



# George Washington's Resignation Speech

*Resigning His Commission as  
Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army*



THE MARYLAND STATE HOUSE  
DECEMBER 23, 1783

M. President,

The great events on which my resignation depended having at length taken place, I have now the honor of presenting myself before ~~you~~<sup>them</sup> to surrender into their hands the trust committed to me, and to ~~request your pardon~~<sup>claim the independence of</sup> to retire from the service of my Country. —

Happy in the confirmation of our Independence and Sovereignty, ~~and pleased with the opportunity afforded by the late treaty of peace of our prospect of national happiness,~~ I resign with satisfaction the appointment I accepted with diffidence — A diffidence in my abilities to accomplish so arduous a task, which however was superseded by a confidence in the rectitude of our Cause, the support of the supreme Power of the Union, and the patronage of Heaven.

The successful termination of the War has verified the most sanguine expectations, and my gratitude for the interposition of Providence, and the assistance I have received from my Countrymen, increases with every review of the momentous Contest. —

While



While I repeat my obligations to the Army in general, I should do injustice to my own feelings not to acknowledge <sup>in my place</sup> the peculiar services and distinguished merits of the Gentlemen who have been attached to my person during the war. — It was impossible the choice of confidential officers to compose my family should have been more fortunate. — Permit me then to recommend in particular those who have continued in service to the present moment, as worthy of the favorable notice of Congress. —

I consider it an indispensable duty ~~to~~ to close this last solemn act of my official life, by commending the interests of our dearest Country to the protection of Almighty God, and those who have the <sup>superintending</sup> direction of them to his holy keeping. —

Having now finished the work assigned me, I retire from the great theatre of action — and bidding an affectionate ~~farewell~~ farewell to this august body under whose orders I have so long acted, I here <sup>offer</sup> ~~submit~~ my Commission, and take my <sup>ultimate</sup> leave of all the employments of public life. —



# George Washington's Resignation Speech

*Annapolis, December 23, 1783*

*One of the most important documents in American history*

Mr. President,

The great events on which my resignation depended, having at length taken place, I have now the honor of *offering my sincere congratulations to Congress, and [&]* of presenting myself before ~~{Congress}~~ them, to surrender into their hands the trust committed to me, and to *claim the indulgence of retiring* ~~{request permission to retire}~~ from the Service of my Country.

Happy in the confirmation of our Independence and Sovereignty, *and pleased with the opportunity afforded the United States, of becoming a respectable Nation* ~~{as well as in the contemplation of our prospect of National happiness}~~,

I resign with satisfaction the appointment I accepted with diffidence—

A diffidence in my abilities to accomplish so arduous a task, which however was superseded by a confidence in the rectitude of our Cause, the support of the supreme Power of the Union, and the patronage of Heaven.

The successful termination of the War has verified the most sanguine expectations- and my gratitude for the interposition of Providence, and the assistance I have received from my Countrymen, increases with every review of the momentous Contest.

While I repeat my obligations to the Army in general, I should do injustice to my own feelings not to acknowledge *in this place* the peculiar Services and distinguished merits of the Gentlemen who have been attached to my person during the War. —It was impossible the choice of confidential officers to compose my family should have been more fortunate.

—Permit me Sir, to recommend in particular those, who have continued in service to the present moment, as worthy of the favorable notice & *patronage* of Congress.—

I consider it an indispensable duty ~~{duty}~~ to close this last solemn act of my Official life, by commending the Interests of our dearest Country to the protection of Almighty God, and those who have the *superintendance* ~~{direction}~~ of them, to his holy keeping.—

Having now finished the work assigned me, I retire from the great theatre of Action, —and bidding an affectionate ~~{a final}~~ farewell to this August body, under whose orders I have so long acted, I here *offer* ~~{today deliver?}~~ my Commission, and take my ~~{ultimate}~~ leave of all the employments of public life.

The words in italics were inserted by Washington as he contemplated his first draft of the speech. He also crossed out two important words, both relating to his leave of public office: “a final” farewell and “ultimate” leave. In doing so, Washington is keeping his option of returning to public life open.

In the speech, Washington also makes a plea for Congress to pay the soldiers with whom he served and to fund the pensions of his officers, as they had been promised.

This speech is regarded as the fourth most important document in American history after the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. ❖

## *A Revolutionary Act*

In many ways, George Washington's resignation as commander-in-chief of the Continental Army was the final revolutionary act of the American Revolution. Many, especially in Europe, had expected that he would assume power and lead the new nation into the early stages of its independence. The Articles of Confederation of 1781 created only a loose alliance of the thirteen states. Congress was weak, and there was no obvious leader waiting in the wings.

But Washington had confidence in the ability of Congress to guide the nation successfully. It was a revolutionary act of faith and a remarkable milestone in the history of our nation. By surrendering his power to the civilian authority, Washington ensured that the United States would become a republic rather than a monarchy or a nation led by the military. Most importantly, this act established the bedrock principle of American democracy: that the military is subject to civilian authority.

Before he delivered his resignation speech to Congress, then meeting in the Old Senate Chamber, on December 23, 1783 Washington made clear his intent to retire in letters to friends and colleagues. On December 10, he wrote to his former aide, James McHenry, telling him of his plan to travel to Annapolis, where Congress was meeting, to "get translated into a private citizen." Washington longed to return to Mount Vernon and his family and his life as a farmer.

When Washington arrived in Annapolis on December 19, he wrote to Congress to ask how they wanted him to present his resignation. They responded with a request for him to make a brief speech at noon on December 23. While staying at Mann's Tavern on what is now Main Street in Annapolis, Washington set to work composing this speech.

At noon on December 23, 1783, Washington entered the Old Senate Chamber to deliver his brief but emotional speech of resignation. The protocol for the event had been carefully worked out by a committee of Congress that included James McHenry, Thomas Jefferson, and Elbridge Gerry. The members of Congress remained seated and "covered" (kept their hats on) while Washington stood before them facing the president of Congress, Thomas Mifflin.



*The Old Senate Chamber with statue of George Washington making his resignation speech as Molly Ridout watches from the balcony.*



At the conclusion of his remarks, Washington bowed to Congress and briefly left the room. He then returned to bid farewell to the many people who had crowded the room for the event. In addition to the members of Congress, the audience included several of the generals and other officers with whom he had served during the war, local officials, and prominent residents of Annapolis. The women in attendance were not allowed to be present on the Old Senate Chamber floor and had to watch from the “Ladies Balcony” at the back of the room. One of these women, Molly Ridout, wrote one of the very few descriptions of the ceremony in a letter to her mother: “the General seemed so much affected himself 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.”

As he departed, hoping to be at Mount Vernon in time for Christmas, Washington handed his personal copy of the speech to James McHenry. It remained in the McHenry family until 2007 when it was purchased by the Friends of the Maryland State Archives. The purchase also included the letter that James McHenry wrote to his future wife, Margaret (Peggy) Caldwell, describing the ceremony. Both of these documents had been privately held since 1783.

There are two official copies of General Washington’s resignation speech: one in the National Archives in Washington, D.C. and one at the Library of Congress. The one on display in the State House is the one from which Washington read as he addressed Congress and contains the changes he made as he composed the speech, some of which provide important clues to his thinking about his role in the nation’s future. ❖

*“It was a solemn and affecting spectacle;  
such [a] one I believe as history does not present.  
The spectators all wept, and there was hardly a member of Congress  
who did not drop tears.”*

CONGRESSMAN JAMES MCHENRY  
TO PEGGY CALDWELL  
DECEMBER 23, 1783



## Washington in Annapolis

George Washington visited Annapolis many times throughout his life. He had many friends there; his stepson, Jacky, attended King William's School and he loved the horse racing, theatre, and parties that were so much a part of the Annapolis social scene.

Washington's stay in Annapolis in December 1783 was the last stop on a long and emotional farewell tour to honor and thank his troops and, especially, the officers who served with him throughout the long and difficult war. On December 4, at a dinner at Fraunces Tavern in New York City, Washington said goodbye to these officers: "[w]ith a heart full of love and gratitude, I now take leave of you. I most devoutly wish that your latter days may be as prosperous and happy as your former ones have been glorious and honorable." He then took each officer by the hand to offer a personal word of farewell. After leaving New York, he stopped in Philadelphia and Baltimore before arriving in Annapolis on December 19.



*Mann's Tavern where George Washington stayed in December 1783.*

On his approach to the city, Washington was met at Three Mile Oak (near what is now the Annapolis shopping mall) by Generals William Smallwood and Horatio Gates and other Annapolis dignitaries. He was escorted to Mann's Tavern where he wrote to Congress requesting guidance as to how he was to offer his resignation.

Washington's presence in the city was a source of great pride and celebration for the citizens of Annapolis, and many dinners and other events were held in his honor. On December 22, Congress held a public dinner for some 200 guests at which thirteen toasts were offered:

*The United States; The Army; His Most Christian Majesty; The United Netherlands; The King of Sweden; Our Commissioners abroad; The Minister of France; The Minister of the United Netherlands; Harmony and a flourishing commerce throughout the union; May virtue and wisdom influence the councils of the United States, and may their conduct merit the blessings of Peace and Independence; The virtuous daughters of America; The Governor and State of Maryland; Long health and happiness of our illustrious General.*

After these toasts, Washington offered his own: "*Competent Powers to Congress for general Purposes,*" an expression of his oft-stated desire that Congress be given more authority.

James Tilton, a member of Congress from Delaware, described the dinner "as the most extraordinary I ever attended...Every man seemed to be in heaven or so absorbed in the pleasures of imagination, as to neglect the more sordid appetites, for not a soul got drunk, though there was wine in the plenty..." Following the dinner, a beautifully illuminated ball was held in the State House by the General Assembly. Washington, it was reported, danced with every lady present. ❖

## *Washington's Speech Display Case*

George Washington's resignation speech has been on display in the rotunda of the Maryland State House since February 2015 when it was unveiled by the leadership of the state and the legislature on Presidents' Day. It is most appropriate that the speech is displayed in the State House, within sight of where this historic event took place. The Archives was able to purchase this historic document through a combination of state funds, a tax deductible gift on the part of the owners, and two private donations. Private donations, through the Friends of the Maryland State Archives, have also made possible the display of the speech in a state-of-the-art exhibit case in the rotunda of the State House.

The case was designed by MFM Design of Bethesda, Maryland and built by Case[werks] of Baltimore.



### **PREPARED BY**

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### **COVER IMAGE:**

*Washington Resigning His Commission (detail)*  
Edwin White, 1858