

Allison Bridge

## **New York as the Nation's Capital**

*Since we ought to be no less persuaded that the propitious smiles of Heaven, can never be expected on a nation that disregards the eternal rules of order and right, which Heaven itself has ordained: And since the preservation of the sacred fire of liberty, and the destiny of the Republican model of Government, are justly considered as deeply, perhaps as finally staked, on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people. (Washington's First Inaugural Speech)*

In 1788, the first presidential inauguration was scheduled for the first Wednesday in March of the following year. However, the early months of 1789 proved to be unseasonably cold and snowy and bad weather delayed many members of the First Federal Congress from arriving promptly in New York City. Finally, on April 6, 1789, the ballots were counted and George Washington won unanimously with 69 electoral votes. Washington was then notified of his victory and traveled to New York City from his home in Virginia.

On April 30, 1789, George Washington took the oath as the first president of the United States. The oath was administered by Robert R. Livingston, the Chancellor of New York, on a second floor balcony of Federal Hall, above a crowd assembled in the streets to witness this historic event. President Washington and the members of Congress then retired to the Senate Chamber, where Washington delivered the first inaugural address to a joint session of Congress.

In 1785, Congress began meeting in New York City under the Articles of Confederation. New York City had become the first national capital of the United States under the new United States Constitution. The Constitution also created the Congress of the United States, and its first sitting was at Federal Hall on Wall Street. Federal Hall was also the setting for George Washington's first inaugural address. The nation's new capital would also be the location for the first United States Supreme Court and where the United States Bill of Rights was drafted and ratified. New York City remained the capital of the U.S. until 1790, when the role was transferred to Philadelphia.

At the time New York City served as the nation's capital it was a bustling city of 28,000

people who were known to be both rich and crude. A 1989 *New York Times* article described the city as a place where “Men and women of the upper class dressed in the latest fashion from London or Paris and attended balls, but the streets were unpaved, narrow and crooked, often unlighted at night and frequently impassable because of wandering pigs.”

Why then would New York City have been chosen to be the nation’s capital? Despite the problems that the city had, many citizens, as well as brand-new secretary of the treasury Alexander Hamilton, wanted New York to be the permanent capital. New York was the largest of the thirteen original colonies and the city had the advantage of being equidistant between New England and the South. The city could also boast all that was necessary to be considered a modern city including restaurants, hotels, and plenty of evening entertainment for those with the money to enjoy it.

There were those, however, who were not as enthusiastic with this choice. Thomas Jefferson, the new secretary of state, had a well-known dislike of New York. He believed the nation’s capital should be located in a less cosmopolitan area. He favored a more rural setting near his home state of Virginia.

Compromise on the location was not to be had until Jefferson agreed to acquiesce to Hamilton’s demand for the Federal government to assume states’ Revolutionary war debts and in return Hamilton abandoned the dream of keeping New York City the nation’s capital.

### **Citations**

Faber, Harold. “Spanning 200 Years to the Inaugural.” *New York Times* 23 April 1989: Print.

Homberger, Eric, and Alice Hudson. *The Historical Atlas of New York City: A Visual Celebration of 400 Years of New York City's History*. New York: Holt, 2005. Print.

Washington, George. “Washington’s Inaugural Address.” Federal Hall, New York City, NY. 30 April 1789. Inaugural Address