

**56TH CONGRESS, 1ST SESSION,
DOCUMENT NO. 62. THE REMOVAL OF
THE SEAT OF GOVERNMENT TO THE
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA: TWO PAPERS
READ BEFORE THE DISTRICT OF
COLUMBIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

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WILHELMUS B. BRYAN & SAMUEL C. BUSEY

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56TH CONGRESS, }
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THE

REMOVAL OF THE SEAT OF GOVERNMENT TO
THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.

TWO PAPERS READ BEFORE THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
HISTORICAL SOCIETY BY WILHELMUS B. BRYAN, B. A.,
AND SAMUEL C. BUSBY, M. D., LL. D.

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REMOVAL OF THE SEAT OF GOVERNMENT TO WASHINGTON.

By W. B. BRYAN.

[Read before the Columbia Historical Society, December 3, 1894.]

The removal of the seat of government from Philadelphia to Washington was completed as far as the executive offices were concerned by the 15th of June, 1800. Congress adjourned May 14, 1800, having directed that the next or second session of the Sixth Congress should commence in Washington, November 17, 1800.

The departure of the Government officials was considered of so little consequence by the editor of the *General Advertiser*, a daily published in that city, that the only reference to it was a brief paragraph of some three or four lines in the issue of June 12, 1800, stating that letters and newspapers must in the future be directed to the respective offices of the Government at the city of Washington.

As is well known, Philadelphia was regarded during the ten years of the location of the seat of Government there as merely a temporary abode. Many of the Philadelphians, however, entertained the hope that the law which was passed in 1790, directing the removal of the seat of Government to Philadelphia, pending the building of a capital city on the banks of the Potomac, would in some way be repealed, and that the Government would remain permanently in Philadelphia. No doubt the clerks, to a large degree, shared this hope, especially when they looked forward to making their homes in the wilderness, as Washington was then generally characterized.

In this connection the fact is interesting that a large house, which was erected by the State of Pennsylvania on Ninth street, between Market and Chestnut streets, for the accommodation of the President of the United States, but which was never occupied either by President Washington or President Adams, was not disposed of until after the official representatives of the Government had left the city, and then an advertisement appeared in one of the local papers offering the property for sale.

During the ten years the seat of Government was located in Philadelphia the Executive Departments occupied leased buildings, while the Houses of Congress were located in a building still standing at the corner of Sixth and Chestnut streets, which had been furnished for their use by the commissioners of the city and county of Philadelphia.

Some recently discovered letters supply details both curious and valuable in regard to the removal of the Government to this city. In the letter books in the files of the Post-Office Department were found two letters written by Mr. Abraham Bradley, jr., the Assistant Postmaster-General in the year 1800 and for many years later. In the fair and clerical hand which is characteristic of so many of the old records of the Government, made in the more leisurely days of the period now nearly one hundred years ago, is found recorded Mr. Bradley's impressions of the new city and an extremely minute account of the building secured for the use of the Post-Office Department, including even the dimensions of the rooms, as well as the prevailing rents in the city for private houses, the price of vegetables, and other interesting details. The Postmaster-General, Mr. Habersham, had gone to make a visit to his home in Georgia, and did not reach the new city until the fall. The entire charge of the removal of the Post-Office Department, therefore, devolved upon Mr. Bradley. Under date of June 2 Mr. Bradley writes to his friend Robert Patten as follows:

We arrived here on Friday last, having had a pleasant journey as far as we traveled by daylight. Capt. Stevenson, with whom I agreed for

a house before my arrival, was not ready to give possession, and the house was not convenient for us. I have, therefore, taken a large three story house within a few rods of Blodget's Hotel, which will accommodate the office and my family and the postmaster's office. It is about equidistant from the President's house and the Capitol. It is impossible that all the people attached to the public offices should be accommodated with houses, the few that have been left are at rents none under \$250 and \$300. Provisions are plenty, good enough, and cheaper than in Philadelphia. You can buy a peck of field strawberries for a five-penny bit, garden at 11 cents a quart. Vegetation is at least two weeks earlier here than in Philadelphia. For myself, I do not regret the removal. The situation of the city is beautiful, and this season is extremely pleasant.

Under date of June 11, Mr. Bradley writes to the Postmaster-General as follows:

We have not been able to open the office and commence business until this day. I left Philadelphia on Wednesday, May 27th, and arrived on Friday evening, the 29th. The President left Philadelphia the 26th and arrived at Georgetown, June 1st. The situation of the city is extremely pleasant, and it will probably become the greatest city in America. Provisions are plenty and cheap; but it will hardly be possible for all those attached to the public offices to be accommodated, with houses within two miles of the offices. I have not been able to learn whether any house has been taken for your family and have, therefore, been obliged to store your furniture in Georgetown. We have taken Dr. Cracker's house for this office (close by the Great Hotel) and for my family at \$300 a year. The apportionment of the rent I shall leave to you. It appears that \$200 is as much as I ought to pay for a house. Our office is kept on the second floor, which contains one large room and two small ones. The largest room is 27 x 17 feet, and the smallest rooms are each 15 x 14 feet. The front room on the first floor was prepared for Mr. Monroe's office, with an apartment for blanks. Only half the floors were laid when we took the house, and only four rooms were plastered. The owner allowed us to expend \$300 of the rent to make it tenable. The carpenters are now at work, and we shall complete, as far as our money shall permit, by the last of next week, at which time Mr. Monroe will move his office here. . . . We have a flood of Business on hand at this time, and our removal had put us a month in arrears. It took us a week to prepare to move, load, etc., and it will take us another week to get our things in proper order.

There is another letter in which Mr. Bradley drops the gossipy style of the preceding letters, and indulges

some caustic comment and thinly veiled sarcasm at the expense of the owner of the building which the Department occupied in Philadelphia. It is evident from this letter that sundry claims were made for compensation, alleging damage to the walls, the woodwork, and the fire-places. From the vantage position of a two-days' journey from Philadelphia, Mr. Bradley, as the representative of the Department, sturdily resisted these claims. He curtly informed the owner that the ink stains on the floors and the dents in the plaster and in the woodwork were nothing more than the ordinary wear and tear that might be expected, while as for the chimney-back, he was told that if he had built his chimneys better he would not now be claiming that they were out of repair.

The information which is in the letters of Mr. Bradley constitute a valuable contribution to the history of that period. While Mr. Bradley does not give the exact location of the building that was leased for the use of the Post-Office Department, his description is, perhaps, as accurate as could be expected under the circumstances. It is hardly necessary to say that while the streets of the city of Washington were beautifully delineated on paper and carefully named, there was no indication, or at least very little, in the city itself that there were any streets. Some years later a traveler to the city stated that he was in the center of the city when he thought he was some distance away.

There was the Capitol and the White House, and midway, as Mr. Bradley says, the large building known then as Blodget's or the Great Hotel. It was located on the site of the south wing of the present Post-Office Department building. From Mr. Bradley's account, as made more definite by other records, it is believed the house referred to was at or near the corner of Ninth and E streets northwest. Reference is made by Mr. Bradley to providing quarters for Mr. Monroe's office in this building. Mr. Monroe was at that time the postmaster of the city, and this statement clears up a rather doubtful period in the early history of the city post-office. At any rate,

the joint tenancy of the Post-Office Department and the city post-office then began, which was continued, with but slight interruption, up to a few years ago.

The accounts of the removal of the Government to this city are extremely meager; in fact, it may be said that the history of that event is still to be written. In all the histories of the city of Washington which have appeared from time to time since the year 1800—and a complete collection would form quite a respectable library—this period has generally received slight attention, and, it may be said, in all cases inadequate attention. It is noticeable that the tendency on the part of nearly all in treating of this event is to pack the Government effects into very small and very few boxes and to reduce the official household to the lowest reasonable limits—probably for the same reason that influences individuals who have obtained wealth and position to exaggerate the poverty and difficulties which surrounded their early days.

Perhaps the account which is most generally quoted is the one which appeared some years ago in an article in Harper's Magazine on the "Early History of Washington." The writer, in referring to the removal of the Government to Washington, states that it was not "a very formidable transfer. The oldest inhabitant assures me," he continues, "that a single packet sloop brought all the office furniture of the Departments, besides 'seven large boxes and four or five smaller ones,' which contained the archives of the Government. Fifty-four persons, comprising the President, Secretaries, and clerical force, chose their own method of conveyance."

This bill of lading, as it might be termed, is not complete. The oldest inhabitant was evidently a patriot, and if the occasion demanded, he would no doubt have as readily asserted that all the archives of the Government were brought to this city in carpetbags by the Cabinet officers. The description which is given in Mr. Bradley's letter of the rooms which were provided for the use of one of the Executive Departments of the Government, the

fact that only one building had been erected for the accommodation of the Executive Departments, although another was in course of erection, the extremely small civil list as compared with the present, and in general the comparatively slight volume of Government business, all seemingly confirm this popular impression of the insignificance of the removal of the capital to Washington.

The first blue book, which was printed in the year 1792, shows that the employees in the Government Departments numbered 134, exclusive of the heads of the Departments. The Navy Department was not then in existence, and the General Post-Office, with Timothy Pickering as Postmaster-General, is put down as having made no returns. The next blue book was sent to Congress by President Jefferson, January 12, 1802, and the number of Department employees is given as 126. The total amount paid in salaries when the transfer was made to Washington was \$125,881. The employees for the first year in the new city apportioned among the Departments was as follows: State Department, 8 clerks; Treasury Department, 75; War Department, 17; Navy Department, 16, and Post-Office Department, 10.

The only account of an eyewitness of the arrival in this city of the Government effects of which I have any knowledge is found in a small volume published in 1866, in which Christian Hines gives his recollections of the early days of the capital city. It is true that Mr. Hines wrote this book at the advanced age of 84, and it is but natural to suppose that in giving a description unaided by a diary or other written data of events which had happened sixty-four years before he would fall into some errors. He attempts to enumerate all the houses and their location which were standing in the year 1800, and, of course, he made mistakes.

It may be presumed, however, that his recollections of such an event as the transfer to this city of the National Government are fairly accurate. At any rate, his account is interesting as a contemporary description, especially in