

The Battle of the Roses: The "First Capital" Controversy

By John Ward Willson Loose

Lancaster's neighbor across the Susquehanna River—the city of York—delights in proclaiming itself the "First Capital of the United States of America." So far has this bit of boosterism gone that "First Capital" has been applied to a local savings bank, a chapter of Phi Delta Kappa professional education fraternity, and the labels of a well-known beer brewed in Pottsville. This would be amusing and hardly worthy of serious notice if it were not accepted as fact by many students.

From the days of the First Continental Congress to the present time, there have been nine places that have hosted the government of the newly-independent states under the Continental Congress, the Articles of Confederation, and the present Constitution. They are:

First Continental Congress

Philadelphia, Pa.	5 September 1774 to 24 October 1774 (Under the English Crown)
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Second Continental Congress

Philadelphia, Pa.	10 May 1775 to 12 December 1776
Baltimore, Md.	20 December 1776 to 27 February 1777
Philadelphia, Pa.	4 March 1777 to 18 September 1777
Lancaster, Pa.	27 September 1777
York, Pa.	30 September 1777 to 27 June 1778
Philadelphia, Pa.	2 July 1778 to 1 March 1781

Congress Under the Articles of Confederation

Philadelphia, Pa.	1 March 1781 to 21 June 1783
Princeton, N.J.	30 June 1783 to 4 November 1783
Annapolis, Md.	26 November 1783 to 19 August 1784
Trenton, N.J.	1 November 1784 to 24 December 1784
New York, N.Y.	11 January 1785 to autumn 1788

Congress Under the Constitution

New York, N.Y.	4 March 1789 to 12 August 1790
Philadelphia, Pa.	6 December 1790 to 14 May 1800
Washington, D.C.	Since 17 November 1800

As the British troops advanced upon Philadelphia, the Continental Congress resolved to leave Philadelphia and meet at Lancaster, which they did on 27 September 1777. Their paths thither took a northern route, arching through Berks and Northampton counties to avoid any British patrols that might be lurking in central Chester County. Upon reaching Lancaster, members of the Congress discovered the town “bursting at the seams,” and there would be no lodgings or places to conduct the business of government. The Pennsylvania state government had arrived earlier from Philadelphia, and had established its various offices in Lancaster. The county courthouse had been appropriated for the state legislature, and all Lancaster’s inns were filled. Moreover, the town was jammed with militia arriving from the South, refugees coming from Philadelphia, and local militia assigned to guard the over-crowded prisoner-of-war barracks. Clearly, the Congress could meet for one day only, and then move on to York, which had a courthouse in which they could assemble for the duration of the British occupation of Philadelphia. Although it has been traditional to say Congress went to York to be farther away from the British, the fact is that Lancaster had no room for the Congress. Lancaster with its important weapon-manufacturing and war-provisioning activities should have been a target of the invaders, but the British made no move towards Lancaster. The state government felt safe in Lancaster and remained there throughout the British occupation of Philadelphia. (From 1799 to 1812 the state government made Lancaster its capital the second time.)

Our York neighbors argue that their town should be called the “First Capital” because the Articles of Confederation were adopted by Congress on 15 November 1777 while it sat in York. What seems to be overlooked in that argument is that the Articles of Confederation did not become operative until *all* thirteen states ratified the Articles—and that did not occur until 1 March 1781, long after Congress had left York.

“Ah, but this nation was not the United States of America prior to the action of Congress in York in November 1777,” say our neighbors. Using the

logic of the York people, then, we were not the United States of America until 1781. But let us refer back to the *Journals* of Congress. On 4 June 1777, a resolution of the Board of War stated "Whereas Congress did on the 16th day of September in the year 1776 resolve, that the legislative powers of each of the United States should appoint all the Officers . . ." In the same resolution is the statement that "every Officer in the Army of the United States, under the rank of a Brigadier General . . ." On 11 June 1777 the Congressional Committee on the Treasury stated "Whereas, by the oppressive Councils and hostile operations of the British King and Parliament, the United States of America, at a time when they were totally unprovided with Fleets or Armies . . ." On 24 July 1777 Congress resolved "That it be recommended to the executive authorities of each of the United States, to divide their states into districts. . . ." The use of the term United States and United States of America was frequent in the state papers of the Continental Congress long before Congress moved to York. We have no reason to think the term United States of America sprang fully-developed from the brain of Congress sitting in York. Abundant evidence proves the use of United States of America to have had currency prior to the flight from Philadelphia.

If history is to be accurate and historians are to be intellectually honest, we can say only that Congress adopted the Articles of Confederation while sitting at York, and the Articles became effective in 1781 while Congress was sitting in Philadelphia. Therefore the only place that has the right to call itself the "First Capital of the United States of America" is Philadelphia—site of the First Continental Congress and site of the first Congress under the Articles of Confederation.

York, like Lancaster, has a glorious heritage. It has played important roles in the history of our commonwealth and nation. Let all communities, large and small, ancient and new, take pride in their legitimate accomplishments without fabricating spurious monuments.

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