislative records, and executive documents.

For nine years thereafter the second Court House of Dauphin County was known as the State House of Pennsylvania. Newspapers were printed “opposite the State House on Market Street”; boarding house mistresses advertised their locations as “a few doors” from it. But while it served in its proud capacity, the minds of Pennsylvanians and particularly of Harrisburgers were much on another subject. So much, indeed, were they upon it that in March, 1816, the Legislature worked out a scheme for selling the abandoned State House in Philadelphia to the city in which it stood. The State needed funds for the erection of a new Capitol; to procure a substantial amount Independence Hall was offered to the municipal buyer for seventy thousand dollars.

Philadelphia was not long in embracing the proposal of the Commonwealth; and, upon its purchase of the famous old structure, plans were set afoot for the erection of the State's first Capitol at Harrisburg. In 1816-1817 carpenter Stephen Hills, on directions from Commissioners, was busied, as had been Andrew Hamilton almost a century earlier, with the gathering of building tools and supplies. In 1819, in the term of Governor William Findlay, that same competent artisan and architect became the contractor chosen to erect, upon the prize-winning designs he had himself submitted, the much desired edifice. In
December, 1821, at a total cost of $135,000, Mr. Hills had ready for use the nobly proportioned Capitol which was destined to be the physical seat of government of Pennsylvania from January, 1822, to February, 1897. Its lofty Greek Revival portico and high dome were features of almost pure classic grace. Within its spacious chambers for House and Senate were drawn those laws which created Pennsylvania’s most advanced modes of transportation, its canals and its railroads, and which established its proud system of public schools. Within them was drafted section 28 of Article III of the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1874, which makes forever invalid any law which would propose a new location of the State’s Capital without previous submission of it to a general referendum of the people.

When fire destroyed this beautiful structure on February 2, 1897, it was as though an era of grandeur had come to an end, although certainly most of us would rather have lost it than Independence Hall.

But old-time Pennsylvanians really needed something like the Commonwealth’s magnificent second Capitol, built in 1902-1906, to console them for a loss so incalculable. Italian Renaissance in architectural type, designed by Joseph M. Houston, of Indiana limestone rather than of brick and local sandstone, as was the first Capitol, the present building is incomparably handsome in exterior and interior, exquisite in a thousand of its details. The massive symbolic and meaningful sculptures executed by George Gray Barnard to flank its main entrance; the broad marble steps

WILLIAM FINDLAY
From a lithograph.
THE SQUIRRELS IN THE CAPITOL GROUNDS

were introduced by Governor Daniel Hartman Hastings (1895-1899), who had a pair brought from the Park of the Virginia Capitol in Richmond. Their descendants at Harrisburg are said to consume annually a short ton of peanuts. The children's costumes shown above belong to Governor Hastings' period.

rising between them to the great central bronze door; the colorful figured tiles on the floor of rotunda and corridors within, designed by Henry C. Mercer out of a myriad fancies and aspects of Pennsylvania life in flora and fauna, craftsmanship and pastime, everything, as it were, from oak leaf to button wood, turtle to open-winged bat, coal mine to oil derrick, burdened packhorse to woman at her spinning wheel, Indian splitting timber with a stone axe to a white man operating a printing press; marble interior stairway and balustrades lifting one's eyes instinctively to the high vaulting of the rotunda and to such noble murals there as Edwin A. Abbey's "Spirit of Light"; the two legislative chambers with their equally graphic murals on eloquent themes out of Pennsylvania history; the moving drama of the life of William Penn and of his meaning to men everywhere today, as it is set forth, in the Governor's Reception Room, in the "Holy Experiment" mural paintings of Pennsylvania's
greatest woman artist, Miss Violet Oakley—all these spell an epic of honor.

It is hardly fifty years old; yet memories of much wise legislation and of Pennsylvania’s participation in two great world wars for human liberty cluster about it. It, too, will grow mellow with time. But today it is best for us—as Pennsylvania’s four “State Houses” and its other, first Capitol have been best for us—as a visible symbol of the greatness of law, justice, and wisdom in that republican form of government in which men take counsel together for the good of society and a people.