

LETTERS OF THE CONTINENTAL CONGRESS IN LANCASTER

By William Frederic Worner

It was shortly after the defeat of the American army at Brandywine, in September, 1777, that the Continental Congress, as noble a legislative body as the world had ever seen, adjourned from Independence Hall in Philadelphia, to meet in Lancaster, Pa. To prevent them from being captured by the British, the governmental documents and the small amount of money then in the treasury, were sent to Bethlehem in wagons, carefully guarded by troops. Shortly after midnight, September 18th, or, more correctly, very early on morning of Friday the 19th, some of the members of the Continental Congress started on horseback for Bethlehem. They passed through Bristol, Trenton and Easton, and arrived in Bethlehem on the 22nd, where a brief stop was made. They then passed through Reading to Lancaster, where at least one of the members, Elbridge Gerry, probably accompanied by others, arrived on Wednesday the 24th. Christopher Marshall, in his diary, under date of Thursday, September 25th, 1777, records: "Came into town President Hancock and some others of the Delegates." One day's session of the Continental Congress was held Saturday, September 27th, in the court house, which stood in the center of Penn square. For this reason Lancaster claims the distinction of having been the capital of the United States, even though it was but for a day.

As Howe was in possession of Philadelphia, then the largest city in America, only 62 miles distant from Lancaster, the members of Congress felt apprehensive lest they should be captured; it was, therefore, decided that "the broad Susquehanna should flow between Congress and the enemy." For that reason, it adjourned to meet in York, Pa.

The members spent Sunday, September 28th, in Lancaster. On Monday, the 29th, 1777, Marshall entered in his diary: "Took leave of sundry of the Congress, who were setting off for Yorktown."

During their stay in Lancaster, members of the Congress, wrote letters to their families and friends; and, in some instances, to the governors of the states which they represented. Fortunately, a number of these letters have been preserved. I am quoting from several of them such portions as relate to Lancaster and its inhabitants. They throw an interesting side-light on conditions as they existed in that eventful year of 1777.

September 24th, 1777, James Lovell wrote to Elbridge Gerry, from Philadelphia:

"By all I can find you will be so sick of Lancaster as to determine upon York speedily. . . . Mr. S[amuel] A[dams] was little inclined to go to Lancaster; but I do not think he will quit before the Confedn. is gone through."¹

Elbridge Gerry wrote a letter to General George Washington as follows:

Lancaster, Sepr. 24th, 1777

Sir

In Consequence of your Letter of the 22d directed to the President or any Member of Congress, I have conferred with William Henry Esqr. of this Place upon the most expeditious Method of collecting the arms and accoutrements in the Hands of the Inhabitants here, and he is of Opinion that it may be accomplished by your Warrant to him grounded on the late Resolution of Congress for that and other Purposes. As there is not a prospect of having a Congress or Board of War for several Days to give him authority,

and the Articles are immediately wanted, he has consented to proceed on the Business without Delay, in Expectation that on the Receipt of this you will give him full Powers to justify his Conduct and date them the 22d, that the Time of his Transaction may comport with his Commission. With wishes of Success to your Excellency and the Cause in which you are engaged I remain Sir very respectfully your most hum. Serv.²

E. Gerry.

In reply to this letter, General Washington wrote Gerry as follows, under date of September 26th, 1777:

"When I wrote Congress, I was informed, that there were several arms in Lancaster belonging to the public. These with their accoutrements, I wished to be collected and put into the Hands of the Militia coming from Virginia. But I did not mean that any the property of Individuals, should be taken, because I did not conceive myself authorised, nor do I at this time to order such a measure. . . . The Army is much distressed for blankets and shoes, and I wish the most vigorous exertions could be pursued to make a collection, the speediest possible, in the neighborhood where you are."³

Gerry wrote a letter to General Washington, as follows:

Lancaster Sepr 25th 1777 3 oClock P M

Sir

I wrote You a Line Yesterday, desiring You to impower Mr. Henry of this Place to collect the Fire Arms wanted for the Virginia Troops on their March to the Camp, since wch. Your letter of the 23d is received, desiring that a number of Blankets and Shoes may be also collected.⁴

* * * * *

Colo R H Lee is present, and has just directed a Letter to the Commandg Officer of the Militia at Frederick Town in Maryland ordering on all the Militia that are arrived and 500 of those that are unarmed to be supplied in this Place.

General Washington replied to Gerry on September 27th, as follows:

"I am favd. with yours of the 25th. I yesterday wrote you that I did not think myself authorised to seize upon any Arms the property of private persons but if they can be collected and the owners satisfied for them it would be of very essential Service as great Numbers of Militia would join the Army could they be furnished with Arms."⁵

Cornelius Harnett wrote a letter to William Wilkinson, a part of which is as follows:

Lancaster 25 Sepr. 1777

Dr Sir

Congress have been Obliged to leave Philadelphia and it is supposed Genl. Howe is now in possession of it, altho' every effort in Genl. Washingtons Power has been made use of to prevent it.....

The Congress are not yet met here several of the Members not being arrived, as soon as they do meet, and an opportunity offers I shall write you again more fully. . . .⁶

John Hancock, President of the Continental Congress, wrote a short letter to General Washington. A portion of it is as follows:

Lancaster 26 Septemr. 1777.

Sir

I arriv'd last Eveng at this place, where I was honour'd with your Letter of 23d Inst. which I shall lay before Congress as soon as the whole of the Members arrive here which I Expect will be this Day.....⁷

Cornelius Harnett wrote a letter to Richard Caswell, the Governor of North Carolina, as follows:

Lancaster Sepr. 27, 1777

Sir

I did myself the Honor of writing Your Excellency a few days ago from Philadelphia, since which Congress have been obliged to Decamp, Genl How having by many different Maneouvers got between Our Army and the City, and can when he pleases take possession of it. But it seems his intention is to Come to another Battle with Our Army first.

.....Congress intends to proceed to business this day. I can send Your Excellency no Newspapers as yet. Messrs. Burke and Penn are neither of them Arrived I expect them to-day.⁸

Eliphalet Dyer wrote a long letter to Joseph Trumbull, a part of which is as follows:

Lancaster Sepr. the 28th 1777

Dear Sir

.....and by an express who came into the City about one o'Clock in the morning of fryday the 19th Instant Informing the Enemy had passed the Schuylkill and was then on their full March for the City, noticing the Congress Members Immediately to leave the City, and that they had not a minute to spare tho this proved a mistake. You may depend upon it we were soon on the wing and made our flight with all speed to Trenton where we arrived early that day. from Thence we Journeyed to Bethlem and through Reading to Lancaster to which place we had agreed to adjourn Congress when there should be Need, but we only met there to adjourn to this place where we Open Congress this day. we thought it not best at this time to remove out of this State least in this Critical Situation of affairs there should be a total defection of this State the Enemy are now in possession of their Capital which they entered on fryday last with a party of about 15 hundred and with their main body are fortifying on the heights near German Town.....

[P. S.] we shall Immediately enter upon the Confederation, taxation and if possible to retrieve the sinking State of our Currency Congres have resolved that the Intrest on the loan office Certificates past and future to be paid by bills of Excge drawn on our Commisrs in France at 6 pr Ct.....⁹

The first part of this letter was written in Lancaster. It was completed in York. In the margin is written: "York town: October 1st."

When John Hancock arrived in York, he wrote a long letter to General Washington. A portion of this letter follows:

York-Town in Pennsylvania Sepr. 30th. 1777

Sir

Since my departure from Philadelphia, I have to acknowledge the receipt of your favrs. to the 23d Inst. I met the Congress on Saturday last at Lancaster, and upon consultation it was judged most prudent to adjourn to this place, where we are now, and where we can deliberate and prosecute business without interruptions and where your dispatches will meet us.

Your most obedt and very hble. Servt

John Hancock Presidt.¹⁰

John Adams, upon his arrival in York, wrote a long letter to Mrs. Adams, describing the circuitous journey he had made from Philadelphia to York. He wrote, in part, as follows:

York Town, Pennsylvania,
Tuesday, 30 September, 1777.

My Best Friend,

In the morning of the 19th instant, the Congress were alarmed in their beds by a letter from Mr. Hamilton, one of General Washington's family, that the enemy was in possession of the ford over the Schuylkill and the boats, so that they had it in their power to be in Philadelphia before morning. The papers of Congress belonging to the Secretary's office, the War office, the Treasury office etc., were before sent to Bristol. The President, and all the other gentlemen were gone that road, so I followed with my friend Mr. Marchant, of Rhode Island, to Trenton, in the Jerseys. We stayed at Trenton until the 21st, when we set off to Easton, upon the forks of Delaware. From Easton we went to Bethlehem, from thence to Reading, from thence to Lancaster, and from thence to this town, which is about a dozen miles over the Susquehannah river. Here Congress is to sit. In order to convey the papers with safety, which are of more importance than all the members, we were induced to take this circuit, which is nearly a hundred and eighty miles, whereas this town, by the direct road, is not more than eighty-eight miles from Philadelphia.....¹¹

James Duane wrote a letter from York to George Clinton. In this letter he referred to the crowded condition of Lancaster at the time the Continental Congress met there. The letter follows:

York Town, Penna Oct 3d 1777

Sir

I wrote your Excellency from Lancaster covering a copy of General Washington's Letter to Congress which explains the causes of the loss of Philadelphia. I wish those dispatches may have got safe to hand. Congress at their first meeting at Lancaster adjourned to York town 22 miles farther Southward, and 10 from the Susquehanna. Lancaster they found crowded and in other respects exceptionable. Here we are at least sufficiently retired and can deliberate without interruption.¹²

The above letters may be found in the following cited archives; the numeral preceding each citation being the same as that suffixed to each of the said letters.

1. Gerry Papers.
2. Sparks MSS. Vol. II p. 319.
3. Library of Congress, Washington Papers.
4. Do.
5. Do.
6. Dreer Collection, Hist. Soc. of Pa.
7. Library of Congress.
8. N. C. State Papers Vol. 11.
9. Trumbull Papers, Connecticut Historical Society.
10. Library of Congress.
11. Adams Letters.
12. Sparks Manuscripts Harvard University Library.

Printed copies of the said letters may also be found in "Letters of Members of Continental Congress" published by the Carnegie Institute of Washington, at the proper place in the chronology of dates followed in that work.