

How Pennsylvania lost its chance to have the nation's capital

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The city of Columbia, Pa., almost became the capital of the United States.

At a meeting in New York in September 1789, the House of Representatives voted for a site along the Susquehanna River, probably the site of the small town 28 miles south of Harrisburg.

The move, however, fell apart in the Senate where Pennsylvania's two senators — the populist William Maclay and the aristocratic Robert Morris — could not agree on a preferred location within the state. Harrisburg's Maclay favored a site along the Susquehanna River. Philadelphia financier Morris favored a site nearer the Delaware River — where not so incidentally he would benefit from his extensive real estate investments.

Morris was so committed to his preferred location that he was willing to commit \$100,000 to the relocation effort. The two men battled it out in the Senate, where a tie vote was broken in Morris' favor by Vice President John Adams.

Virginia congressman James Madison, however, was determined that the capital be along the Potomac River and inserted an amendment to the House bill that effectively killed any legislative agreement.

During the 1780s, under the Articles of Confederation, the nation's capital had moved from city to city in the mid-Atlantic states — as far south as Annapolis and as far north as New York, where George Washington was inaugurated president in 1789. Under Article One, Section 8 of the Constitution, a new capital could be selected in an area “not exceeding 10 miles square.”

By June 1790, Congress was still deadlocked on the capital sitting issue as well as the question of federal assumption of state debts from the Revolutionary War. Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton considered federal assumption to be a keystone of his plan to put the new government on firm financial footing.

Sen. Morris tried to break the impasse by arranging an encounter with Hamilton along the Battery at the tip of Manhattan. Hamilton was willing to deal, but Morris demanded too high a price: Philadelphia as the nation's capital in the short-run and the long-run. Sen. Maclay, meanwhile, disdained any deal with Hamilton. Fergus M. Bordewich wrote that the two senators' “stubbornness cost the North the capital.”

A few days later, Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson ran into an agitated Hamilton pacing in front of the New York residence of President George Washington. Jefferson suggested that he come to dinner the next night — June 20, 1790.

As Jefferson later recalled the meeting, a tense Hamilton told a relaxed Jefferson: “It was probable that an appeal from me to the judgment and discretion of some of my friends might effect a change in the vote, and the machine of government, now suspended, might be again set into motion.”

Also in attendance was congressman Madison, who was an adviser to President Washington and a close friend of Jefferson. The two Virginians opposed assumption of states’ debts, but wanted the federal capital to be along the Potomac River. So did another Virginian, President Washington, who supported Hamilton’s debt assumption plan.

Jefferson, Madison and Hamilton made a deal: Virginia would get the new capital and Hamilton would get the votes to pass assumption of the debt.

Jefferson would subsequently claim he had been duped by the cagey New Yorker — complaining that Hamilton had “made [me] a tool for forwarding his schemes, not then sufficiently understood by me.” Hamilton preferred to keep the capital in his hometown of New York, but he was committed to the nation’s fiscal stability and to the nation as a whole.

Madison continued to oppose assumption in the House of Representatives, but he convinced two congressmen from northern Virginia to support the Hamilton debt legislation.

They were joined in a July vote by two more congressmen from adjacent Maryland. Hamilton and Washington then convinced Sen. Morris to support the legislation with a sweetener of moving the temporary capital to Philadelphia.

Morris gambled that the proposed Potomac capital would never be constructed by the 1800 deadline and that Philadelphia would become the capital by default. He lost.

The doubters did not count on the persistence of President Washington, to whom was given the authority to decide on the precise site of the new capital.

Many northerners disdained the rural character, swampy location and humid climate of his preferred location, but Washington persevered when he happily left presidential office in 1797.

Washington pushed the project along, but he would never live to see the first president move into the unfinished executive mansion in November 1800.

Gen. Washington died at his beloved Mount Vernon on Dec. 14, 1799. Washington, not Columbia or even Philadelphia, would stay the nation's capital.

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