

Washington's Birthday: Opening Remarks on the dedication of the Washington Document Case, by Dr. Edward C. Papenfuse

February 16, 2015

Good Evening.

It is a pleasure to be back with you once again to mark this historic occasion.

Today is the official federal holiday for Washington's birthday. While it is not either day on which he actually celebrated his birthday (February 11 old style, according to the then-used Julian calendar, and February 22, new style, Gregorian Calendar adopted in 1752 - Washington personally celebrated on both days), it is the now designated day we are meant to pay tribute to our first president.

In 1842, a young lawyer from Illinois was asked to give remarks on Washington's birthday (February 22, new style). In those days speeches were exceptionally long and his was no exception. His closing was especially grand eloquent, given it was a Temperance Society audience in his home town of Springfield:

"And when the victory shall be complete --when there shall be neither a slave nor a drunkard on the earth-- how proud the title of that Land, which may truly claim to be the birthplace and the cradle of [political freedom] ... how nobly distinguished that people who shall have planted, and nurtured to maturity, both the political and moral freedom of their species.

This is [Abraham Lincoln continued] the ... anniversary of the birthday of Washington. We are met to celebrate this day.

Washington is the mightiest name of earth --long since mightiest in the cause of civil liberty, still mightiest in moral reformation.

On that name, an eulogy is expected. It cannot be. To add brightness to the sun, or glory to the name of Washington, is alike impossible. Let none attempt it. In solemn awe pronounce his name, and let its naked deathless splendor, leave it shining on."

Our future 16th president may have gotten carried away in his tribute to Washington. Washington did have his shortcomings, as the New York Times pointed out this morning, in reference to Washington's relationship with his slaves, but what he accomplished on behalf of the republic is without question and of lasting value. He was a man of action and few words, both spoken and written, such as the remarkable document we pay tribute to tonight.

Tonight we unveil the permanent home of one of the most important documents in American history, George Washington's draft in his own hand of the speech he gave resigning his commission as commander-in-chief on December 23, 1783. Washington arrived at the appointed time before the door to the Old Senate Chamber. He was announced by Robert Patton, the messenger and doorkeeper to Congress. Following a protocol prepared by a committee that included Thomas Jefferson and Washington's former aide, James McHenry, Washington proceeded to a chair near the dais reserved for the president of Congress, where he sat flanked by two aides who remained standing. After a proper time for the arrangement of spectators, silence was ordered by the secretary of Congress at which time the president of Congress addressed General Washington with "Sir the United States in Congress assembled are prepared to receive your communications." Washington then rose and gave his brief address with such emotion that he had to steady the hand holding his remarks with his other hand.

He congratulated Congress on "the opportunity afforded the United States, of becoming a respectable nation," satisfied that the arduous task assigned him had produced a successful termination of the war and verified the most sanguine expectations. He considered it his indispensable duty to close his last official act by commending the interests of the country to Congress, as well as the care of the men who had served so well on Congress's and the nation's behalf.

He concluded with: "Having now finished the work assigned me, I retire from the great theatre of action --and bidding an affectionate farewell to this August body, under whose orders I have so long acted, I here offer my commission, and take my leave of all the employments of public life."

Note the importance of the copy of those remarks you will see in the original tonight: Not only did he specifically and, according to protocol, make his bow to Congress's authority, thus reinforcing the concept of civilian rule in the new republic he helped create, but on the copy you will see, he also deleted 'final' from before 'affectionate farewell' and the word 'ultimate' from before 'leave of all the employments of public life.'

That we have such a significant document to place on display tonight in a specially designed case is due to the contributions and efforts of many people and institutions. I particularly want to thank Kendall Ehrlich who first suggested and helped us organize a Friends group to acquire the Washington document. At her and Joe Coale's behest, Henry Rosenberg provided half the private funds raised for the acquisition. At Governor, then Comptroller Schaefer's recommendation, the late Williard Hackerman contributed the other half. The Board of Public Works, Treasurer Kopp, Governor Ehrlich, and Comptroller Schaefer provided the public match, while the owner of the document gifted a considerable portion of the appraised value of the document. We then raised the money privately to build the special case you will see to night. Their names are on the case and to all who helped us acquire and exhibit the document, we deserve a round of applause.

I would also be remiss if I did not say a special word of thanks to Mimi Calver and Elaine Bachmann, who with the strong support of Tim Baker, the acting state archivist, have worked long and hard to make this and the other exhibits in the State House a reality. They deserve our applause and appreciation for creating what will be one of the premier learning experiences of a visit to our historic state house.

It is now my great pleasure and distinct honor to introduce the featured speaker of the evening, Dr. Alan Taylor.
[Taylor's remarks]