

Andrew Ellicott

Surveyor of the Capital of Our Nation

By M. LUTHER HEISEY

Surveyor of the Capital, Washington, D. C., February, 1791 to July, 1793.
A resident of Lancaster, Pa., from October, 1801 to November, 1813.
"To this place [Lancaster] I feel more attached than to any other."—A. E.
Secretary of the Land Office of Pennsylvania, October 3, 1801, to April
4, 1809.

Trustee of Franklin College, Lancaster, Pa., June 17, 1813.

A booklet, called the "Development of the United States Capital," issued as House Document, No. 35, of the 71st Congress, 1st Session, 1929, completely ignores, except for the survey on pp. 10-11, the name of Andrew Ellicott, but again and again mentions that of Major Pierre Charles L'Enfant. It is but another instance where the qualifications of an alien are recognized, and the able talents of a native son are ignored or underrated.

Our nation celebrates this year the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the permanent site for the capital at Washington, D. C. The City of Lancaster can claim a deep interest in the event due to the fact that a citizen, Andrew Ellicott, was the chief surveyor of the city on the Potomac. We know that you will hear loud and fulsome praise of an alien as the planner, and unless you are conversant with the facts you will be led to believe that Major L'Enfant was the sole surveyor and planner of the City Beautiful. But be it known that the Major, after a year's work, quit in a huff, taking all plans with him. So it devolved upon Andrew Ellicott (whose residence in Lancaster for twelve years gives us a claim to him as a citizen) to re-draw plans, and make surveys for the completion of the city. Why not frankly admit it was Ellicott's city and not L'Enfant's? The Major, himself, if he could gaze from his tomb on Arlington's hill would accord most credit to Ellicott.

Although Major L'Enfant held his position until March 6, 1792, as early as November 20, 1791, Thomas Jefferson, then Secretary of State, writes to President Washington, that as "it has been found impracticable to employ Major L'Enfant, about the federal City in that degree of subordination which was lawful and proper he has been notified that his services are at an end. . . . Ellicott is to go on and finish laying off the plan on the ground and surveying and plotting the district."¹

So the very next day Jefferson writes to Ellicott concerning an area to be "first laid off," so that "an extensive sale of lots in Washington should take place as soon as possible." He continues, "The object of the present [letter] is to ask your private opinion of the earliest time at which this portion of the work can be completed? which I beg the favor of you to communicate to me by letter. In order that the sale may not be delayed by the engravers it is hoped that by communicating what is executed from time to time, the engraver can nearly keep pace with you."²

Major L'Enfant refused to allow the use of any of his plans after his dismissal³ so Ellicott "then drew a new plan, made from his knowledge of the now unavailable plan of Major L'Enfant; from materials which he had in his own possession, and from his actual surveys of the ground. This plan was adopted and engraved."⁴

In a splendid commendation of the work of Ellicott, Isaac Briggs, who assisted in the surveys of the District, concludes thus: "I do not believe it possible for a man, aiming solely at the augmentation of his private fortune, or the attainment of his reigning wish, to be more indefatigable in the purpose, or constant in his

¹ "A Sketch of the Life of Major Andrew Ellicott," by Mrs. Sally Kennedy Alexander (a great-granddaughter of Ellicott), April, 1896, in *Records of the Columbia Historical Society*, Washington, D. C., vol. 2, p. 176.

² *Ibid.*

³ A trait of L'Enfant's personality is revealed by the charges he made for his work. It shows the exalted opinion he held of his professional ability and services. President Washington thought the compensation should be no more than \$2,500 or \$3,000. The Commissioners had paid him \$600 and expenses, which they considered adequate, but later made an additional offer of 500 guineas and a lot in the District. This L'Enfant refused. He demanded \$95,500. The claim was finally settled in 1810 by the payment of \$1,314.20. See *ibid.*, vol. 2, pp. 113, 114.

⁴ This and following quotations were taken from the work of Catharine Van Cortlandt Mathews, "Andrew Ellicott: His Life and Letters," New York, 1908. Copy in Fackenthal Library.

exertions, than Major Ellicott always appeared to me to be in the faithful execution of the public business committed to his charge."

Andrew, son of Joseph Ellicott, was born in Bucks County, January 24, 1754, and became famous as a surveyor, astronomer, scientist and mathematician. While yet a young man, he and his father constructed a wonderful musical clock. On December 31, 1775, Andrew was married to Sarah Brown, at Newtown, Bucks County. All were Quakers. He went with his bride to Ellicott's Mills, a town his father had built ten miles west of Baltimore. Here, in 1777, he became major of the Elk Ridge Battalion of the Maryland Militia, and by 1780-81 we find him printing almanacs with true astronomical calculations.

In November, 1784, he was given the degree of Master of Arts by the University of Williamsburgh. In 1786, he was living in Baltimore, where he taught mathematics at the Baltimore Academy, and represented the city in the Maryland Legislature.

His Work As Surveyor

By his own admission, he was a "self-made" man, for he says, "I have without the Interest of Friends or Relations or my own application been appointed to various posts." By appointment in 1785 for the State of Virginia, he was one of the commissioners to run the line between that state and Pennsylvania (the extension of the Mason and Dixon Line). With him were Rittenhouse, Peters and Nevill, and as an associate to these commissioners a youth of but nineteen years, Benjamin S. Barton, son of the Rev. Thomas Barton, both of Lancaster. Young Barton was a qualified assistant, with a good knowledge of the work required. About this time Ellicott was asked by Congress to assist in the division of new states.

The years 1796-1800 were spent in surveys along the Spanish possession, East and West Florida. While at Natchez, he noticed that the Mississippi River, normally a half-mile wide, spreads during the floods in the summer months to a width of thirty-seven miles.

On July 6, 1811, he, with his son Joseph, set sail from Philadelphia, for North Carolina and Georgia, where for nearly a year he was busy surveying. It was a pleasant farewell, for his two youngest daughters, Nancy and Rachel, had come from Lancaster to bid him good-bye.

Working For Pennsylvania

Ellicott was employed on many occasions by the Keystone State. In 1786, he surveyed the boundary of Pennsylvania and New York from the Delaware River to the ninetieth milestone, completing the work to Lake Erie in the following year.

On May 11, 1787, he leaves Philadelphia for the northwestern part of the state, no doubt reaching Lancaster on the next day



ANDREW ELLICOTT

for what was probably his first visit to this large inland city. Later, writing from Venango, he penned these prophetic words: "The United States of America have more natural advantages than any other Governments, or Powers in the World, and if they judiciously turn to their own account those advantages which they have from the nature of the Country, they must become both rich and powerful."

In 1788, by direction of the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania, Major Ellicott made a survey of the islands in the rivers Allegheny and Ohio, within the bounds of that state. In the following year, he moved with his family to Philadelphia, residing at 16 North Sixth Street, and also during the year surveyed the tract of land on Lake Erie, purchased by Pennsylvania from Congress by Act of September 4, 1788.

In October, 1790, he finished the surveying of the western boundary of New York near Presque Isle (Erie). This boundary between Pennsylvania and New York was reckoned from a line extended directly south from the extreme western tip of Lake Ontario, through Lake Erie, which brings it some miles east of Erie City.

Governor Thomas Mifflin "in the name and by the authority of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania" appointed Ellicott, together with General Wm. Irvine and John Wilkins, Jr., commissioners for viewing and laying out, on the most "eligible" ground, a road from Reading to Presque Isle. Much of two years was spent in building roads and planning towns in the northwestern part of the state.

He was appointed Secretary of the Land Office of Pennsylvania by Governor Thomas McKean of that state. To hold this office it was necessary that he should reside at Lancaster, Pennsylvania, the site of the state capital. This he and his family found to be a pleasant home. "The salary was good, and the duties were light, leaving him abundant leisure for the pursuit of his astronomical and scientific researches, and for the large correspondence dealing with matters scientific, political, or personal, which was one of his chief pleasures." He held this office from October 3, 1801, to April 4, 1809.

In 1808 Ellicott had the honor to be elected a member of the National Institute of France. But political changes were taking place in his own state, where Governor McKean was succeeded by Simon Snyder, with whose views Ellicott was at variance, causing his dismissal from the Land Office. His friends resented the action of Governor Snyder, and they with Ellicott wrote letters to Editor William Hamilton, of the *Lancaster Journal*. The published letters, of which the following is a good specimen, reveals the attitude of some on political questions of their day.

Mr. Hamilton,

The following letter to governor Snyder, except the first paragraph, which was substituted for another, was drawn up some time ago, for the purpose of accompanying a resignation of the office of secretary of the land office of this commonwealth, which I had determined to present to him; but upon communicating this design to some of my friends, among whom were several democratic gentlemen, I was induced to abandon that idea, from an opinion *unequivocally expressed*, that if a general removal was determined on, it was more honorable to be *dismissed by governor Snyder*, in the present state of things, than to resign, and leave him responsible for the consequences, as it had now become obvious, *that with him principle was out of the question*, and that he views his *political opponents* in the light of *highway-men*, who have endeavored to deprive him of his lawful heritage. The letter as it now appears, was handed to the governor immediately after my removal.

Andrew Ellicott.

(Herewith is a copy of Ellicott's letter, but not in its entirety, as the original filled an entire newspaper column.)

Sir,

LANCASTER.

My removal from the office of the secretary of the land office of the commonwealth, has this moment been announced. In this event, I have nothing to lay to my charge, and retire with a self-approving conscience, which I value much more highly than I should all the executive patronage you possess.

I presume, that I have been guilty of the same crime for which you have already dismissed some of the best officers in this commonwealth;—that crime was, in not taking an active part in favor of your election, and I feel conscious, that I am entitled to no greater favors than other revolutionary characters, who have felt the weight of your executive powers.—But sir, I have always done you equal justice with the other candidates, and when the defects of your education, of your literary, and other acquirements were called into question, I have shewn your letters, filed in the land-office to rebut, so far as I am able, that argument. At the same time, I candidly confess, that I did think, and my opinion is not yet altered, that either of the other candidates were better qualified to administer the government of this commonwealth than yourself.—I should have preferred either Mr. Lane, Mr. Weaver, or Mr. Maclay. The voice of the majority of our citizens, however being in your favor it is the duty of every member of the community to respect it, and treat you as the first magistrate of an enlightened, and powerful state — On this point I am convinced you have no reason to complain of me.

The constitution of this commonwealth imperiously calls upon its citizens every three years to elect a governor or chief magistrate. In the expression of that will, it is to be expected from the imperfection of human nature, that there will be a diversity of sentiment: but if this diversity of sentiment must render every person in the minority unworthy of public confidence, there is an end to the freedom of opinion, and consequently of liberty.—On this subject Mr. Jefferson, in his inaugural address, delivered the 4th of March, 1801, has

given his opinion in the following words:—"All too will bear in mind this sacred principle, that though the will of the majority is in all cases to prevail, that will to be righteous, must be reasonable, that the minority possess their equal rights, which equal laws must protect, and to violate would be oppression."—And again: "Let us reflect, that having banished from our land that religious *intolerance*, under which mankind so long bled and suffered, we have gained little, if we countenance A POLITICAL INTOLERANCE, AS DESPOTIC, AS WICKED, AND CAPABLE OF AS BITTER AND BLOODY PERSECUTIONS." These sentiments will add lustre to the character of Mr. Jefferson when his aberrations are forgotten. It is certain, that when political persecution, and intolerance, enter one door, liberty flies out at the other.

In making removals and appointments, every enlightened, and patriotic executive, will consult the public good in preference to the gratification of his private feelings, and party resentments, which too often betray a narrow, contracted, and illiberal mind;—and that executive who violates this rule, commits a crime against his country.

So far as your administration may appear to me, to be the result of true patriotism, you may rely upon my most decided support, but on the contrary, when it appears tinged with party prejudice and political inquisitorial persecution, you will find me in the foremost ranks of your opponents.

Wishing that your administration may be equally honorable to yourself, and our common country.

I am with due respect,

Your humble servant,

ANDREW ELLICOTT.

Simon Snyder, governor of the
commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

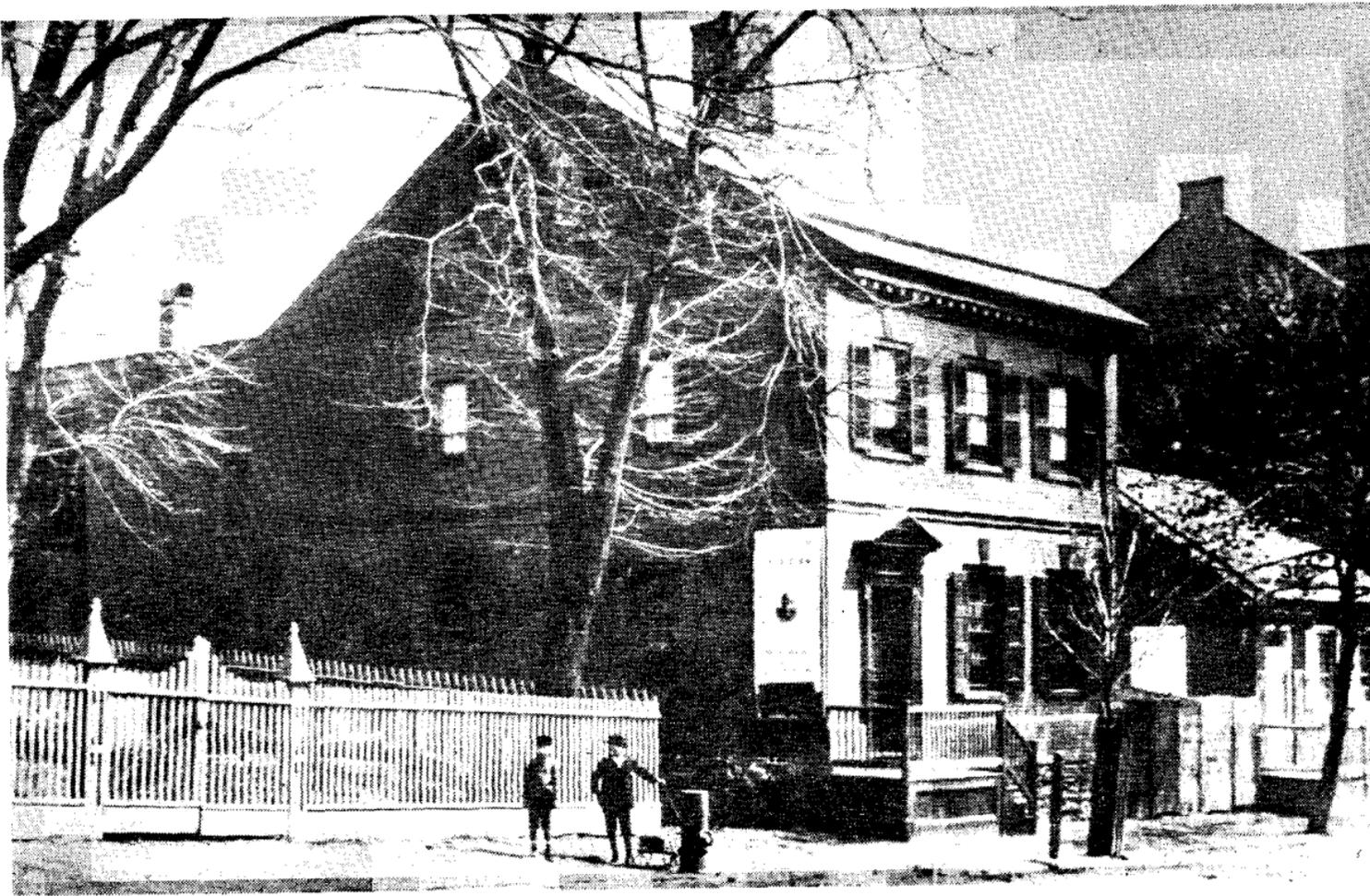
—*Lancaster Journal*, April 7, 1809.

Another communication read:

"Mr. Ellicott of this commonwealth, who has been more extensively concerned in the scientific determination of state and national boundaries, than any other person who has ever lived, we hear is appointed to settle the long contested boundary between Georgia and North Carolina.—From this appointment it appears, that mathematical and astronomical talents, are not estimated in the other states, by the same rule as they are in this, where they depend wholly upon the opinion the person intertains of the great *knowledge*, *erudition*, and *judgment*, of Simon Snyder.—It is likewise worthy of remark, that this Simon Snyder, in conjunction with our *enlightened* legislature, interposed their authority, and put a stop to an important course of astronomical observations, by depriving Mr. Ellicott of the use of the state telescope! Does not this savour a little of the old *blue-laws* of New-England?"—*Lancaster Journal*, April 19, 1811.

Lancaster a Likeable Location

Of his Lancaster home Ellicott says, "To this place, from my fine garden, and young thriving fine fruit trees, and grape vines,



HOME OF ANDREW ELLICOTT

all the work of my own hands, I feel more attached than to any other place.—Grafting and inoculation I think I have brought to the highest degree of perfection.—This year I had a peach tree loaded with peaches only three years old from the stone, and grafted, and another but two years from the stone and inoculated. They were certainly the finest peaches produced in this place this season.” His home was located at the southeast corner of Prince and Marion streets, and still stands.

In 1803 he received a visit from Captain Meriwether Lewis, who when it was “proposed to send an exploring party to trace the Missouri to its source, to cross the Highlands and follow the best water communication which offered itself from thence to the Pacific Ocean, immediately renewed his solicitations to have the direction of the party. While attending at *Lancaster* to the fabrication of the arms with which he chose that his men should be provided, he had the benefit of daily communication with Mr. Andrew Ellicott, whose experience in astronomical observation and practice of it in the woods, enabled him to apprise Captain Lewis of the wants and difficulties he would encounter and of the substitutes and resources offered by a woodland and uninhabited country.”⁵

It is no doubt a fact that the advice and counsel given to the younger explorer by Ellicott had much to do with the success of the explorations.

In 1804 a distinguished scientist visited Lancaster. Returning from a five-year intensive study of Natural History in South America, Baron Alexander Von Humboldt found a congenial spot in Lancaster, as he shared his time with such noted local scientists and scholars as the Rev. Henry E. Muhlenberg and Andrew Ellicott. To the Baron, Major Ellicott gave the following note of introduction to Aaron Burr, vice-president of the United States:

Lancaster, June 11, 1804.

“Dear Sir

I beg leave to introduce to your acquaintance and civilities the bearer, the Baron De Humboldt:—He is now on his return to Europe from an interesting tour thro south America.—You will find him a gentleman of informa-

⁵ Meriwether Lewis while in Lancaster made the acquaintance not alone of Andrew Ellicott but among others of the Rev. Henry E. Muhlenberg, botanist, who later received seeds from the Lewis-Clark Expedition, no doubt through the solicitations of Muhlenberg at the time of Lewis' visit to Lancaster. See *Bartonia*, the Journal of the Philadelphia Botanical Club, No. 25, pp. 41, 55 and 61; 1949.

tion, science, and real worth.—Your attention to him will confer a particular favour on your

real friend, and

Hbl Servt

Andw. Ellicott.”

Ellicott was not forgotten, for writing from Philadelphia, June 27, 1804, to the Rev. Henry Ernest Muhlenberg, of Lancaster, Friedrich Heinrich Alexander, Baron Von Humboldt, asked him to “Remember me to the good Ellicott and Mr. William Barton [a brother of the Benjamin above mentioned].”

Ellicott, by his interest in science and education, was appointed an official Visitor to the Franklin Academy at Lancaster in 1807; six years later, he succeeded General Daniel Hiester as trustee of Franklin College.

While his family were Quakers, Andrew was a member of the first Board of Trustees of the First Methodist Church in Lancaster, located on East Walnut Street, the Board receiving a deed of conveyance for the church lot on February 8, 1810.

Among His Friends

In 1785 we find him in Philadelphia, drinking tea “With Gen. Hand and Col. Harmer at my old Friends Mary Jenkins,” and on Sunday, April 23, 1786, he spent the greater part “of this day at Wm. Bartons Esqr. He is a most judicious Gentle man and Valuable Citizen.” He tells us that Dr. Rush paid him a two-hour visit on a day in January, 1801.

He was acquainted with William Henry, of Lancaster, who discussed with him the practicability and possibility of a steamboat making headway against wind and tide. Before that time, in 1785, Henry had permitted Fitch to examine his perfected models of steamboats.

Ellicott made friends and befriended others. It was through his intervention that the president of the United States in 1799 granted a free pardon to David Bradford, the leader of the so-called Whiskey Insurrection.

Member American Philosophical Society

While living in Baltimore he was elected a member of the Society on January 20, 1786. The certificate of membership was signed by Benjamin Franklin, president, and John Ewing, William White and Samuel Vaughn, vice-presidents. Three years later he

removed to Philadelphia, and became an intimate friend of Benjamin Franklin, so that the latter could write:

"I do hereby certify whom it may concern, that I have long known Mr. Andrew Ellicott as a Man of Science; and while I was in the Executive Council have had frequent Occasions, in the Course of Public Business, of being acquainted with his Abilities in Geographical Operations of the most important kind, which were performed by him with the greatest Scientific Accuracy. Given at Philadelphia this 10th Day of August, 1789.

B. FRANKLIN

late President of the State of Pennsylvania."

His good friend, Dr. Rush, took care of him professionally, for though often living in swamps and marshes, and frequently exposed to rains and night dews, his good health was due "to the excellence of some pills put up for him by Dr. Rush of Philadelphia before he left home." He tells us "each of these pills was composed of two grains of calomel, with $\frac{1}{2}$ a grain of gambage, combined by means of a little soap." The pills were efficacious, but after the supply was exhausted, he became ill.

Papers written by Ellicott were read before the Society in 1802, 1803, 1805 and 1806. They dealt with astronomical observations made at Lancaster, whose latitude he gave as $40^{\circ} 2' 39''$.

Ellicott's *Journal* of his work and experiences on the Florida boundary survey was received by his associates of the Society "with warm praise for both its literary and scientific value; Dr. Benjamin Rush saying it could not fail of placing his name with those of Franklin and Rittenhouse; and that the public recognized its interest and worth is shown by the fact that it was twice reprinted."

His work was recognized and appreciated by the Society which honored him by the appointment to high office. In 1801 he states that "as Vice President of the Philosophical Society, I took the chair in that learned body, so often occupied by [Benjamin] Franklin, [David] Rittenhouse and [Thomas] Jefferson." We detect a note of pride in that statement as he is given the distinction to rank with men of the caliber of those three.

Small wonder it was, that "his good friend," Thomas Jefferson, offered him the post of Surveyor-General of the United States. He calls this offer one of the most flattering and honorable incidents of his life. However, the offer was declined. Yet three months later he accepts the position in the Land Office at Lancaster.

Leaving Lancaster

Except for political differences with those in high places, his

I have the honor
to acknowledge the receipt of
the sum of \$100.00
from the estate of
Mrs. J. W. H. H. H. H.
who departed this life
August 1890.
aged 66 years.

stay in Lancaster was most pleasant. His duties in the Land Office were not heavy; here he had time to pursue his studies in the field of science; here nine of his children grew to maturity; and four of them married before the family left our borough.

But a call to the chair of Professor of Mathematics, and as acting head or president of the institution, drew him to the West Point Military Academy,⁶ and so we find him and his family reluctantly taking leave of Lancaster, and moving to the banks of the Hudson in November, 1813. After seven successful years at the Academy, life for him came to a close on August 28, 1820. He lies buried in the cemetery at West Point.⁷

Let me close this paper with a comparison. Ellicott in 1791 found nothing desirable about the proposed site of the nation's capital for he said, "This country intended for the Permanent Residence of Congress, bears no more proportion to the Country about Philadelphia, and German-Town, for either wealth or fertility, than a Crane does to a stall-fed Ox!" But the years have brought improvements to the place; now it is a matter of pride to all citizens having the good fortune to view this city of magnificent distances, broad avenues, stately trees and buildings of grandeur.

Here, we hold no regrets that the Lancaster of 1789 was not considered as a desirable site for the capital, after an invitation had been extended and the merits of the place explained by none other than our own General Edward Hand. Hear our modest forefathers declare themselves: "As an Inland Town we do not perceive ourselves inferior to any within the Dominion of the United States." Our pride lingers; we ask no Federal loans for schools or other public works. We are sufficient unto ourselves; content to be the capital of a prosperous and proficient American agriculture; satisfied to stand among the fields of abundant yield of corn, wheat, tobacco, tomatoes and potatoes; content with, at times, a hybrid language, with a homespun culture, with enduring and useful arts and crafts.

⁶ A letter from the War Department, dated July 7, 1812, notified L'Enfant that he had been appointed Professor of the Art of Engineering in the Military Academy. He made this notation on the bottom of the letter: "Unaccepted but not rejected—P. C. L'Ent."

⁷ Office of the Quartermaster, West Point, New York: "Andrew Ellicott was buried in the Post Cemetery in Section XXX, Row N, Grave No. 546. . . . The date of death listed on our records is 9 August 1820."

So we exclaim, in the most impressive words Andrew Ellicott ever uttered:

“To this place . . . I feel more attached than to any other place!”

CHILDREN OF ANDREW ELLICOTT AND SARAH BROWN:

A son who died at Ellicott's Mills, March, 1785.

Jane married Thomas R. Kennedy, July 28, 1802 (Trinity Lutheran Church records, Lancaster Pa):

A son, Joseph C. G. Kennedy, LL. D.

Mary married N. C. Griffiths, 1801.

Sarah married Henry Baldwin, 1805.

(These three, with Andrew, were married before they left Lancaster.)

Letitia married John Bliss, 1819.

Ann married D. B. Douglass, 1815:

A son, the Rev. Malcolm Douglass, D. D.

(The above two daughters were married while at West Point.)

Andrew married Sarah Williams, 1801.

Joseph married Eliza Sherman, 1823.

John married Helen Griffiths, 1822.

Rachel married T. H. Woodruff.

HOME OF ANDREW ELLICOTT

See page 8.

This house stands at the southeast corner of Prince and Marion streets; the small building on the right was occupied as an office by Mr. Ellicott. It was built before 1785 by Gottlieb Sehner, Jr., and was occupied successively by Andrew Kaufman, Marcus D. Holbrook, General James L. Reynolds and John A. Hiestand; Colonel Rutherford resided here in 1896. Mr. Kaufman was Justice of the Peace, 1799-1811; state representative, 1837. Mr. Holbrook was owner and publisher of the Intelligencer, 1845-48, and of the Lancastrian, 1848-52. James L. Reynolds was a brother of General John Fulton Reynolds. Mr. Hiestand was state representative, 1852-53, 1856; senator, 1860; publisher of the Examiner, 1858; the Union, 1863-64; and the Express, 1876.