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# How Augusta Became and Stayed the State Capital 1982

Neil Rolde

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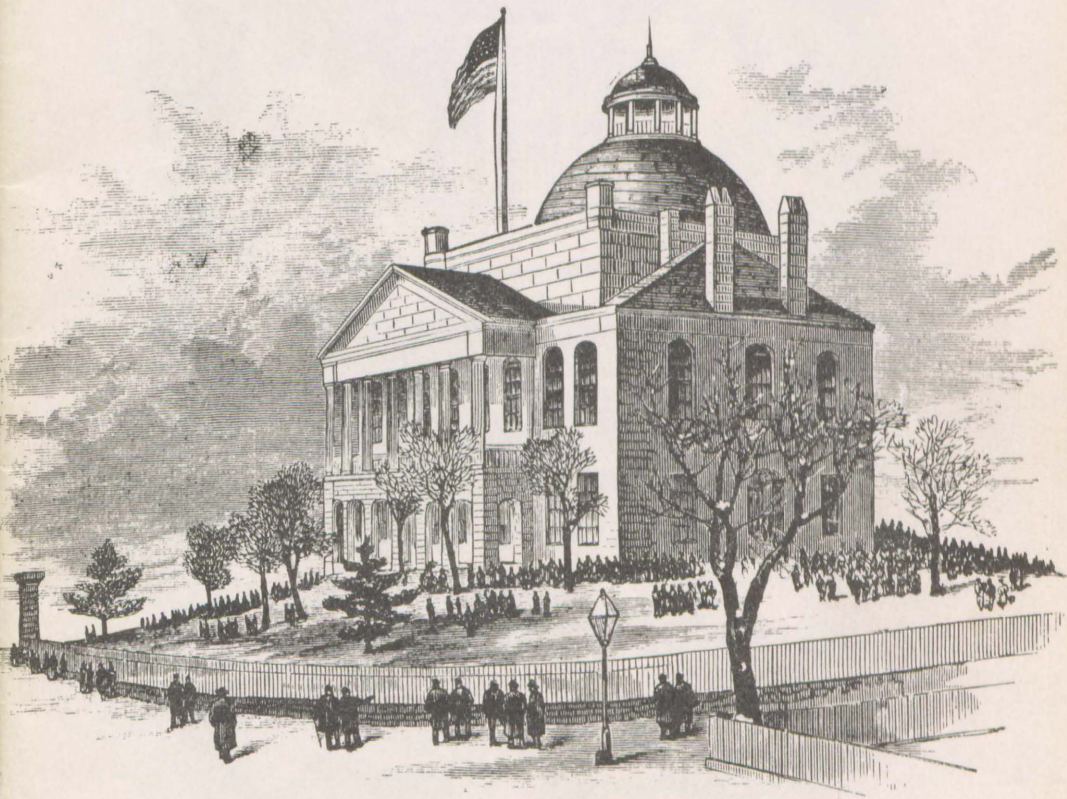
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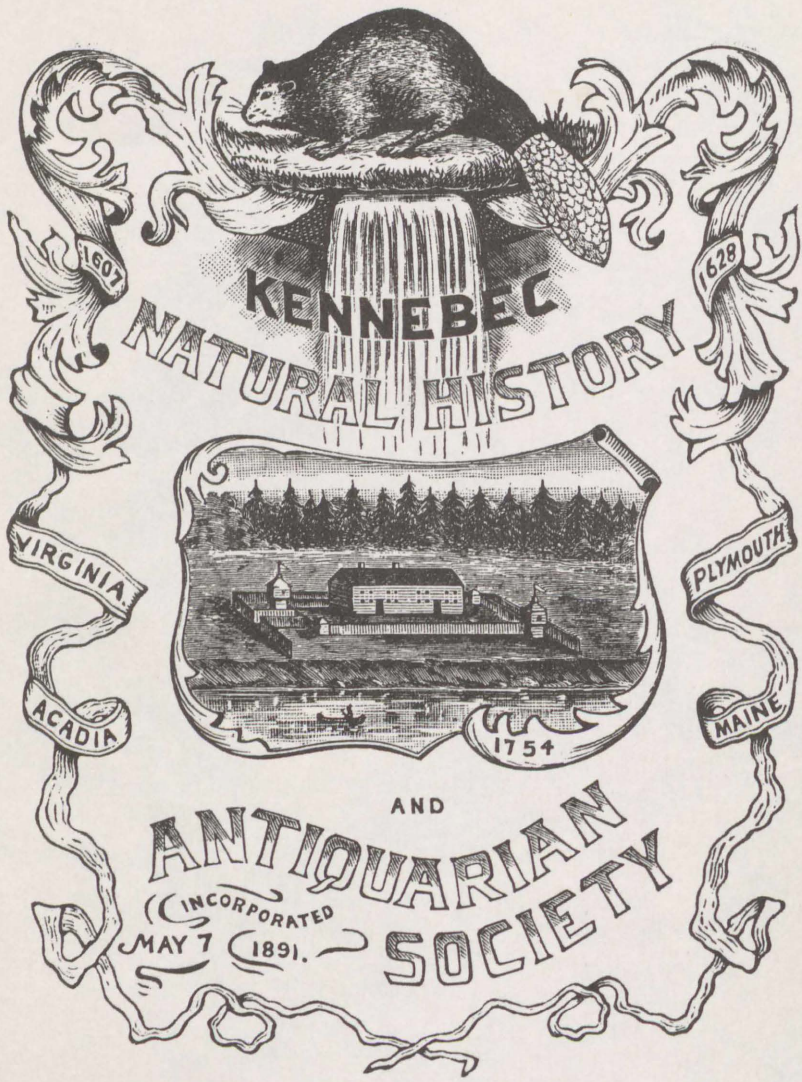
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HOW AUGUSTA BECAME AND  
STAYED THE STATE CAPITAL

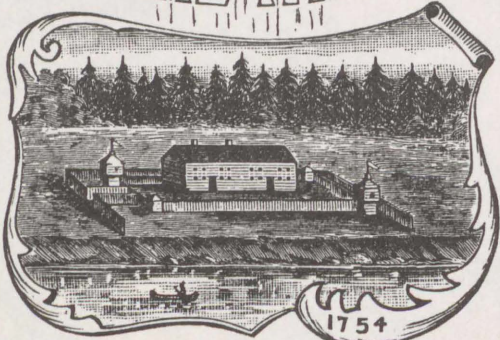
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An Address Delivered before the Kennebec Historical Society  
by Representative Neil Rolde of York  
at the Maine State House on February 24<sup>th</sup>, 1982



KENNEBEC  
NATURAL HISTORY



AND  
ANTIQUARIAN  
SOCIETY  
INCORPORATED  
MAY 7 1891.

VIRGINIA  
ACADIA

PLYMOUTH  
MAINE



HOW AUGUSTA BECAME AND STAYED  
THE STATE CAPITAL

by Representative Neil Rolde

An Address Delivered before the Kennebec Historical Society  
in Commemoration of the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Maine State  
House, with members of the Monmouth, Winthrop, and Litchfield  
Historical Societies in attendance.

To Marie,

With my very best  
Wishes to an old and  
dear friend.

Neil

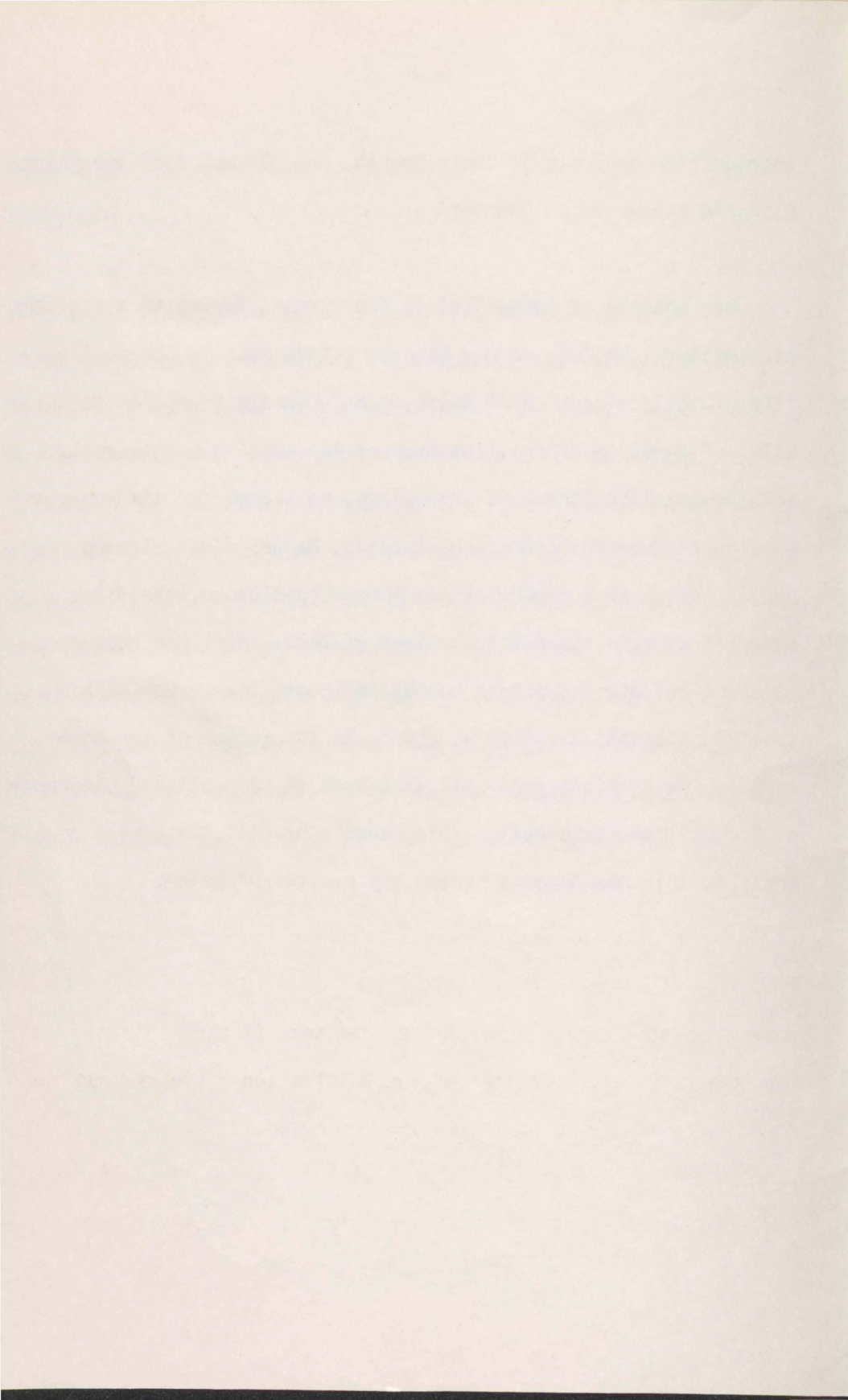
Remarks by Anthony J. Douin, President of the Kennebec Historical Society:

I bid you welcome to this the first joint meeting of the Kennebec, Monmouth, Winthrop, and Litchfield Historical Societies. We begin tonight a two part observance of the Maine State House now celebrating its 150<sup>th</sup> year. We who live in the shadow of this beautiful building are acutely aware of its role in Maine's history and politics. Yet we are also aware of its influence on local history. Tonight Rep. Neil Rolde will examine for us how a small town on the Kennebec won a hard fought contest between Portland, Augusta, and Hallowell to emerge as Maine's Capital. Our apologies are extended to anyone from Hallowell or Portland here present. To introduce this evening's speaker I will now turn our program over to Earle Shettleworth.

Introduction by Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr., Director of the Maine  
Historic Preservation Commission:

Our speaker is identified in the current legislative register as a writer. Writers rarely take an active role in the public life of their state. Neil Rolde is a fortunate exception to this rule. A graduate of Phillips-Andover Academy, Yale University, and the Columbia School of Journalism, he served for six years as an aide to Governor Kenneth M. Curtis. He was first elected to public office as a member of the 106<sup>th</sup> Legislature, the first Democrat ever to represent the Town of York. Neil has served on numerous private and public boards and committees. One of his special interests is history, and he is the author of the book York is Living History as well as a soon to be published biography of Sir William Pepperrell. This evening he will share with us his insights into how Augusta became the capital of Maine.





*Intro Musical chairs  
East =  
Crawston - Brazil*

Mr. Rolde's Address:

In each of the fifty States, there is an often untold or little known saga - the establishment of the State capital. This all-important question of providing a permanent seat of government for the States was not infrequently controversial and, if one reads between the lines of dry local histories, probably scandalous. State capitals meant growth and prosperity for those communities clever enough to gain and keep them.

For some States with established colonial capitals, like Boston in Massachusetts and Annapolis in Maryland, the choice was easy. Virginia, on the other hand, because of British incursions during the Revolutionary War, moved its early capital inland from Williamsburg to Richmond on the urgent recommendation of its wartime Governor, Thomas Jefferson. Some States started from scratch. Ohio located its new seat of government near the remains of a dismantled distillery twelve miles above the obscure river town of Franklinton, a site that grew into Columbus, while Mississippi chose an abandoned Choctaw trading post, which it named for its hero, General Andrew Jackson. A battle over choosing the territorial capital of the Dakotas led to fears that the Governor would be assassinated in the process. And so forth, until even the present-day, when Alaska is in the midst of changing from Juneau to a modernistic complex at a place called Willow.



Maine's decision, after several years of statehood, to remove its seat of government from Portland to Augusta was to be among the more contentious of these State capital dramas. Practically from 1820 until 1907, debate on this subject raged within the Pine Tree State. Although the cornerstone of the present Augusta State House was laid in 1829 and the building first occupied in 1832, the serene and secure sense of permanency it exhibits today was periodically belied by attempts to abandon Mr. Bulfinch's imposing building.

Nor was it an easy task to get to build a State House in Augusta in the first place. A suspenseful tale of political intrigue lies behind what in time - but only after almost a century - became an established success story whose 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary is being celebrated this year.

Maine's first State Legislature met in Portland. The House of Representatives gathered in the ancient Cumberland County Court House, long since torn down, at the corner of Congress and Myrtle Streets, where the present City Hall now stands. The Senate was next door, in a building erected by Portland for the State and called "the State's House." Previously, a livery stable had occupied the spot and the members of that fledgling government complained for the next three years about the swarms of flies that still plagued the location. A tiny government it was, too, barely more than 190 persons, including lawmakers, Governor, clerical staff and Supreme Court.

There was an understanding among the solons, apparently, that after five to ten years, they would abandon Portland for a more central location in Maine. To that end, a joint committee of both legislative bodies was chosen in 1821 to designate such a place for the next meeting of the Legislature. Hallowell, in Kennebec County, was eventually the town named.

During this era, Hallowell was the largest town on the Kennebec River, a thriving seaport and trading center whose valuation of \$316,046 was almost twice that of Augusta. It has been claimed that Hallowell, as a port town with seagoing vessels, was on a political par with Portland, then the sixth largest port on the Atlantic coast, in that both were hotbeds of Federalist Party strength. However, the opposition Democrat-Republicans (or Jeffersonians) controlled the Maine Legislature. Therefore, they desired another capital and thus the original suggestion of Hallowell was shunted aside and the following year, three commissioners, appointed by the Governor, settled upon Augusta.

Whatever the political motivation may have been, it is known that Daniel Rose of Thomaston, Benjamin Green of South Berwick and John Chandler of Monmouth visited Portland, Brunswick, Hallowell, Augusta, Waterville, Belfast, and Wiscasset, all of whom had offered land for a permanent capital. After a sop was thrown to Wiscasset, saying that it would be the best location on the seaboard, the three commissioners unanimously recommended Weston's Hill in Augusta, a beautiful conical elevation overlooking the



river east of the then-travelled road to Hallowell. Their further recommendation was that the Legislature should begin meeting there within five years, by the first Wednesday of January, 1827, a date later amended to 1830.

That neither timetable could be met was due to the stalling tactics of Portland legislators and others, mostly from southern Maine. Augusta, itself, acted quickly. Local citizens immediately purchased the recommended plot of land from Judge Nathan Weston and a deed to it was presented to the State in December, 1823. A month later, the Senate accepted it, but the House wouldn't; a 12 vote majority postponed any consideration of the deed until 1827, yet a subsequent vote shortened the delay to the next session of the Legislature in 1825.

The debate of 1825 primarily engaged Reuel Williams of Augusta, a future United States Senator who was to play a major role in the establishment of the capital in his native city, and Samuel Fessenden of Portland. Arguing against another postponing measure, Williams declared that five years had already elapsed of the five to ten years that Portland was expected to serve as the capital and that it was time to start planning for a new capital now. He also argued about costs - that travel would be \$1,000 less to Augusta for members - and convenience. As he said, "What good reason can be assigned for calling a man from Bangor, sixty miles beyond the center of population, and when he reaches the center, of saying to him, you are not equal to a man in Cumberland County,



you must go to Portland sixty miles farther, before you can reach the seat of government?" Fessenden, arising to counter Williams, first called for a roll call and then maintained that there was no reason to choose Augusta now since by 1830, it might no longer be the center of the State. "How could we tell what changes would take place?" he asked and then, dragging out a rather shameless red herring, stated, "Even the town itself by some calamity or other might be destroyed, so that the Legislature could not hold their sessions there." Fessenden also mentioned in his presentation the transfer of the Federal government from Philadelphia to Washington, D. C., which he claimed had caused the taxpayers greater expense and that since the American population was moving westward, the country's capital "must be moved again or the nation divided." Inaccurate in forecast and outrageous as he may have been, Fessenden had the votes. By a 65-64 margin, the Augusta question was postponed once more.

The Kennebec Journal, two years later, adopted a somewhat weary and sardonic tone in reporting the next debate on the subject, which occupied one whole Tuesday and half a Wednesday for the Legislature. Said the K. J. of the argumentation that it was "familiar if not tedious to most of our readers, having been published with little variation for five successive winters," that the "speakers kept to beaten tracks" and that "all argument on the subject was exhausted years ago."

But in this particular political donnybrook in 1827, Augusta

won out, after a series of parliamentary maneuverings and diabolical strategems that would have done credit to Machievelli. It eventually came down to having enough votes to force through a bill setting up Hallowell, instead of either Augusta or Portland, as the site for the next session of the Legislature. The date of passage of this fateful bill was February 24, 1827. But anyone who examines the Acts and Resolves of the Maine Legislature for the same year will find that a completely contradictory law was also passed on February 24, 1827. Entitled "An Act Fixing the Place of the Permanent Seat of Government and Prescribing Where the Legislature Shall Hold its Sessions," it ordained that "on and after January 1, 1832," the permanent capital would be at Augusta, but until then, the Legislature would continue to meet at Portland, with a clause added to annul the Hallowell bill.

What had happened was that the Cumberland County legislators, outvoted on Hallowell, saw a chance with another bill that would enlist Augusta and its allies to overturn the first bill and still keep Portland as the Legislature's temporary meeting place. Their hope, of course, was that in the next session, they would be able to block Augusta once again. One can see their duplicity through a comparison of votes. In 1827, on the vote to make Augusta the capital but keep the sessions in Portland meanwhile, all 24 Cumberland County House members present and the three Senators voted in favor; the next year, when a bill was submitted to appoint a building commissioner to plan the Augusta capital and sell



certain public lots to raise the necessary money, all these 24 Cumberland County House members and three Senators reversed themselves and voted against the measure.

In vain, however, since the proposal passed. With the appointment of a commissioner of public buildings, who was none other than the first Governor of Maine, William King, and the sale of ten townships, bringing in some \$60,000, Augusta had cleared its first major hurdle.

To design the new capitol structure, King selected Charles Bulfinch, one of America's foremost architects, who had built the handsome Massachusetts State House. While imitating to a certain extent his famous gilt-domed edifice in Boston, Bulfinch managed to infuse elements of originality into the Augusta plans, for instance, hammered New England granite instead of red brick for the facade and a Greek Revival style in place of Federal. King's report described the project as "A stone building one hundred and fifty feet in length and fifty feet in width, with an arcade and colonnade projecting fifteen feet in front and eighty in length." Its estimated cost was \$80,000.

On the Fourth of July, 1829, the cornerstone was laid during a day of celebration that began in Augusta with the ringing of bells and a 24-gun salute at sunrise. The Grand Masonic Lodge of Maine played a prominent part and utilized Masonic ceremonies <sup>file</sup> in placing of the cornerstone, underneath which were deposited a copy of the Maine constitution, various publications of the day,



samples of American coins and a commemorative plate. Governor Enoch Lincoln spoke and a special guest who addressed the large crowd on hand was Major Augustus Davezac of Louisiana, a personal friend of President Andrew Jackson. In the high-flown oratory typical of the time, Davezac touched upon the habit the ancient Romans had of consulting oracles on such occasions and concluded that "This day, sir, is an auspicious day to lay the foundation of good works and though no eagle soared on sight in happy augury of rising empire, yet the meditating mind might have the glad assurance that the frontiers of Maine will never recede before the footsteps of an invader and that her youth, in defense of their native land, can never be conquered."

On Davezac's mind, perhaps, was the fact that Maine's north-eastern frontier with Canada was then still a matter of sharp dispute and, in fact, he later served as secretary to the U. S. delegation that settled the boundary problem - incidentally, not to Maine's satisfaction.

A bit of factional politics that saw ex-Governor King replaced as building commissioner by William Clark of Hallowell, who in turn was replaced by Reuel Williams, did not impede the progress of the work. But the question of expenses and what in effect was a cost overrun presented Portland with another opportunity for political mischief.

When a legislative appropriation of \$30,434 to finish the building and grounds reached the House, it was tabled and the whole issue of establishing the permanent seat of government was opened

up again. Portland made several new bids. So did Augusta. The upshot was that \$25,000 was appropriated, but Augusta would have to furnish a bond of \$50,000 to cover any costs beyond the \$25,000 and that these expenses would not be recoverable if the bond had to be used.

Ultimately, some \$11,466 had to be taken from the bond in order to complete the State House, which, including furniture, alterations, interest, and expenditures on the grounds, finally cost in total, \$138,991.34. As an aside, it should be noted that in a future legislative session, Augusta mustered enough political muscle to assure that its citizens did not have to pay out the money from their bond.

In 1833, the Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Public Buildings declared that Maine had been "furnished with a building of as splended workmanship and excellent materials as any State in the Union can boast of..."

And there, one might have thought, the matter would have rested. But no, in 1837, in 1860, in 1889, and as late as 1907, the selection of Augusta as the State capital was disputed and jeopardized.

The 1837 attempt came about when Portland businessmen, in the act of building a Merchants' Exchange, offered it as an "eligible accomodation" for the State Legislature. Although the three months of debate on the issue was mainly a Portland show, an Orono Representative also backed the removal on the assumption that Bangor would soon become the center of the State.

Narrowly defeated in 1837, another removal proposal in 1860 likewise was barely beaten back. On this occasion, Portland was



constructing a new City Hall, which it decided could be built to house State government as well as all necessary municipal functions. The failure of this effort did result in some remodelling funds to enlarge the State House.

In 1889, the debate flared again. Portland offered a site worth \$100,000 and pledged another \$100,000 toward a building that would cost \$500,000. Augusta then made the claim that the real cost would be \$800,000 to \$1,500,000. The scare tactic worked. A legislative committee recommended that the capital remain in Augusta and that a major wing be added. Governor Edwin C. Burleigh, an Aroostook County boy who had moved to Augusta, lost no time in assembling his council and granting an award - on a non-competitive basis, one might add - to John C. Spofford, a Boston architect who had helped Augusta shoot down Portland's proposal. The result was a West Wing addition to the State House, constructed between 1890 and 1891, at a cost of \$150,000.

Still, Portland made one last try. The year was 1907 and Portland forces took advantage of the fact that Governor William T. Cobb, in his address to the Legislature, had called the present State facilities inadequate and had asked for a State Office building. Once more, a legislative measure for "removal of the capital" was put before the lawmakers. Once more, a prolonged, stormy session resulted. Looking back on the event fifty years later, Orlie L. Sprague who represented Corinna then recalled "a hectic day in the House of Representatives" and an unparalleled "flow of



eloquence" on both sides from the members, 121 of whom wore moustaches or full beards. The House debate in the legislative record covers 24 pages. And well it might. For everything rested on the House. The Senate, the first body to act, had approved Report A, "Ought To Pass" of the Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds on the order for the removal of the State capital. It had been a close vote, a 15-15 tie, broken by the President of the Senate, Fred J. Allen of Sanford. Now, the battle began in the House.

The principle argument centered, per usual, on the inadequacy of the present arrangements in Augusta. The local hotel accommodations came under particular attack. As Orlie L. Sprague reported, "The Augusta House at that time had no elevator, the guests all reaching their rooms by manual labor, regardless of what floor they were located on..." Room and board cost \$15 a week and since legislators were only paid \$150 for three months, they lost money on the deal. The Hotel North, a smaller establishment than the Augusta House, was seemingly the only other place where legislators could stay.

This side of the argument drew ridicule from at least one Augusta partisan, the Honorable Forrest Goodwin of Skowhegan. Scoffed Goodwin at a public hearing: "But the principal reason that our friends from Portland urge for moving this Capital down to their beautiful city is because the hotel accommodations of Portland are better than they are here. How long has it been, Mr.

Chairman, since the great and important question of moving the Capital of the State of Maine resolved itself into a question of victuals? Talk with our friends from Portland and tell them that we do not want to abandon this million dollar building and what is their reply? Victuals. Tell them we do not want to impose taxation upon our people to the amount of two or three million dollars and what is their reply? Victuals. Through the corridors of this building, in the rotunda and in the different halls you may hear the hoarse voice of the citizens of Portland crying out day after day, "Victuals, victuals, victuals!"

The crucial vote was 73-65 not to accept the committee's majority recommendation to remove the capital to Portland. Subsequent maneuvers to decide otherwise were defeated by more comfortable margins.

Two years later, the Legislature created a Commission on the Enlargement of the State House. Under the direction of Boston architect G. Henri Desmond, extensive renovations were carried out on the State House between 1909 and 1910, at a cost of \$350,000. Among other things, the original dome was replaced and a new one built to the height of 150 feet. By then, too, the improvements to the Augusta House promised by a citizens group that had subscribed \$60,000 for that purpose were presumably in place.

Since the last turbulent debate in 1907, Augusta has retained its role as Maine's capital and its government facilities have grown to the point where any thought of removal is patently unthinkable. At the heart of the present government complex, there still



remains the State House, the capitol building - capitol with an o - the actual locus of power. If there is any proper summation in words for the personality of this building, it may lie in another statement made by the Honorable Forrest Goodwin seventy-five years ago when he said rather eloquently: "It is an ancient building in its style of architecture; it is as old as Greece itself, but it is beautiful in its simplicity and dignity. For seventy-five years it has stood here. Summers' rains and winters' snows have beaten upon its granite pillars and have not harmed its symmetry and its beauty. It stands untouched by the ravages of time, unshaken by the war of the elements, and I hope to God that it may stand for many generations yet unborn."

Clearly, Maine's State House has fulfilled the hopes he had

for it.

*Post script  
Add an O*