

Was there ever a Serious Idea of Locating the Capital of the Country on the Susquehanna?

“On the 7th of March, 1789, Jasper Yeates, who was a prominent jurist of Pennsylvania, resident in Lancaster, sent to the Federal Congress, on behalf of the corporation of Lancaster a lengthy communication setting forth reasons why Lancaster should be selected as the permanent place of residence for the Federal Congress. The original of this paper is in the possession of D. McN. Stauffer, of New York, and it was published in the *Lancaster Intelligencer* December 29, 1886, as part of an address by Mr. Honsel before the Lancaster Board of Trade. The argument upon the selection of a site for the Federal capital began in the Federal House on September 3, 1789, and was, according to McMaster, “one of the longest and most acrimonious the members had yet engaged in.” Every one of the fifty-nine had something to say; and, though the eastern members were indisposed to consider the subject, being driven to it, they caucused with the representatives from the Middle States, and concluded that the capital, keeping close to the centre of population, wealth and territory, and with easy connections with the Atlantic and Ohio river, should be located at least somewhere on the east bank of the Susquehanna. When Lee challenged the advocates of this plan to name a place meeting these requirements, it was then the claims of our own Columbia were presented. Says the historian:

“Hartley took him at his word and answered him. Wright’s Ferry was such a

town. It stood upon the east bank some thirty-five miles from sea water. As for the Susquehanna, so great was the volume of its waters that ships could at any time of year sail up it to the waters of Otsego lake. Three fine rivers ran into it from the north, the west and the south. The Tioga was navigable for a great distance, and was connected by an easy portage with the Genessee, which emptied into Lake Ontario. The Juniata nearly connected with the Kiskiminetas, and that with the Ohio. A short land-carriage joined the head of the west branch with the Allegheny, which gave easy connections with the frontier towns of Kentucky. As to the town, it was no mean place. But ten miles separated Wright's Ferry from the greatest city of America. The climate was salubrious. The soil and the river yielded plentifully. If the honorable gentleman was disposed to give attention to a dish of fish he could find none finer than could be drawn from the waters of the Susquehanna. 'Then, why not,' said Lee, 'go at once to Yorktown?' Why fix on the banks of a swift river when it is possible to occupy the shores of Codorus creek?'

"He was assured by Goodhue that the Susquehanna was much to be preferred. There was the centre of territory. The centre of population, it was true, lay to the northward. But the eastern members were ready from a spirit of conciliation to let that pass. They well knew that the centre of population would not change for ages, and that when it did the movement would be to the eastward, not to the south; to the manufacturing, not to the agricultural States."

The passionate southerners protested, and there was much mind measuring of the relative distances of points north and south, east and west to Wright's Ferry.

Peach Bottom was even named as a compromise. The proposition to appoint a commission to select a spot on the banks of the Susquehanna prevailed by 28 to 21 after days of ill-natured debate. The Senate amended the bill and made the location one mile from Philadelphia. The House sullenly concurred and adjourned. It was nearly a year later that the vote was reconsidered and the capital site fixed on the Potomac.

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