

ON THIS DAY IN WEST VIRGINIA HISTORY DECEMBER 1



On December 1, 1790, two prominent Shepherdstown residents wrote to President George Washington to recommend that the capital of the United States be located in Shepherdstown.

CSO: SS.8.2, SS.8.14, SS.8.21, ELA.8.1

Investigate the Document: (*West Virginia Review* November 1943)

1. _____ wanted to be the nation's capital because they were where the "first shot was fired;" _____ because where it was where independence was created; _____ because that is where the Revolution had been won.
2. Who were the two prominent Shepherdstown residents who wrote to President George Washington to recommend that the capital of the United States be located in Shepherdstown?
3. According to the letter to George Washington, how many acres were being offered on the Virginia side of the Potomac River? Maryland?
4. Describe the "political deal" between Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton that would place the capital on the Virginia site?

Think Critically: Would (West) Virginia have benefited from the nation's capital being in Shepherdstown? Why do you suppose that Shepherdstown was not selected as the nation's capital? —does the letter provide any clues? Why do you think that George Washington had dreams on the nation's capital being located along the Potomac River, specifically?

The Capital on the "Potowmack"

THE MEN of Shepherdstown dreamed great dreams during that summer of 1790, and they put action behind their dreams. Their visions of the future were for their little town overlooking the quiet Potomac, visions of a great city rising here, of the greatest city in the world, a city planned for the seat of the Federal government. No other country in the world had a capital which had been built for that purpose. The men of Shepherdstown meant to make their town that capital, if at all possible, and so they discussed the matter with President Washington and then began to raise money and find land.

The Congress had been a migratory affair, meeting in Philadelphia, Baltimore, Lancaster, York, Princeton, Annapolis, Trenton, and New York. It was time to settle down in a place of its own and the Constitution had provided Congress with the power "to exercise exclusive legislation in all cases whatsoever over such district (not exceeding ten miles square) as may, by cession by particular states and the acceptance by Congress, become the seat of government of the United States."

The announced purpose on the part of the Congress to establish a permanent capital caused a flurry among the established towns of the east. Every town wanted the seat of government and offers came from "Boston, where the first shot was fired; Philadelphia, where independence had been proclaimed; Yorktown, where it had been won," as M. Jusserand said. Other aspirants included New York, Kingston, Newport, Wilmington, Trenton, Reading, Lancaster, Annapolis, Williamsburg, and Shepherdstown.

In 1790, the Congress, by vote, designated that the permanent seat of government should be on the Potomac River, "at someplace between the mouths of the Eastern Branch

and the Connogochague" and the President was authorized to appoint three commissioners who, under his direction, were to survey and define the district, and to acquire title thereto.

AT SHEPHERDSTOWN the men were busy, but their offer was "too little and too late." On December 1, 1790, Henry Bedinger and William Good addressed their offer to President Washington, the original of which is preserved today in the Library of Congress. It reads:

To the President of the United States
Sharpsburgh, Dec 1st, 1790.

Sir

Unavoidable accidents have prevented us from Transmitting to you such a Plat of the Lands between Sharpsburgh and the Potowmack River, as we wished to make out for your information, agreeable to your request to Col. Wm. Darke and Captain Joseph Chapline—If you can with Propriety postpone the Decision of fixing the permanent Residence of Congress a few days, it will enable us to show at one view the Situation, and donations in Lands, and we flatter ourselves that it will prove Satisfactory.—

The Donations on the Virginia Side of the River amount at this Period to Twenty Thousand, Six Hundred, Sixty Two and two-thirds Dollars, and on the Maryland side to four thousand, Eight Hundred and thirty Nine Dollars, also Four Hundred and Seventy five Acres of Land Lying Directly in a Line between Sharpsburgh and the River.

Subscriptions are continued open, and a probability that they will be considerably augmented. The price per Acre of the adjacent Lands will also be sent. General Matthews has honored us with his promise to Deliver this, who is informed of some of the Obstacles that have caused this delay, and if required will explain them. We have the Honour to be your Excellencies

Most Obedient Servants

HENRY BEDINGER
WILLIAM GOOD

Seven weeks later, on January 24, 1791, President Washington sent a message to Congress that he was appointing Thomas Johnson of Frederick, Maryland, Daniel Carroll of Rock Creek, Maryland, and Dr. David Stuart of Hope Park in Virginia as commissioners to sur-

vey "and limit a part of the territory of the ten mile square on both sides of the river Potomac so as to comprehend Georgetown in Maryland and to extend to the Eastern Branch." Maryland and Virginia granted \$192,000 for the seat of government, a much larger sum than that subscribed by the hopeful men of Shepherdstown and Sharpsburgh.

Thomas Jefferson later told that he and Alexander Hamilton had made a political "deal" which insured the location of the capital city to the south. He said that in return for Hamilton's support for the Virginia site that he, Jefferson, agreed to give his vote for Hamilton's bill for the assumption of state war debts.

And so Shepherdstown settled down to be a quiet, cultured town instead of the busy capital of a great nation. But the letter remains and shows clearly that these were not pipe dreams of the progressive citizens. The letter indicates that President Washington had given ear to their pleas and that they had received some encouragement from this man whom they considered their neighbor and under whose command Morgan's men had faithfully served. He had requested a plat of the available lands and had discussed the matter with, or written to, Colonel Darke and Captain Chapline. After all, President Washington owned lands in Berkeley County and his family lived at Charles Town, not ten miles away from Shepherdstown, so he might really want the capital there.

Today the Rumsey monument overlooks the Potomac on a high bluff where the capitol of the United States might have stood. Shepherd College occupies a site which would have been worthy of the President's Mansion. But fate, or politics, or the ability to raise money, willed otherwise.