

Perhaps Why Congress Did Not Sit at Elizabethtown 1783

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Congress at Elizabethtown 1783

IT WOULD BE curious, in case it could be proven true, if Congress had a disposition to make Elizabethtown its abode, even for a season, because of the higher cost of living there in 1783 than in Princeton. A recent publication in the Newark "Evening News" of a letter from the Secretary of the Congress of the Confederation, Charles Thomson, indicates as much. The letter was from Mr. Thomson to his wife, who, it is said, was an aunt of President William Henry Harrison. Congress then sat in Princeton, having gone there from Philadelphia in June, 1783, and it continued its sessions until November 4, when it adjourned. During part of this period Washington occupied the Berrien mansion at Rocky Hill and wrote therein his "Farewell Address" to the army. The letter was dated at Princeton, and is said to read as given below. The President of Congress was Dr. Elias Boudinot, a native Philadelphian, who studied law with Richard Stockton, afterward marrying Stockton's sister and then practised in Elizabethtown. His Revolutionary record and life afterward were important to the State. No doubt he would greatly have preferred that Congress should move to Elizabethtown, since it was his home. The "Mr. Condit" spoken of was Silas Condict, of Morristown, who was a member of Congress during the same terms as Mr. Boudinot (1781-'84). It is to be assumed from the letter that Mr. Condict was on a committee to report a proper residence for the Congress. Charles Thomson, the writer of the letter, came from Ireland in 1740, and was Secretary of Congress from 1774 to 1789. He wrote important religious books and was a patriot of whom high encomiums were made by writers of his time. The following is the Thomson letter, which is said to be in possession of a descendant, Mrs. Rex Worthington, of Harrison, Arkansas:

"PRINCETON, Aug. 21, 1783.

"DEAR HANNAH:

"I have received your letters dated Monday 12 o'clock and Tuesday 10 o'clock at night and acknowledged the receipt of them. ... Mr. Read was misinformed respecting the adjournment. They met on Monday, but they might as well have adjourned till this time for any business they have done. I am very apprehensive that nothing but some calamity will awaken the States to a sense of their situation. ... The President of Congress has not provided a house for himself, nor is it likely he will find one here to suit him. I find Elizabethtown has been talked of at his table as a proper place for the residence of Congress. He has a house there which he says has twenty rooms, and which he will let for the use of the President. It is true the place is infested with mosquitoes in summer and lying low, and near marshes may be liable to intermittents in the Spring and Fall, but these are trifling when it is considered that by fixing the residence of Congress there the value of his estate will be increased and he will have an opportunity of letting his house at a good rent. But yet I am inclined to believe this will be opposed by his colleagues; for Mr. Condit has found a lodging in this town at \$3 a week, which enables him to lay up money. And there is reason to fear that at

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Elizabethtown, which is so near New York, it will cost him at least four. This would be a clear loss of \$52 a year which is no trifling consideration, and which I daresay will have due weight with some others. There are other weighty considerations which might be mentioned.

"Your loving husband,

CHAS. THOMSON."

It is interesting in this connection to note that about the same time (only a little over two months later) Morristown made a bid for the Legislature of New Jersey to meet at Morristown, and on the ground of cheapness of board. In the "Diary of Joseph Lewis," of Morristown (from which we hope to make some further quotations in another number), under date of Nov. 1, 1783, he wrote:

"Last evening the inhabitants of this town signed an agreement to board and accommodate the Members of the Legislature at 12s. 6d. per week, and signed a request that they would remove to this place."