

FROM PHILADELPHIA TO LANCASTER: THE FIRST MOVE OF PENNSYLVANIA'S CAPITAL

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IN DECEMBER 1799, the Pennsylvania Assembly opened its session in Lancaster, terminating a six-year struggle in the legislature over relocating the capital of the commonwealth. Philadelphia had been the seat of political power during the entire provincial period, but the deep sectional antagonism that marked Pennsylvania's history in the late eighteenth century made intolerable any thought that it should remain so. As a political issue, removal had many fundamental causes, but was brought to a climax by the yellow fever epidemics that raged through Philadelphia in 1793, 1797, and 1798.

Capital relocation occurred or was attempted in most states during the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Generally, the coastal towns that had served as political centers gave way to inland boroughs along major transportation routes such as Hartford in Connecticut, Albany in New York, and Richmond in Virginia. In some states, Vermont and North Carolina, for example, no town received sufficient support in the legislature to mark it as a permanent capital, and the representatives of these states shifted their activities from place to place on a rotating basis. By and large, the growth of inland areas brought pressure on elected officials to move the capitals to locations more convenient to the bulk of the citizens. Pennsylvania was no exception to this trend.

The major motivation of those seeking a removal of the government involved a symbolic rejection of the dominance of the state by the nation's largest city. Western farmers felt the City of Brotherly Love harbored an unholy gaggle of merchants, bankers, pettifogging lawyers, old Tories, and, worst of all, government officials of all varieties. Moreover, the theatrical per-

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formances which took place there clearly marked the city as decadent and immoral.¹ During the 1790's, the whole of central and western Pennsylvania was filling up with farmers of varied nationalities, cultivating (and sometimes squatting on) moderate-sized farms, as close to nature as man might hope to be. To such men, towns were only useful as markets or centers for absolutely essential governmental activities. Harrisburg, Carlisle, Reading, Easton, York, Lancaster, Washington, and Pittsburgh, among the major local centers, played those roles well. In addition, the distinctive natural region composed of the Susquehanna River and its tributaries provided most of the center of the state with a potential commercial outlet in Baltimore, leaving Philadelphia to thrive on the rich lands of the Delaware and Schuylkill systems. Thomas Paine noted the implications of the geographical division in 1793 and suggested that the "back-country" simply had no need for Philadelphia.² If the Susquehanna region could get along without the city, surely the far western portion of the state, rapidly expanding with the signing of the Grenville, Jay, and Pinckney treaties, and served by the Allegheny-Monongahela-Ohio system, saw little reason to want to leave the government so far to the east.³

Simple population distribution also weighed heavily against the continuation of eastern dominance in the state. The city and the seven easternmost counties held a minority of the citizenry as early as 1790, and the trend toward a lesser relative population would continue. At the beginning of the decade, 214,000 people resided in Philadelphia City and County and the counties of Chester, Bucks, Montgomery, Delaware, Northampton, and Berks, while the rest of the state held 240,000. By 1800 the eastern counties held 253,000 and the remainder of the state 350,000. Put differently and using 1790 as a base, the state as a whole grew 38.6% during the 1790's: the eastern section, however, increased by only 13.1%, while the rest of the state experienced a remarkable growth of 45.3%.⁴

¹ See: William S. Dye, Jr., "Pennsylvania versus the Theatre," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, LV (1931), 333-372.

² *American Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia), February 28, 1793.

³ *The Papers of Albert Gallatin* (Rhistoric Publications microfilm, Reel 3), "Petition of the Western Counties for Jay's Treaty," 1796.

⁴ Figures are rounded. *Heads of Families at the First Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1790: Pennsylvania* (Washington, D. C.,

largely agrarian population who would seldom see that much cash at one time, but the representatives claimed they needed the extra funds to pay for lodging, food, and expenses in the city. Not surprisingly, an immediate attack on the Assembly resulted from the salary bill, led by the county grand juries of Cumberland, Dauphin, Mifflin, and Huntingdon who challenged the raise as unjust and the retroactivity clause as unconstitutional.⁶

The law became a prime issue in the Assembly election campaigns in September and October, with several representatives supported or challenged because of their votes on the salary bill. "An Elector" of Juniata urged the reelection of Runnel Blair of Cumberland County because he was one of the "virtuous fifteen" who opposed the increase.⁷ "A Freeman of Dauphin County" warned against electing those who supported high salaries, noting that the legislature could again vote itself an increase. He supported "Honest [Christian] King" and suggested to his readers that it might be "your duty to omit the other two gentlemen, out of respect to the dictates of conscience."⁸ True to form, King was reelected, outpolling all candidates for any local office, while Stacey Potts and Jacob Miley, who voted for the increase, were "omitted."⁹ "Old Elector" suggested that the three dollar per diem was sufficient cause to move the capital out of the city,¹⁰ while an election meeting in Washington, chaired by Absalom Baird (State Senator, 1794-96 and Vice-President of the Washington County Democratic Society), vigorously condemned the salary increases of both the legislature and various judges.¹¹

The public outcry forced an effort to repeal the increase in the 1793-94 session, and although the vote was close (27-32 for repeal), the attempt failed.¹² In subsequent sessions, lower salaries would be tied to removal bills by the House of Representatives but eliminated by the Senate. At Lancaster, the three

⁶ See, respectively, *Carlisle Gazette*, May 22, 1793; *Oracle of Dauphin* (Harrisburg), June 17, 1793; *Carlisle Gazette*, August 11, 1793; *ibid.*, September 25, 1793, for the texts of the grand jury reports.

⁷ *Ibid.*, September 18, 1793.

⁸ *Oracle of Dauphin*, September 9, 23, 1793.

⁹ *Ibid.*, October 14, 1793.

¹⁰ *Carlisle Gazette*, October 2, 1793.

¹¹ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, September 7, 1793.

¹² Pennsylvania, *Journal of the House of Representatives*, February 17, 1794. Cited below as Pa., *Jrl. HR.*

dollar per diem seems to have offered a comfortable profit to members serving there, as room and board cost as little as two dollars per week. At those rates, a frugal member might clear \$300 for his service at one session.¹³

While an occasional voice called for removal in the 1780's, the first appearance of the question in the national period occurred in the same month that the salary increase passed and grew out of an argument in a Philadelphia tavern between Charles Dilworth, a Representative from Chester County, and Israel Whelen, Philadelphia grocer and later Senator. On February 28, 1793, Dilworth voted for Albert Gallatin in the joint House-Senate election for United States Senator.¹⁴ That evening, according to Dilworth's complaint, Whelen insulted him over the vote and ordered him out of the tavern. James Hannum, also of Chester, and John Torrence of Fayette introduced a resolution calling for removal of the legislature to Harrisburg for its next session, citing this effort as intimidation and "other obvious reasons." John Rea of Franklin and Torrence then moved to have Whelen brought before the bar of the House to answer for his conduct.¹⁵ The second reading of the Rea-Torrence resolution found Philadelphians Jacob Hiltzheimer and Benjamin R. Morgan defending Whelen in a counter resolution requiring Dilworth to write out a formal complaint and provide the defendant with an opportunity to refute the charges.¹⁶ The several resolutions never reappeared, and the Senate took no notice of the affair. Only the *Oracle of Dauphin* paid any attention to the incident, while the Philadelphia press maintained a stony silence.¹⁷

In practical terms, the reapportionment of the Assembly after the Census of Taxables in 1793 shifted the balance of legislative power away from the eastern counties and provided the west with sufficient majorities in both houses of the Assembly to pass a capital relocation bill if the representatives voted along purely sectional lines. That removal came in 1799 instead of 1795 can be attributed to a handful of Senators from central

¹³ See: Harry M. Tinkcom, ed., "Sir Augustus in Pennsylvania," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, LXXV (1951), 369-399.

¹⁴ Pa., *Jrl. HR.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, March 2, 1793.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, March 7, 1793.

¹⁷ March 18, 1793. Naturally, the paper presented Dilworth's side of the dispute.

and western counties who refused to support the various bills almost annually brought before them. In the House, small but steady majorities passed removal bills in 1795, 1797, and 1798, but not until 1799 did the Senate reflect the interests of its constituents.

Sectionalism ran rampant at the 1794-95 session of the Assembly, the first held under the new reapportionment. Begun shortly after the Whiskey Rebellion, the session was marked by eastern hostility to the west as both House and Senate, voting basically along sectional lines, forced all of the Representatives and newly-elected Senators from Washington, Allegheny, Westmoreland, and Fayette counties to submit to a second election, declaring the October polls sufficiently agitated by the Rebellion to invalidate their results.¹⁸ After the westerners returned, the House of Representatives easily and quickly passed a bill to remove the capital to Carlisle in Cumberland County, sell all state-owned land in Philadelphia, and require all state officials to move to the new site by December 1795.¹⁹ The four roll call votes taken on the removal bill revealed the sectional alignment in the House that would remain virtually unchanged for four years. Forty members favored removal. These came from Lancaster (6), Dauphin (3), York (6), Cumberland (3), Franklin (3), Huntingdon (1), Mifflin (2), Luzerne (1), Northumberland-Lycoming (3), Bedford-Somerset (3) Fayette (2), Westmoreland (3), and Washington (4). Opposed were the thirty-eight remaining members: thirty-six from the eastern counties and both Allegheny County members, Presly Nevill and David McNair.

The Senate promptly rejected this radical and hasty proposal. In a 13-9 vote, that body adopted the report of the committee of the whole that the "bill was lost,"²⁰ and did not bother itself with any further discussion of the question. While the alignment of the vote varied somewhat in the Senate from the House pattern, the basic sectional division prevailed. The Senators from Philadelphia City and County and the counties of Delaware, Northampton, Chester, Bucks, Montgomery, and Berks in the

¹⁸ *Gallatin Papers*, January 5, 10, March 5, 1795; Pa., *Jrl. HR.*, December 30, 1794-January 9, 1795; *Jrl. Sen.*, January 2, 1795.

¹⁹ *Jrl. HR.*, February 27, March 28, 30, 1795.

²⁰ *Jrl. Sen.*, April 2, 1795.

east provided nine of the majority's votes, supported by John Miller of Lancaster, Thomas Lilly and Michael Schysmer of York, and John Conan, who served a vast district composed of Bedford, Somerset, and Huntingdon counties. All nine votes for removal came from men serving the central and western parts of the state. A 13-9 vote *in favor* of removal would have resulted if the Senators from Lancaster, York, and Huntingdon had followed the lines established in the House vote, as those counties were solidly in favor of deserting Philadelphia.²¹

The 1794-95 session provided a clear lesson for the westerners. Some compromise would have to be reached to overcome the Senate's reluctance: Carlisle was too far west to suit the tastes of Senators from Lancaster and York counties. While a lower Susquehanna site would receive support from Nathaniel Ellmaker and Miller of Lancaster and Lilly and Schysmer of York (and their successors), both Carlisle and Harrisburg were out of the question. Of all the inland towns, Lancaster was logically best suited to replace Philadelphia as the state's capital city because of its central location relative to the bulk of Pennsylvania's population. In addition, a major turnpike from Philadelphia to Lancaster received legislative authorization in 1792, and subsequent acts connected the town with Harrisburg and the west, York (through Wright's Ferry), and Chester.²² While the town could not match Philadelphia for facilities and services, its location in an agricultural county populated by pious and thrifty farmers promised to eliminate the potentially evil influences of the metropolis from legislative activity.

At the next meeting of the Assembly, commencing in December 1795, efforts toward the necessary compromise began, but failed again. An initial struggle centered on which town ought to be named in a resolution in the House empowering a committee to prepare a bill to effect removal. Westerners opposed Reading as too far east, all of the easterners and Susquehanna-based representatives rejected Carlisle as too far west, and the House finally settled on Lancaster.²³ The willingness of Lancasterans to

²¹ *Lancaster Journal*, April 8, 1795.

²² For the various turnpike acts see Pennsylvania, *Session Laws*, 1792, Ch. CXX; 1794, Ch. CCLVII; 1796, Chs. XXII, XXX; 1798, Ch. CXLIV; 1799, Ch. CCXXVII. The Philadelphia-Lancaster portion was completed in the winter of 1795-96. *Lancaster Journal*, January 15, 1796.

²³ Pa., *Jrl. HR.*, January 28, 1796.

host the capital was clear, for they had written to their delegates during the week preceding the votes and promised the best accommodations available, a strengthened police force, and culture (through a new library subscription). As if anticipating competition, they closed by commenting that "we are satisfied that no country [sic], if its wealth and flourishing situation are to be taken into view, can vie with the county of Lancaster."²⁴

Easterners were little impressed, it seems, for they introduced and supported several "overkill" proposals to the Lancaster bill in an effort to guarantee Senate rejection of removal: the easterners voted *for* Carlisle, tried Harrisburg, and, down but not out, sought an amendment reducing the per diem to two dollars per day at the new site.²⁵ The western-Susquehanna coalition held firmly to Lancaster, and passed the critical first section of the bill 40-36. The only changes in the alignment revealed a year earlier balanced each other—Samuel Ewalt replaced McNair from Allegheny and voted for removal, while John Franklin displaced Abraham Carpenter from Huntingdon and opposed Lancaster.

Compared with the previous session, the removal question made progress in the Senate: a bill was brought out of committee instead of suffering rejection out of hand. The Senate now adopted a policy of obstructionism, however, to which it would adhere for three years. The House bill, calling for removal to Lancaster by December 1796, was transformed by the Senate into a proposal to allow Governor Mifflin to appoint a commission to survey the Susquehanna region for a likely location. The House never considered this emasculated version of its handiwork.²⁶

Partisanship smothered practical politics in the 1796-97 session as the Assembly held pressing issues in abeyance while it engaged in a series of bitter debates over the near-catastrophe surrounding Pennsylvania's electoral vote in the presidential campaign, a farewell message for George Washington, the undeclared naval war with France, and the election of James Ross

²⁴ *Lancaster Journal*, January 29, 1796.

²⁵ Pa., *Jrl. HR.*, March 3, 1796. The apparent reversal of position by the Philadelphians fooled few westerners. Only the salary amendment received strong support, losing 37-39.

²⁶ *Jrl. Sen.*, March 19, 1796.

of Pittsburgh to the United States Senate. An August session to deal with more mundane matters found yellow fever in Philadelphia an effective deterrent to sectional politics.²⁷

Action in the 1797-98 session closely resembled that of two years earlier. Wright's Ferry, a small town on the banks of the Susquehanna along the turnpike from Lancaster to York, stood as the House of Representatives' choice for a capital. The House also voted to reduce legislative salaries, but delay the cut until 1800. The complete bill passed by a 38-36 margin, only Northampton County's Abraham Horn deserting the hitherto solid eastern bloc and joining those in favor of moving.²⁸

The Senate again delayed precipitous action, notwithstanding the loss of a thousand lives in the epidemic that raged through the city during the late summer.²⁹ A committee formed to bring in a removal bill disbanded without report a few days before the House bill reached the Senate. When it received that proposal, the upper chamber again stalled, and would only move to form a committee to survey the John Harris property in Harrisburg as a potential site.³⁰ At loggerheads with only a few days left in the session, neither body would compromise on main points, and the House even refused to select a conference committee.³¹

The second successive summer of yellow fever in Philadelphia finally forced action from the Assembly. Strickler of Lancaster and Martin of Lycoming placed the issue in proper perspective by introducing a resolution in the House for moving the capital "to a more central place" "nearer to the center of population" because "as of late . . . yellow fever . . . has raged at particular periods, so as not only to almost depopulate the city, but to render it dangerous for Members of the Legislature to meet therein."³²

²⁷ See *ibid.*, December 1796-April 1797, *passim* and *Jrl. HR.*, December 1796-April 1797, *passim*.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, March 22, 23, 1798. Horn replaced Abraham Bachman, who always voted to stay in Philadelphia.

²⁹ Governor Mifflin's opening address to the Assembly set 4000 as the number of cases of the fever. *Jrl. Sen.*, December 9, 1797.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, February 19, March 21, 27, 28, 1798. Cost was the attraction of Harrisburg; the land was free. The Senate could thereby claim attention to the state's fiscal position as the basis for this delaying tactic.

³¹ *Ibid.*, March 30, 1798; *Jrl. HR.*, March 31, 1798.

³² *Ibid.*, January 18, 1799. Among the dead was Jacob Hiltzheimer, a twelve-year veteran of the legislature from Philadelphia who was among

In a complete reversal of form, the Senate took the lead in passing a removal bill after only two votes. The upper house rejected Harrisburg 9-14 on March 26, 1799, a coalition of stubborn easterners and practical westerners joining in the negative. John Kean and Christian Lower, elected from a district combining Berks and Dauphin, voted in opposition to Harrisburg, thus joining in the rejection of a site within their own district. Their selflessness, combined with Speaker Robert Hare's refusal to consider any place but his own city of Philadelphia, averted another deadlock and paved the way for a second ballot. The next day a bill requiring all state offices to move to Lancaster by November 1799 passed 14-10.³³ On this second vote, Richard Smith, who replaced John Canan of Bedford-Huntingdon-Somerset, provided another key vote and clarified somewhat the sectional nature of the Senate alignment. While the Senators from Philadelphia, Delaware, Chester, Bucks, and Montgomery counties maintained their positions, they found little support. Only Samuel Postlethwaite of Cumberland and John Woods of Pittsburgh took their side, both apparently favoring a more westward location. The sheer weight of numbers available to the Susquehanna-oriented faction had finally exercised its power, only Postlethwaite breaking ranks among these central area members. Additional votes came from far-westerners John Brandon and Samuel King of Westmoreland-Fayette, John Hamilton of Washington, and surprisingly, "freshman" Nicholas Kern of Northampton County, bounded on its entire eastern side by the Delaware River and part of the natural economic region which had its base in Philadelphia. Kern's predecessor, Robert Brown, had always voted against removal, but the annual visitations of the fever to Philadelphia apparently convinced Kern and his House colleagues Horn, Jonas Hartzell, and Thomas Mawhorter that Philadelphia was a rather unhealthy place.

Action in the House of Representatives was swift and decisive once the Senate cleared the way. After a fruitless effort at maneuvering on the site, the Representatives agreed on Lancaster and passed the Senate bill without amendment, 44-24.

those adamant in opposing any movement of the government. See: "Extracts of the Diary of Jacob Hiltzheimer," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, XVI (1892-93), 93.

³³ Pa., *Jrl. Sen.*

As the chart below demonstrates, support for the bill was nearly unanimous outside the five southeastern counties. Governor Mifflin's signature completed the long journey of this embattled piece of legislation on April 4, 1799.⁸⁴

Pennsylvania House of Representatives, March 31, 1799
Vote on Lancaster Capital Bill, by counties.

<i>For Lancaster</i>	<i>Divided</i>	<i>Opposed to Lancaster</i>
Lancaster (6)	(3) Northampton (1)	Philadelphia City (6)
Berks (5)		Philadelphia County (5)
York (5)		Chester (4)
Dauphin (3)		Bucks (4)
Northumberland (2)		Montgomery (4)
Franklin (2)		Delaware (2)
Mifflin (2)		Luzerne (1)
Bedford (2)		Lycoming (1)
Huntingdon (1)		Cumberland (2)
Somerset (2)		
Fayette (2)		
Westmoreland (3)		
Washington (3)		
Greene (1)		
Allegheny (2)		

An examination of patterns of roll call voting in the Assembly clearly demonstrates that affiliation with national political "parties" played no role in the long struggle over capital removal. The avowed Jeffersonian-Republicans of Philadelphia County such as Blair McClenahan and Dr. Manuel Lieb joined their Federalist-merchant-lawyer neighbors from the City, Lawrence Seckle and Robert Waln, for example, in staunchly opposing any move to the west. At the other end of the state, Republican Absalom Baird and Federalist Thomas Stokely joined hands and votes to press for a site as far west as Carlisle.⁸⁵ In Berks County, Representatives Paul Groscup and Charles Shoemaker, who differed widely on political and ideological questions, joined in a consistent effort to keep the capital in Philadelphia.⁸⁶ Section, not

⁸⁴ *Irl. HR.*, March 29, 31, 1799; *Session Laws*, 1799, Ch. CLXXII.

⁸⁵ See *Gallatin Papers*, September 26, October 12, 24, 1796, for the Gallatin-Stokely contest for the United States House of Representatives.

⁸⁶ Compare, for example, their opposite views of elections and Jay's

party, determined behavior in the Assembly on this vital matter.

Pennsylvania's newspapers, usually a reliable and valuable source of information on political matters, remained strangely silent on the question of a new location for the capital. As printers, the publishers had a vital interest in state contracts, but carried only small items in their dailies or weeklies reporting on the legislature's activities, and failed to couple those reports with editorials, comments, speeches, or letters plugging the merits of their localities. The Philadelphia press all but ignored the question, its editors preferring the fast pace of national politics and international intrigue to the relatively dull and ordinary plodding of the state legislature. William Duane of the *Aurora* erroneously blamed partisanship for the removal of the capital in one of the few editorial comments on the issue. "This removal," he claimed, "has been affected by the City Members, for such has been their intemperate party spirit, and such their disregard and overbearing deportment, . . . Philadelphia was rendered irksome to every independent representative."³⁷

While Duane's conclusion hit the mark, the state capital was pushed out of Philadelphia by yellow fever and a prevailing distrust of urban life common to an agrarian people. At the same time, the rapid growth of the state to the west, and the political power that western population represented, pulled the capital along with the people it was to serve. The vociferous and agitated administration of Thomas McKean must have found staid Lancaster a somewhat uncomfortable environment for its activities since the county gave his opponent, James Ross, a thousand vote plurality in 1799. By 1803 efforts were under way to move the capital still farther west, and finally succeeded in 1810 when another set of sectional votes brought about the approval of Harrisburg as the next (and last) site of the state capital.³⁸

Treaty (Pa., *Jrl. HR.*, March 29, February 25, 1796) with their total agreement on roll calls relative to capital removal.

³⁷ *Aurora* (Philadelphia), April 5, 1799, quoted in George L. Heiges, "When Lancaster was Pennsylvania's Capital," *Papers of the Lancaster County Historical Society*, LV (1951), 2. Heiges suggests that yellow fever and population growth were partly responsible for the move, but also cites fear that the Philadelphia city government might dominate state affairs as a contributing cause. The present author can find no evidence in support of this claim, and Heiges offers none himself.

³⁸ Sanford W. Higginbotham, *The Keystone of the Democratic Arch: Pennsylvania Politics 1800-1816* (Harrisburg, 1952), 27, 334, 382. Higginbotham also found little comment from otherwise wordy newspapers relative to the capital question.