WILLIAM FINDLEY'S ATTEMPT TO MOVE THE STATE CAPITAL TO HARRISBURG IN 1787*

JAMES H. MAST

In nine different sessions of the Pennsylvania General Assembly between 1782 and 1799, a petition, resolution, or bill was introduced to remove the seat of government from Philadelphia. One of the most interesting but unsuccessful instances of this movement took place in 1787. Professor Robert L. Brunhouse has called this movement to remove the seat of government inevitable after the American Revolution because of the radical alignment which was dominant in Western Pennsylvania. In 1787, William Findley was one of the three representatives from Westmoreland County in the unicameral legislature, and he was one of these radicals. On a supposedly quiet legislative day, Saturday, March 3, 1787, he surprised the conservative easterners with a resolution to move the seat of government westward. In the midst of a shocked assembly in the State House in Philadelphia, John M'Dowell of Washington County quickly seconded the motion. This was the first plan advanced in the legislature, since a resolution to move the state capital to Lancaster had failed to reach a second reading during the second session of the Eighth General Assembly in 1784.

William Findley's motion of 1787 resolved "that a committee be appointed to prepare and bring in a bill, to appoint and empower commissioners to purchase materials, and therewith to erect on the lot of land in the town of Harrisburg, the property of this commonwealth, a State-House, for the accommodation of the Supreme Executive Council and General Assembly in the execution of their several trusts, and to appropriate effective funds for the completion of the said State-House." William Findley selected Harrisburg for an economic and a practical political reason. He told the House in his resolution that the seat of government of Pennsylvania should be centrally located in order to

* This paper, which was read at the meeting of The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on May 31, 1956, is an outgrowth of Mr. Mast's research at the University of Pittsburgh for his recently completed thesis, The Removal of the Seat of Government of Pennsylvania from Philadelphia to Lancaster in 1799.—Ed.

4 Minutes of the Second Session of the Eleventh General Assembly, 132.
"lessen the expence of government." It would be cheaper for the assemblymen to meet in Harrisburg, and he felt that his colleagues should utilize the square of four acres which on July 6, 1785, John Harris had placed "in trust for publick use and for such publick purposes as the Legislature shall hereafter direct."5 William Findley informed the General Assembly that it should take "into consideration the great inconviency and unequal burthens to which the major part of the good citizens of this commonwealth is subjected, by the seat of government, land-office, treasury of the state, Comptroller-General's office and rolls-office, being situated on the eastern extremity of the state, at the distance of near 400 miles from the western boundary thereof, and also that government is and ought to be instituted for the common benefit of the community, which principles ought at all times to govern the legislature of a free state."6 For political advantage, therefore, William Findley inferred that the conservative atmosphere of Philadelphia had interfered with the government. In order to exchange this environment for the freedom of the west, he thus resolved that the seat of government should be moved to Harrisburg.

After he had introduced his resolution, William Findley "expatiated on the advantages to be derived to the state from the removal." He spoke highly in commendation of Harrisburg and the country in its vicinity: "it abounded with every thing, all of which could be obtained at lower rates" than in Philadelphia, and no "dangers were to be apprehended from the rise of the Susquehannah, as the town was elevated beyond its reach." He said that "in coming down from Westmoreland he had taken it in his way, and was astonished to see its increase and delighted with its prospects: it seemed to him the most proper place to combine the interests of the state, which the Susquehannah appeared to divide by running a line between the lower and upper counties." He insisted that "he had intended to make this motion during last sessions, but thought it would be better to defer it until he could advocate it from a personal knowledge of its propriety."7 Professor Brunhouse has concluded, however, that William Findley took this particular opportunity to place his motion before the House, because five members were absent from the counties which he thought would oppose the measure.8

5 Deed Book A, I, 84. (in the Dauphin County Court House, Harrisburg).
6 Minutes of the Second Session of the Eleventh General Assembly, 132.
7 The Pennsylvania Gazette, March 7, 1787.
8 Brunhouse, op. cit., 289-290.
When William Findley concluded his introductory remarks, no one rose to support or oppose his proposition. The General Assembly was in such a state of shock that the Speaker of the House, Thomas Mifflin, was forced by the westerners primarily to put the resolution to a vote immediately without a recess or any formal debate. William Findley had picked the right day, for by a purely sectional division he carried his motion by a vote of 33 to 29.9

All of the negative votes were cast by the representatives present from the city of Philadelphia and the counties of Philadelphia, Chester, Bucks, Lancaster, Northampton, and Montgomery with only two exceptions; Emanuel Carpenter of Lancaster County voted yea, and Philip Kreemer of Berks County joined the opposition. The rest of the Berks County delegation present supported the resolution along with all of the members from the counties of Dauphin, Northumberland, Cumberland, York, Franklin, Bedford, Westmoreland, Fayette and Washington. The delegate from Luzerne County was absent. “To bring in a bill conformably to the foregoing resolution,” a committee was appointed by Thomas Mifflin of Philadelphia County. It consists of David M’Conaughy and Michael Schmyser of York County, Thomas Kennedy of Cumberland County, Joseph Powell of Bedford County, and William Findley of Westmoreland County.10

In 1784, the conservative press of Philadelphia had ignored the unsuccessful resolution to move the seat of government to Lancaster, but now that a resolution had been passed in favor of Harrisburg and a committee constituted to bring in a bill to remove the seat of government, the newspapers hurried to arouse public opinion against any such move. The Pennsylvania Gazette on Wednesday, March 7, 1787, besides describing the action which was taken on William Findley’s motion in the General Assembly on the previous Saturday, contained a pertinent two column editorial which was written on March 4, 1787, by “Civis.” This now unknown editorialist called for “the attention of the Citizens of Philadelphia.”

“Menaces have heretofore been occasionally thrown out by Members from some of the back counties,” he pointed out fearfully, “in hopes of terrifying those who acted from better motives, into compliance with favorite measures, that the seat of government should be

9 Ibid., 197.
10 Minutes of the Second Session of the Eleventh General Assembly, 133.
removed from Philadelphia into an interior part of the state.” During these earlier attempts he wrote, however, “There has always been found a sufficient number of men in the House, who preferred the general good to the success of clandestine combinations, or the gratification of private interests.”

It was confidently believed by the press that one of these “two last-mentioned motives prevailed” when William Findley introduced his resolution. It should be inferred, though, that both of them underlaid the motion. This was true because of the political prominence that would have accrued to the west and the economic advantage which Harrisburg would have enjoyed both from a legislative and a material standpoint. The latter advantage, of course, would come initially from the erection of a State House there.

“From the celerity of the proceeding, there is reason to believe,” Civis thought, “that the authors of the measure will endeavor to drive the House, with equal precipitancy, to engage so far in the scheme as to render it difficult to retract; and it is therefore incumbent on those who wish well to the commonwealth in general,” and to Philadelphia “as an important part of it, to endeavor, with equal diligence, to obviate a design which will appear less expedient the longer it is considered.”

The Pennsylvania Gazette was certain that it would be difficult indeed to reason with the radical side of the House, since they had been secretly concerned in supporting the program that William Findley had reintroduced on this occasion.

“Such a want of policy, and such an ignorance of the true methods to render a people rich and respectable,” Civis observed, “appear in the endeavor to obstruct the interests and diminish the resources of this capital of the state, as render it hopeless to address them. It is not too late,” he quickly said, however, “to observe to those who have heartily given a vote for appointing a Committee, without having leisure to consider its impolicy, that the commercial and the farming interests being inseparably dependent on each other, whatever tends to render Philadelphia flourishing and active, sheds a beneficial influence on the state at large. To withdraw the offices of government from the city,” he continued, “may depress its trade and depopulate its streets, and thus afford a malignant pleasure to the enemies of a city, which, in generous exertions and liberal contributions during the war, has deserved the gratitude of the rest of the state, but can not otherwise advance their
interests than the decay of the head would promote the welfare of the members."

The conditions in the state in the period immediately before the Constitutional Convention was held, therefore, should not have been blamed entirely, if at all, upon the conservative environment of the city.

"The burthens of the public are already almost as grievous as can be borne," Civis pointed out, "and both the patience and purses of individuals nearly exhausted by the frequent visits of Collectors, but where the fruit of our expences has been the establishment of our liberty, patriotism has suppressed its complaints, and industry surrendered part of its earnings without a murmur. But who," Civis complained, "will resign his right to the overplus? Who will consent to a fresh load of taxes for other purposes than the Federal Contributions, or the general advantage of the state? Ridiculous," he exclaimed, "that the ancient seat of government shall be deserted, the public buildings, to which every owner of property in Pennsylvania may be said to have contributed, shall be sold at auction, the state put to a heavy charge for constructing sufficient edifices on a naked spot of ground, the seat of commerce from whence more applications to the administrators of government necessarily arise than from almost all the state besides, be abandoned in order that the Member from Westmoreland may not have quite so many miles to ride."

With this cutting remark Civis went on to say that "public service can never be rendered entirely compatible with private convenience. Whoever has accepted the confidential office of representing the people in the act of legislature," he thought, "should remember that if, on one side, he took it with its honors, he contracted, on the other, to support its inconveniences. And to seek to subject his constituents, already labouring under oppressive burthens, to the heavy expences proposed," Civis remarked, "merely with a view of shortening his own journies, or diminishing, in some degree, his own expences, if he went no farther, would be taking a dishonest and unfair advantage of the opportunities afforded by his trust. But when the proposal is considered in its true point of view," he wrote, "as a narrow, partial scheme of policy, by its injurious effects on the capital, pernicious to the commonwealth at large, who will hesitate to condemn it?"

Civis concluded, however, that the legislative battle was not over, because the measure had not yet been conclusively adopted.
"When a plan has been unexpectedly proposed in the House," he explained, "it is not unusual for the Members who have not had an opportunity to consider it maturely, to consent to the appointment of a Committee, or even to the second reading of a bill, in order that they may have time to deliberate on the propriety of the measure. Of the majority on this motion," he thought, "no doubt, many were only desirous to have a matter of so much importance considered again."

Civis believed that public opinion would thus finally dictate the course which the General Assembly would pursue in this present situation. He asked if it would not "therefore be proper for the Citizens to assemble, and to instruct their Representatives or address the House?" He explained that the "people of Philadelphia should not in reality be wanting to their own interests which were the interests of the state at large. The divisions of party and the topics of dissention," he demanded, "should now be laid aside: Positive instructions, and vigorous, but decent remonstrances should immediately be opposed to a plan, which would enfeeble and divide us at home, and render us contemptible to the whole Confederacy. The unanimous sense of a town-meeting would not be disregarded in the Assembly," he pointed out, "and by confirming those who have already withstood the motion, and reasoning with those who have not yet settled their opinion, we," the people of Philadelphia, "may deserve well of our fellow citizens, in preventing a plan which tends either to depopulate the capital or divide the state."

This last point was a shocking statement, and it was well emphasized one week later in The Pennsylvania Gazette. It was suggested that a certain resolution would be introduced in the General Assembly, if the committee's report for removing the seat of government to Harrisburg should be adopted by the House. A copy of the proposed motion was published, and three reasons were given for its necessity. Because the inhabitants of the western counties seemed to be "unfriendly to the peaceable government and commercial institutions of the city of Philadelphia, and to the agriculture and improvements of the adjacent counties," an adjustment was proposed. Besides this argument the conservatives also contended that these same inhabitants "neglected to pay such a proportion of their taxes, as are sufficient to defray the expenses of their Representatives in the General Assembly and Council of the state, and because of their distance from the city and adjacent counties they are necessarily ignorant of their true interests, and therefore give up
their judgments to the direction of a few designing men in the city of Philadelphia, who are opposed to the prosperity of the agriculture and commerce of the state." For these reasons, therefore, it was resolved that from and after an unspecified date "the said western counties should be separated from the city of Philadelphia, and from the old and improved counties of Pennsylvania; and that a new boundary between the state of Pennsylvania and the late western counties of the same" would have to be erected.  

The conservatives were marshaling their forces, and finally on Wednesday, March 21, 1787, in the General Assembly, George Clymer of Philadelphia offered the following resolution which was seconded by Gerardus Wynkoop of Bucks County:

Resolved, That the resolution directing a bill to be brought in, for removing the seat of government to the town of Harrisburg, be re-considered, in order that the committee may be discharged.

This motion was adopted by the House, and William Findley's attempt to move the seat of government to Harrisburg was effectively killed by a vote of 35 to 27. Again five members of the House who opposed removal were absent, but in the last three weeks six conservative members from the western part of the state had changed their attitude towards Philadelphia and now voted to discharge the committee. Emanuel Carpenter of Lancaster County, Michael Schmoyer, Henry Tyson, and Adam Eichelberger of York County, Joseph Powell of Bedford County, and Hugh Henry Brackenridge of Westmoreland County were the representatives who outmaneuvered the radicals. Michael Schmyster and Joseph Powell served on the very committee that they voted to discharge. According to the will of the House then, Thomas Mifflin dismissed the committee which had been appointed on March 3, 1787, and for almost eight years in the General Assembly from that time, any plans pertaining to the removal of the seat of government of the state of Pennsylvania were ignored.

On Thursday, March 29, 1787, the General Assembly adjourned, but the then current debate on the removal of the seat of government continued in the western counties. Hugh Henry Brackenridge of Pittsburgh, who had broken during his stay in Philadelphia more than once

11 The Pennsylvania Gazette, March 14, 1787.
12 Minutes of the Second Session of the Eleventh General Assembly, 171.
13 Ibid.
with his radical colleagues from Westmoreland County, James Barr and William Findley, wrote an address “To the INHABITANTS of the Western Country” which was published in \textit{The Pittsburgh Gazette} between April 21 and June 9, 1787. “Having returned from a service of two sessions,” he explained that he wanted to “take the earliest opportunity to state . . . the late transactions of the government, at least so far as they respect the Western Country.”\textsuperscript{14} The portion of his address which was published on Saturday, June 2, 1787, dealt exclusively with the move to remove the seat of government from Philadelphia. Hugh Henry Brackenridge wrote that he thought “it of moment to the people of the western country to know something particularly with respect to a motion made by William Findley during the last session.”

“The intention of making this motion,” he said, “was wholly unknown to me, and I had not thought a moment on the subject. However it was my usual way in these cases, to let a thing go forward. If it was wrong it could be checked in a future stage of its progress. A short time afterwards,” he continued, “a motion was made by George Clymer. . . . This motion was equally without any previous knowledge by me. But I had reflected a little on the subject, and had seen the inexpediency of the motion of Findley. I therefore gave my voice to reconsider it.”

Hugh Henry Brackenridge then listed seven reasons which supposedly had influenced his change of vote on the measure; however, he admitted that the theory which he advanced had mostly occurred to him since March 21, 1787. His entire report was analysed by William Findlay in \textit{The Pittsburgh Gazette} between July 21 and September 22, 1787. William Findley defended his motion for the removal of the seat of government. This part of his “OBSERVATIONS upon the Address of H. H. BRACKENRIDGE, Esq.: to the Inhabitants of the Western Country” was published on two consecutive Saturdays, August 25 and September 1, 1787, by John Scull and John Boyd. William Findley explained thoroughly the proceedings that took place in the General Assembly on his motion.

“When I made the motion for the removal of the seat of government,” he wrote, “I shortly explained the design and propriety thereof, and the question was taken without any reply being made or opposition given, therefore Mr. Brackenridge had not a call to support it on the floor, but he gave his vote for it with the greatest apparent cheerfulness;
I saw the smile of approbation on his countenance, and rejoiced; when it was brought up again and dismissed, he took the floor, and supported it; he urged that it ought to be published for consideration, and go before the people; but a certain city member, who happened to have been out when the first vote was taken, and to whose opinion he doubtless pays a great respect, having now rose against it, Mr Brackenridge rose again, and changing sides manfully, both argued and voted against it."

The representative from Philadelphia who had influenced Hugh Henry Brackenridge was Robert Morris, the leader of the conservatives and the financial interests in the state. After relating this incident William Findley interjected that "Mr. Whitehill (who otherwise, on this occasion, gave a silent vote) rose, and asked the house, what weight could be paid to a member's word or sentiments, who would say and unsay, argue for and against the same subject almost in the same instant."\(^{15}\)

William Findley assumed full responsibility for his motion to remove the seat of government from Philadelphia. He admitted that during the first session of the present General Assembly he had prevented another western member from making a similar motion which would also have provided for an orderly removal. When he was given the original copy of that motion for his perusal, William Findley wrote that he simply "neglected to return it until too late in the session."\(^{16}\)

Since the radicals or even the western sectionalists did not really possess enough votes to move the seat of government, they had to wait for the right moment. It appears then that William Findley wanted to pick this time himself and, of course, was initially successful in his choice. Even Robert Whitehill of Cumberland County, who was equally powerful in the radical opposition, knew nothing in advance of William Findley's plan which unfolded in the second session of the Eleventh General Assembly.

"Now the truth is," wrote William Findley, "that Mr. Whitehill nor any other in the neighborhood of Harrisburgh did neither know of my preparing that motion, nor advise to it, and had they known, they would have advised against it, though they could not with propriety vote against what they knew to be right: it is well known that Lebanon interest is opposed to Harrisburgh, and making constant endeavors to

\(^{15}\) Ibid., September 1, 1787.
\(^{16}\) Ibid., August 25, 1787.
have the seat of justice removed from it; those, therefore, who are interested in Harrisburgh, are afraid of provoking Philadelphia to assist in crushing their infant town, which hath grown with such rapidity.”

Although Robert Whitehill, the son-in-law of John Harris, was supposedly cautious towards a removal which he probably considered inevitable, William Findley was bitter that the western representatives who were conservatives had deserted his motion in the General Assembly, when the city members decided not to wait until the bill had been brought in before showing their strength by dismissing the committee. He felt that their reason was obvious, because “it had been urged both in conversation and the public prints,” that the removal “would require 100,000 l. of a direct tax.”

“This was a mere bug-bear,” William Findley said, “and if the bill had been brought in it would have vanished of course, for not to say that it would not have required the fourth part of that sum. The bill would have gone to lay the statehouse yard at Philadelphia, out into lots, and paid the expence of erecting the new building out of the sale of those lots; the statehouse yard is the property of the public, and would sell for much more than would pay for erecting a new statehouse, and the old statehouse in Philadelphia,” Independence Hall, “would still remain the property of government; much of this ground hath been already bestowed for different uses in the city, and probably in a short time it may be all given away for nothing; this bill would have secured it by appropriating it to a special use, even though it had not been applied to that use for a long time to come.”

Here William Findley conceded that a compromise or surely a delay would have been necessary even if the House had considered the committee’s bill.

“A great majority of the members are in favor of a removal,” he pointed out, “but are not agreed upon the place to which they would remove; before the committee was dismissed, I was requested to amend my motion by inserting Lancaster instead of Harrisburgh, and was assured by doing so, there would be votes enough to carry it through the house; and I was also requested to insert Reading, in Berks county, with the same assurance of success. This division of interest and competition of places,” he concluded resignedly, “is what will keep” the seat of government “for some time at Philadelphia, and not the opinion of the

17 Ibid., September 1, 1787.
majority that it ought to be there.\textsuperscript{18}

William Findley, at first, had considered the principles of his motion orderly and effective and had condemned the motion of 1784, which had provided for the removal of the seat of government to Lancaster by a hasty adjournment. He had expected public opinion to prepare the way for the removal after his resolution had passed the House. He finally, however, realized that the very mention of the erection of public buildings at Harrisburg had created a necessary space of time which produced a split in the ranks of the radicals. While his own party argued over which town would receive the benefit of the £100,000 which many, including Hugh Henry Brackenridge, had estimated would be the cost of establishing the new seat of government, the conservatives were able to strengthen and consolidate their forces. William Findley's element of surprise had been extended, and for that reason it was not until 1795 that the westerners were again able to attempt another concerted move to remove the seat of government of Pennsylvania from Philadelphia.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., August 25, 1787.