George Washington's Resignation Speech: An Historic Document For Maryland

On January 22, 2007, the Maryland State Archives completed the acquisition of George Washington's final draft of his resignation speech, thus bringing back to Maryland one of the seminal documents of United States history, Washington's personal copy of the speech he gave in the Old Senate Chamber on December 23, 1783. In response to instructions from Congress that he was expected to make formal remarks, Washington wrote this speech while he was in Annapolis.

The purchase also includes the letter that James McHenry wrote to his future wife, Margaret (Peggy) Caldwell, describing the ceremony. Both of these documents have been privately held since 1783.

There are two official copies of General Washington's speech: one in the National Archives in Washington, D.C., and one at the Library of Congress. The one acquired by the Archives for Maryland is his personal, annotated copy from which he read during the ceremony. Washington gave this draft of his speech to a member of the Congressional protocol committee, which included Thomas Jefferson and James McHenry, as he departed for Mt. Vernon after the ceremony. It has remained in the family until it was acquired by the Maryland State Archives.

It is most appropriate that these two documents will be displayed in the State House, within sight of where this historic event actually took place. Until this acquisition, Maryland had not owned any documents or artifacts that relate directly to Washington's resignation. The display of these documents will add immeasurably to the interpretation of the State House and to visitors' understanding of the important role that Maryland played in the formation of our nation.

The Archives was able to purchase these two historic documents through a combination of state funds, a tax deductible gift on the part of the owners and two private donations. The Archives will continue to seek private funding, through the Friends of the Maryland State Archives, for educational and interpretive materials, as well as a state-of-the-art exhibit case to protect the documents on display in the State House. The Friends is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that can receive tax deductible gifts.

When the two documents are ready for public display, they will be exhibited near the spot on which George Washington stood as he delivered his speech. A professionally designed and constructed case will be required to protect them from light exposure, as well as the fluctuating climate conditions within the State House.

Once they are on display, interpretive and educational materials will be needed to help the public, and, especially, the thousands of school children who visit the State House every year to understand what a pivotal event Washington's resignation was in the history of our country. The power of the civil authority over the military is a bedrock principle on which the United States' system of government has been built, and George Washington's resignation speech is the cornerstone of that principle. The Archives is continuing to raise funds for these materials.

Image*: Washington Resigning by Edwin White* (detail)*, 1858*
Maryland Commission on Artistic Property MSA SC 1545-1112
Prepared by the Maryland State Archives, *February 2007*

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 of presenting myself before ~~Congress~~ them to surrender into their hands the trust committed to me, and to ~~request permission to retire~~ claim the indulgence of retiring from the Service of my Country. —

Happy in the confirmation of our Independence and Sovereignty, ~~as well as in the contemplation of our prospect of National happiness~~ and pleased with the opportunity afforded the United States of becoming a respectable Nation, 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, encreases 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 in the strongest manner 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 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 superintending 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 ~~official~~ farewell to this August body under whose orders I have so long acted, I here offer ~~[illegible]~~ my Commission, and take my ~~[illegible]~~ leave of all the employments of public life. —

Washington's Resignation Speech (Final Draft)

Annapolis, December 23, 1783

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 Archives and the Friends of the Maryland State Archives wish to thank the executive and legislative branches of Maryland state government for their support of Maryland's acquisition of these historic documents. We would like to thank especially Willard Hackerman, Henry A. Rosenberg, Jr., the former owners of the documents and all of the members of the board of the Friends for their generous support. To everyone who helped to preserve these documents for the benefit of the public, we are very grateful.

If you would like to contribute to the interpretation and exhibition of this document, please contact the Friends of the Maryland State Archives, 350 Rowe Boulevard, Annapolis MD 21401. Phone: 410.260.6445.