

Despite the destitute condition of Washington's men, Congress early in December dispatched a committee to confer with the general "on the best and most practicable means of carrying on a Winter's Campaign with vigor and success." The committee arrived on December 3 and was informed that the General would see them the following day. On December 1, Washington had polled his general officers concerning the desirability of cantoning the army for the winter, and now he again requested their advice on the practicability of a winter campaign. The responses of the generals were laid before the congressional committee on December 4. In their report to Congress submitted December 16, the congressional commissioners reported that the concensus of the generals under Washington's command was that "an attack upon the Enemy's Lines and Redoubts [would be] an enterprize too dangerous, and not to be hazarded but in case of absolute necessity." Furthermore, the commissioners concluded that "untill sufficient reinforcements can be obtained, such a post should be taken by the Army as will be most likely to overawe the Enemy, afford supplies of provision, wood, Water, and Forage, be secure from surprise, and best calculated for covering the Country from ravages of the Enemy, as well as provide comfortable Quarters for the Officers and Soldiers."

At the time of the visit of the members of Congress, Washington was encamped at Whitemarsh, eleven miles northwest of Philadelphia. The majority of Washington's officers advised cantoning the army at least thirty miles from Philadelphia, some advocating the distant backcountry, where the opportunity of molestation by the British would be minimal and the army would have an opportunity to secure warm housing and adequate food, clothing, and supplies. The government of Pennsylvania was inalterably opposed to such a withdrawal, however, because it would leave the British free to pillage the countryside surrounding Philadelphia. Gen. William Smallwood of Maryland recommended moving the bulk of the army to Wilmington, Delaware, a position that offered the advantage of a milder climate than the interior of Pennsylvania, while affording the Americans an opportunity to harass British shipping on the Delaware and provide protection for the Jerseys, Delaware, and the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Washington at first favored the plan, but given the condition of his men what he really required was a place of retreat, where his men could defend their position easily and those that were able could forage for the food that the commissaries could not provide. As a result, Washington determined to encamp the bulk of his army in the valley of the Schuylkill, sufficiently far from the enemy in Philadelphia to prevent a massive attack, and yet a place that could be strongly secured by his weakened and demoralized men.