

Draft of Remarks by
Dr. Edward C. Papenfuse
Maryland State Archivist

On the occasion of the unveiling of Washington's Resignation Speech
in the Maryland State House
8:30 p.m.
February 19, 2007

The touchstone of democracy is the written word. It is what legislators and constitutional conventions do to strengthen and improve our government. It is the direction that emanates from our executives. It is the interpretations that are rendered by our judiciaries.

The importance of the written word to the governance of the free world is the unmistakable contribution of those who founded our nation. From the Mayflower Compact and the Charter of Maryland to the laws that are written here, in Washington, and in state capitols throughout the land, we explain in writing what we expect our government to do and how we define our liberties.

So important is the written wisdom and reflections of those who lead us in writing it all down that a first printing of the Declaration of Independence, which exists in multiple copies, sold at auction for \$8.14 million dollars¹, while George Washington's memories of his adventures during the French and Indian war, penned thirty years after the fact, brought nearly \$850,000 in 2002. Interest in the collecting of such Americana is not confined to the United States. The Jagiellon University, in Cracow Poland owns an important December 1786 Washington letter in which he discusses his concerns about the impending Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia.²

In 1983, when we celebrated the 200th Anniversary of Washington resigning his commission as commander-in-chief, a public member of the State House Trust then and now, alerted me to the fact that Washington's original draft of his remarks had survived among the papers of the family to whom it had been given. At that point the owners had no interest in giving up their treasure and wanted to remain anonymous. We arranged for the loan of the document for temporary exhibit through the Maryland Historical Society. I made it clear then that if the family ever wanted to part with the document and the accompanying love letter that described in moving prose the resignation ceremony, the State would like to acquire both for permanent exhibit in the State House. I heard nothing more for twenty-two years. Then one morning that same member of the State House Trust called me and asked

me if I was sitting down. The family was now considering relinquishing Washington's draft and the love letter. Would the State be interested? You can imagine my response. I quickly called one of the most knowledgeable and well-known manuscript and rare books dealers in the country, and asked him if he would be willing to provide the Friends of the Maryland State Archives with a pro-bono estimate of the market value of the documents. He, I, and the member of the Trust who called me, examined the documents. His initial appraisal was one and a quarter million dollars, but he warned me that a formal appraisal for tax purposes might be considerably more, and that if the document went up for auction, the price could easily exceed that amount. I knew that the Dunlap printed broadside of the Declaration of Independence was originally estimated to be worth just over \$4 million dollars and sold for just over \$8 million. In the end, the owner generously offered to gift one third of the formal appraisal value of \$1.525 million dollars, while the Friends of the Maryland State Archives, with public and private support paid \$1 million dollars for both documents on January 22, 2007, immediately thereupon transferring title to the Maryland State Archives.

I had always assumed the documents were authentic, but now that it was likely that a considerable sum of money would have to be raised for their acquisition, what proof did I have? The story of the ownership of the documents from their creation to the present was relatively easy to prove. A photostatic copy of both had been in the Library of Congress since the early 1930s along with correspondence detailing their ownership. The provenance was impeccable, but there was still the specter of forgery, especially given the fact that one of the more notorious forgers of Washington documents worked openly in Baltimore in the 19th century. To be certain, I carefully examined the paper on which Washington's draft was written, comparing the watermark imbedded in the paper with other known examples of Washington documents, but especially those with indisputable lineage dating from around the time of his resignation as commander in chief here in our state house. To my delight I found that the draft was written on fine English paper with a Britannia watermark, the same paper that Washington used on major public documents from at least 1781 to 1784. If you were to hold the document up to the light you would see that Washington wrote all over the premier symbol of British Rule: Britannia seated with spear and shield. I suspect his use of this particular paper was intentional. Washington always paid close attention to details. When he ordered the American manufacture of paper for his own use he encircled Britannia seated on a plow, surrounded with his own name surmounted by an American Eagle.

Without the support of the Legislature, the Board of Public Works, Governor

Ehrlich, who placed matching funds in our budget, and the Friends of the Maryland State Archives, of one of the most important documents in our Nation's history would not be unveiled tonight as a truly priceless addition to the public records of Maryland. We are especially grateful to the Board of the Friends of the Maryland State Archives who, with their lawyer, Fred Franke, took on the negotiations with the owners, and raised the private funds to complete the acquisition. Even before the document became available, Kendall Ehrlich encouraged us to launch a Friends group, and Chris Allan worked long hours with Friends' President David Troy to secure the necessary IRS recognition. To Willard Hackerman and Henry Rosenberg we owe a particular debt of gratitude for their generosity. Without hesitation they understood the intrinsic value of these documents and quickly agreed to give all that was asked of them in the best tradition of public spirited philanthropy. All of the hundreds of thousands of citizens who will now be able to view the original of this document and know that it is safe in public hands owe them a standing ovation for their support.

I would be remiss if I did not also recognize the important role the staff of the Maryland State Archives played in presenting Washington's speech to you tonight. Mimi Calver and Elaine Bachmann have tirelessly guided this project from a wistful idea to the present exhibit, while at the same time working with my deputy Tim Baker to develop a long term master plan for better interpreting the State House and the State House grounds to the public. Without dedicated archivists and curators the likes of these, much of the rich documentary history our state would have long since decayed and disappeared.

What then is so important about a draft of a speech in George Washington's hand? It is by far the most important piece of evidence in the history of what writer Stanley Weintraub has described as *George Washington's Christmas Farewell*, a journey from New York to Annapolis where he intended to achieve "the seemingly impossible feat of backing away from dictatorship while keeping the newly freed Americans together as a nation." [p.13]

It is that priceless link on paper to the mind of the man who believed that civilian government and leadership was the only answer to the future of the Republic.

On the evening of Friday, December 19, 1783, Washington rode into Annapolis with two aides, David Humphreys and Benjamin Walker, Philip Walmsley, a servant, and a large honor guard of comprised of "Generals Gates and Smallwood, and several of the principal inhabitants of Annapolis." They proceeded to George Mann's Tavern, the confiscated residence of a Loyalist with whom Washington had

often dined before the war, and where "apartments had been prepared for his reception." Flying from the State House was the largest American flag yet made, a replica of which is now on exhibit. The town and those congressmen who managed to make their appearance warmly greeted the general. Given the number of receptions culminating in a Ball at the State House, it is a wonder that Washington had time to write anything. Yet on his arrival he did not know if Congress expected him to speak or merely show up and surrender his commission. On Saturday the 20th he wrote Congress inquiring as to what they had in mind. Congress formed a geographically balanced protocol committee composed of Thomas Jefferson of Virginia, the Author of the Declaration of Independence and soon to be minister to France, Dr. James McHenry of Maryland, formerly aide and physician to General Washington, and Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts (probably best known in political history for his later efforts as the author of *Gerrymandering*). They immediately responded through the President of Congress, Washington's old adversary, Thomas Mifflin from Pennsylvania, that indeed he was expected to make a speech the following Tuesday, December 23rd, in a ceremony that was carefully designed to emphasize the sovereignty of civil authority as then vested solely in Congress.

From Saturday, December 20, until slightly after noon on Tuesday, December 23, 1783, Washington was exceptionally busy. The following Thursday, Christmas Day, the *Maryland Gazette* would fill one whole page with an account of the receptions, dinners, balls, and addresses from the Governor and Council, the General Assembly, the Mayor, Recorder, Alderman, and Common-Council of the City of Annapolis. To each official body Washington made a formal and written reply, while also dining and toasting at a prodigious rate. As the *Gazette* reported, for example, on Monday afternoon, the night before his speech in the State House, "Congress gave his Excellency a public dinner at the Ball-room, where upwards of two hundred persons of distinction were present; every thing being provided by Mr. Mann in the most elegant and profuse stile." After dinner [thirteen toasts] were given including number 10, "May Virtue and wisdom influence the councils of the United States, and may their conduct merit the blessings of Peace and Independence." That same night "the stadt-house was beautifully illuminated, where a Ball was given by the General Assembly, at which a very numerous and brilliant appearance of ladies were present." According to Congressman James Tilton writing on Christmas Day, 1783, "The General danced every set, that all the ladies might have the pleasure of dancing with him, or as it has since been handsomely expressed, *get a touch of him.*"

December 23rd at noon was set for the formal ceremony of resignation.

Washington took great care in reworking his draft for delivery, assigning his aide Benjamin Walker the task of making an initialed copy for the Congressional record. It is clear from what Washington crossed out that he had two goals in mind in making this speech, one of the most important of his whole career: reinforcing the supremacy of the civil authority and leaving the door open for his being called back to civilian service.

The changes in the final draft, overlooked by scholars who cite the official recorded versions at the National Archives and the Library of Congress, are significant. Washington added congratulations to Congress, pointed to the opportunity the United States had of becoming a respectable nation, crossed out FINAL from before farewell, and ULTIMATE before "leave of all the enjoyments of public life." He would be willing to serve again if asked, but especially in any effort designed to strengthen the Civil Authority of the Republic.

In that regard the Maryland General Assembly's address of Monday, December 22, 1783, signed by Senate President Daniel Carroll and House Speaker Thomas Cockey Dye, proved prophetic.

We are convinced [wrote the Maryland General Assembly] that public liberty cannot be long preserved, but by wisdom, integrity, and strict adherence to public justice and public engagements. This justice and these engagements, as far as the influence and example of one state can extend, we are determined to promote and fulfill; and if the powers given to Congress by the confederation should be found to be incompetent [meaning inadequate] to the purposes of the union, we doubt not our constituents will readily consent to enlarge them.

In three and half years Washington would return to National public service at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. He explains his commitment to strengthening the civil authority in his written response to the Maryland General Assembly which he composed and delivered that same day, December 22, 1783:

You have rightly judged, Gentlemen, that public liberty cannot be long preserved, without the influence of those public virtues, which you have enumerated. May the example you have exhibited, and the disposition you have manifested, prevail extensively, and have the most salutary operation! For I am well assured, it is only by a general adoption of wise

and equitable measures, that I can derive any personal satisfaction, or the public any permanent advantages, from the successful issue of the contest.

I am deeply penetrated with the liberal sentiments and wishes contained in your last address to me as a public character, and while I am bidding you a final farewell in that capacity, be assured, Gentlemen, that it will be my study in retirement not to forfeit the favorable opinion of my fellow-citizens.

Washington left the door open to a return to public service and I suspect that night or the next morning, crossed out 'final' from his formal farewell to Congress. Five years later he would be President and the first civilian Command-in-Chief.

Tonight we not only add the final draft in Washington's own hand of his resignation speech to Congress to the public written record of that extraordinary event, but we also add the second of two contemporary accounts of the ceremony to the special collections of the Maryland State Archives. Among our existing holdings we have a letter written by one of the women who was present. From one of the fine Colonial mansions still standing in Annapolis Molly Ridout wrote to her mother in London:

My Dear Mamma:

....

I went with several others to see Genl Washington resign his commission. The Congress were assembled in the State House. Both Houses of Assembly were present as spectators. The Gallery [was] full of Ladies. The general seemed so much affected that everybody felt for him. He addressed Congress in a short speech but very affecting. Many tears were shed. ... I think the world never produced a greater man & very few so good."

Included with the acquisition of the final draft of Washington's speech is another contemporary account written by State Senator and Congressman James McHenry to his bride to be in Philadelphia, Peggy Caldwell. It is a letter written over several days, including December 23, 1783, during which McHenry was a member of the Congressional protocol committee and a participant in the ceremonies.

The ceremonies began at twelve noon on December 23rd. According to the protocol developed by Thomas Jefferson and his committee, Congress met and took their seats, leaving their hats on as a sign that until Washington was a civilian they would not display any deference or sign of subservience. General Washington entered the chamber and was escorted to a chair near the President of Congress. There he waited until the galleries were filled and the President called for silence. He then rose, bowed to Congress, who remained seated with their hats on and did not bow, and delivered his remarks.

James McHenry, more than any other observer, captured the drama of the moment in his letter to Peggy Caldwell:

Today my love the General at public audience made a deposit of his commission. ... It was a solemn and affecting spectacle; such [a] one as history does not present. The spectators all wept, and there was hardly a member of Congress who did not drop tears. The General's hand which held the address shook as he read it. When he spoke of the officers who had composed his family, and recommended those who had continued in it to the present moment to the favorable notice of Congress he was obliged to support the paper with both hands__ But when he commended the interests of his dearest country to almighty god, and those who had the superintendence of them to his holy keeping, his voice faltered and sunk, and the whole house felt his agitations. After a pause which was necessary for him to recover himself, he proceeded to say in the most penetrating manner. ---"Having now finished the work assigned me, I retire from the great theatre of action, and bidding an affectionate farewell to this agust 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"--So saying he drew out from his bosom his commission and delivered it up to the president of Congress...

This is only a sketch of the scene [McHenry continued] But, were I to write you a long letter I could not convey to you the whole. ...the past - the present - the future- the manner--the occasion all conspired to render it a spectacle inexpressively solemn and affecting.

But I have written enough. Good night my love, my amicable friend good night.

Once the President of Congress replied to his speech, Washington bowed again to Congress, who then removed their hats in an orchestrated gesture of respect, and he retired to the Committee Room next door to the Senate Chamber. After a little time, while the spectators withdrew, Washington stepped back into the room, bid every member of Congress farewell, and then rode off from the door of the State House with Governor Paca at his side, intent upon eating his Christmas dinner at home at Mount Vernon. Governor Paca accompanied him as far as the South River Ferry. Washington paused long enough at Londontown for a meal with his servant, Philip Walmsley, and then continued on his way, via the Patuxent Ferry and accommodations at Queen Anne, Prince George's County, having recorded an expenditure of \$50 his own money at the festivities in Annapolis.

Washington devoted the remainder his life to furthering the prosperity of the new nation, fearlessly stepping back into the arena of civil government when he thought he could contribute to its improvement. It is that generosity of public spirit, that devotion to "We the People, in order to form a more perfect union," which this document underscores, and which makes it such an important link in the written record of our longevity and achievement as a Republic.

Thank you