

# George Washington's Resignation Speech:

## *An Historic Document for Maryland*

George Washington's resignation as commander-in-chief of the Continental Army at the end of the Revolutionary War was a 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 dictatorship. He delivered this resignation speech on December 23, 1783 to Congress, then meeting in the Old Senate Chamber. He then left Annapolis to return to Mount Vernon in time for Christmas.



This speech is Washington's personal copy of his remarks to Congress on that historic day. As he left the Old Senate Chamber, he handed it to a member of Congress and it remained in that family until it was acquired in 2007 by 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 was 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 is most appropriate that the speech is displayed in the State House, within sight of where this historic event took place. Until this acquisition, Maryland had not owned any documents or artifacts that related directly to Washington's resignation. The Archives was able to purchase both historic documents 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 rotunda of the State House. The case was unveiled at a ceremony on February 16, 2015.

The display of the speech and interpretive and educational materials are vital to helping 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 Friends of the Maryland State Archives will continue to seek private funding for educational and interpretive materials, as well as other documents and artifacts related to this historic event. The Friends is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization and all donations to it are tax deductible.

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

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~~<sup>claim the indulgence of</sup> ~~to retire~~<sup>to retire</sup> from the service of my Country. —

Happy is the confirmation of our Independence and Sovereignty, ~~and which is the chief~~<sup>and which is the chief</sup> ~~of our~~<sup>of our</sup> ~~prospects of national~~<sup>prospects of national</sup> ~~happiness~~<sup>happiness</sup>, 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 the days</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 to commend 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> resign my Commission, and take my ultimate leave of all the employments of public life. —

## George Washington's Resignation Speech

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.



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The Maryland State 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 the acquisition of these historic documents, as well as Willard Hackerman, Henry J. Rosenberg, Jr., and the previous owners of the documents. The Friends of the Maryland State Archives also thank the following donors for making possible the display case for the speech that is now in the rotunda of the Maryland State House: Captain John Questers Chapter, Rockville; The General Society, Sons of the Revolution, national organization and Maryland Chapter; Maryland Society, Sons of the American Revolution; the Middendorf Foundation, William A. Reese, The Dorothy L. & Henry A. Rosenberg Foundation; the Society of the Cincinnati, Maryland Chapter; and an anonymous donor.

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All donations to the Friends of MSA are fully tax deductible to the fullest extent of the law

*George Washington's Resignation Speech, Maryland State Archives Special Collections MSA SC 5664*