



Where the heck should we put the capital?

One of the biggest things to ever happen to Nashville was the decision to make it the state capital. But only after a long and eventful debate did it become the center of state government. Here is the story:

For the first few decades of Tennessee's existence, the legislature couldn't agree on a permanent capital. Knoxville was the first seat of government in 1796, followed by Nashville in 1812, Knoxville again five years later, Murfreesboro in 1818 and Nashville eight years later. Along the way — in one of the great footnotes of Tennessee history — Kingston in Roane County served as state capital for a day in 1807.

When the legislature met at the Davidson County Courthouse in October 1843, it spent the first week arguing about what city would be home to Tennessee's permanent capital. House and Senate members took turns boasting the virtues of their hometown, asking that the seat of government be placed there. Then the vote would be taken, the measure would fail and another representative or senator would stand up and lay a claim for his hometown.

It went on and on. Over the course of the week, just about every organized community in Tennessee got its chance and lost. During one Senate debate on Oct. 4, Kingston, Hamilton, Sparta, Knoxville, Clarksville, McMinnville, Shelbyville, Murfreesboro, Chattanooga, Franklin, Harrison and Woodbury were all considered. Every town put up for a vote in the Senate that day got between seven and 13 votes — short of the 17 needed for passage.

After several days it came down to Nashville and Murfreesboro, and the debate got interesting. Several legislators said Nashville was the logical choice. After all, the legislature was used to meeting there, Nashville had better road and water connections and it was home to institutions (such as the prison) over which the legislature needed to watch. The city of Nashville was also offering a free piece of land the state could use to build a capitol building. Several of Nashville's wealthiest citizens promised to buy Campbell's Hill for \$30,000 to donate to the state.

But lawmakers advocating Murfreesboro did not go down easily. They pointed out that Murfreesboro, not Nashville, was the geographic center of the state. They also said that since the legislature moved to Nashville 17 years earlier, the government was spending more money than it did before it met in Nashville — obviously the fault of the city of Nashville.

On Friday, Oct. 6, 1843, the House voted 50-43 to make Nashville the state's permanent capital. The next day the Senate concurred with 17 votes in the affirmative, making the state capital bill one of those rare pieces of legislation that passed both chambers without a single vote to spare.

Bill Carey is a Nashville author and executive director of Tennessee History for Kids, an online Tennessee history textbook. For more great stories of Tennessee history, go to www.tnhistoryforkids.org.