

THE MEETING OF THE CONTINENTAL CONGRESS IN LANCASTER

By Herbert H. Beck

The Sesqui Centennial of the most notable part Lancaster has taken in national affairs is September 27. On that date 1777 the Continental Congress met in the Lancaster Courthouse, which stood in the center of Penn Square. September 27 is therefore the Sesqui Centennial of the day when Lancaster was the National Capital, an honor which but three other cities in the United States are privileged to have.

Threatened by the British Army, which had thrown Washington's Army into retreat at Chadds Ford on the Brandywine on September 11th, Congress decided to leave Independence Hall in Philadelphia and move westward. The records of this decision appear in the journal of Continental Congress (now in the Library of Congress) as follows:

"Sunday, Sept. 14th, 1777, Philadelphia, Pa. Resolved: That if Congress shall be obliged to remove from Philadelphia, Lancaster shall be the place at which they shall meet.

Sept. 18. After adjournment the president received a letter from Colonel Hamilton, one of General Washington's Aids, which intimated the necessity of Congress removing immediately from Philadelphia; Whereupon, the members left the city, and, agreeable to the resolve of the 14th, repaired to Lancaster."

Christopher Marshall, who lived at 215 East Orange Street, has this entry in his diary under the date of Thursday, September 25th, 1777 "Came into town President Hancock and some others of the Delegates."

The route followed by Continental Congress is described in a letter written by one of its best known members to his wife immediately after Congress left Lancaster.

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 folks 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 Susquehanna 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 direct road, is not more than eighty-eight miles from Philadelphia - - -

John Adams.

Presumably the route from Reading to Lancaster led through Sinking Spring, past the Black Horse tavern to Dunkertown (Ephrata), across the Lititz creek at Catfish (Oregon), through Landis Valley to Lancaster. That one member, later destined to become President of Congress, took a different road is recorded in the Moravian Archives (Lititz) "Sept. 27, 1777 Yesterday,

Mr. Laurens, a Congressman, came here from Philadelphia via Bethlehem. He knows the Brethren in Carolina" Entry by Bernhard Grube.

This record also seems to explain why Laurens, who had befriended the wounded Lafayette at Bristol, took the General to the Moravian Community at Bethlehem.

The journal of Continental Congress records the local meeting as follows:

Lancaster, Pa., Saturday, September 27, 1777.

A letter of the 15th from General Gates, at the heights above Behman's; of the 15th from Colonel Gist, at Christiana Bridge; one, of the 16th, from Colonel Gibson, at Alexandria; one, of the 23rd, from General Washington, at Pottsgrove, were read.

A letter from General Conway was read and referred to the Board of War.

A letter from Colonel G. Morgan, at Pittsburgh, with several papers enclosed, was read and referred to the Board of War.

A letter from Baron de Kalb to Colonel R(ichard), H(enry) Lee, was read and referred to the Board of War.

A letter, of the 16th, from Joseph Trumbull, was read and referred to the Board of Treasury.

Resolved: That the Board of War be directed to co-operate with General Washington in devising and carrying into execution the most effectual measures for supplying the Army with fire-arms, shoes, blankets, stockings, provisions, and other necessaries; and that, in executing this business, these collections be confined, as much as circumstances will admit, to persons of disaffected and equivocal (unequivocal?) characters.

Resolved: That the Treasury Board direct the treasurer, with all his papers, forms, etc., to repair to the town of York, in Pennsylvania.

Adjourned to York-town, there to meet on Tuesday next, at 10 o'clock.

Members of the Continental Congress present at the Lancaster Session.

In as much as no vote was taken at the Lancaster meeting the list of those present cannot be obtained from the usual "ay and no" records of the journal. The following list is compiled from "Letters of members of Continental Congress" by Edmund C. Burnett, and from other incidental references and sources.

Those at the Lancaster Session were:

Connecticut; Eliphalet Dyer, Richard Law and William Williams.

Georgia; Nathan Brownson and George Walton.

Maryland; Charles Carroll of Carrollton and Samuel Chase.

Massachusetts; John Adams, Samuel Adams, Elbridge Gerry, John Hancock (President) and James Lovell.

New Hampshire; Nathaniel Folsom.

New York; James Duane and William Duer.

North Carolina; Thomas Burke, Cornelius Harnett and John Penn.

Pennsylvania; Robert Morris (?) and Daniel Roberdeau.

Rhode Island; Henry Marchant.

South Carolina; Thomas Heyward, Jr., Henry Laurens, and Arthur Middleton.

Virginia; Benjamin Harrison, Joseph Jones, Francis Lightfoot Lee and Richard Henry Lee.

George Ross of Lancaster, one of the members of the Continental Congress who had signed the Declaration of Independence, was absent. He seems to have been serving elsewhere on a Congressional Committee.

There is no authentic information as to where the distinguished visitors lodged during their short stay in Lancaster. With little doubt, however, many of them made use of the White Swan Hotel, conducted by Colonel Matthias Slough on the Southeast corner of Penn Square and of other nearby hostelries including the Grape Hotel of Colonel Adam Reigart, near the Square on the west side of North Queen Street. The town was full of refugees from the Philadelphia region when Congress came to Lancaster and probably the members found some difficulty in being comfortably and conveniently lodged. (A letter from James Duane to Geo. Clinton dated York Town, Penn. Oct. 3d says "Lancaster they found crowded and in other respects exceptionable.")

The official report of the Lancaster meeting and the reasons for moving to York appear in a letter written by the President of the Continental Congress to General Washington.

York-Town in Pennsylvania
Sept. 30th, 1777.

Sir:

Since my departure from Philadelphia, I have to acknowledge the receipt of yr favrs. to the 23rd inst. I met 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.

The Continental Congress met in York from Sept. 30, 1777 until June 27, 1778, when they adjourned to meet in Philadelphia on July 2nd.

Note: See also Vol. 7 p. 199, (1903) Scenes in Lancaster County's First Court House.

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