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.

Washington’s Speech Display Case

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George Washington’s Resignation Speech

WASHINGTON’S SPEECH DISPLAY CASE

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PREPARED BY

The Friends of the Maryland State Archives

With funding from:

The Maryland Heritage Areas Authority, an instrumentality of the state of Maryland. However, the contents and opinions do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Maryland Heritage Areas Authority.

Friends of the Maryland State Archives

350 Rowe Boulevard, Annapolis MD 21401
410.260.6444 or mimi.calver@maryland.gov

The Friends is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization and all donations to it are tax deductible.

COVER IMAGE:

Washington Resigning His Commission (detail) Edwin White, 1888
George Washington’s Resignation Speech

Washington’s Speech Display Case

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COVER IMAGE:
Washington Resigning His Commission (demi)
Edwin White, 1858

George Washington’s Resignation Speech
Resigning His Commission as Commander-In-Chief of the Continental Army
January 2017

THE MARYLAND STATE HOUSE
DECEMBER 23, 1783
Washington in Annapolis

George Washington visited Annapolis many times throughout his life. He had stayed in the town during the American Revolution and in the early days of the new republic. Both before and after the Revolution, he had stayed in the town with his wife, Martha. He loved the racing, theatre, and parties that were so much a part of the Annapolis social scene. The Governor and State of Maryland; Long health and happiness of our illustrious General.

Mr. President,

The great events on which my resignation depended, having at length taken place, I have the satisfaction to tender to Congress the resignation of a commission, which was accepted by me on the 2nd of April, 1781. I now return it with a thanksgiving heart, to these officers: “[w]ith a heart full of love and esteem for all those in whose keeping my life was placed, and who have had the opportunity afforded the United States, of becoming a respectable Nation. —Permit me Sir, to recommend in particular those, who have continued in service to the Office of Action, —and bidding an affectionate {a final} leave of all the employments of public life.

Washington Resigning His Commission in the Old Senate Chamber

Washington Resigning His Commission in the Old Senate Chamber

Washington's Resignation Speech

Washington's speech is regarded as the fourth most important document in American history after the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. Washington's speech 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. The words in italics were included in Washington's final draft of the speech but were not present in his original manuscript. The words in double italics were added by Washington's secretaries after his final draft. The words in bold were added by Washington himself.

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The Governor and State of Maryland; Long health and happiness of our illustrious General.
Washington in Annapolis

George Washington visited Annapolis many times throughout his life. He had a long friendship with Governor Thomas Nelson 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 journey for the Commander in Chief. He was honored in Annapolis, and, especially, the officers who served with him throughout the war. On December 4, at a dinner at the Annapolis shopping mall, General James McHenry’s resignation speech: one in the National Archives in Washington, D.C. and the other 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 continued 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.  

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Washington Academy:

Mr. President, this brings me to the close of the information which I have to offer. I trust that it may be satisfactory to Congress, and I beg leave to offer my sincere congratulations to them on the great and important service which they have been instrumental in effecting, and to tender my most respectful obligations for the favors which they have been pleased to bestow upon me. I now take leave of you. I most sincerely hope that the Country will continue to be governed by the principles which you have so long supported, and that you will be directed by them in all your future conduct. I beg leave to offer my most respectful compliments to the ladies who have distinguished me with their attendance, and to assure them that I shall ever feel it aSource: George Washington’s Farewell Speech (1796)
At the conclusion of his remarks, Washington bowed to Congress and briefly left the room. He then returned to his 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 wait 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 & few very good ones.”

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.

This copy of the McHenry family-owned copy is what is now on display in the State House. It is the one from which Washington read as he addressed Congress in a short Speech but very affecting many tears were shed…

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 pronouncement in the city was a source of great pride and celebration for the citizens of Annapolis and of the nation. He was seated at Mann’s Tavern where he wrote to Congress requesting guidance as to how he was to offer his resignation.

On December 4, at a dinner at Fraunces Tavern in New York City, Washington toasted the memory of the recently deceased General John Sullivan. The toast was met with applause and gratitude, and I take now of you, I mean every man of you, and your last duty may be as prosperous and happy as your former ones have been happy and prosperous.”

He was then asked to return to Philadelphia by the Continental Congress, but he refused and remained in Annapolis. After a brief stay, he left for Philadelphia by boat and stopped in Philadelphia and Baltimore before arriving at his home at Mount Vernon on December 28.

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 permission of Congress to resign my commission.”

He made a short visit to Annapolis on December 12, 1783. On December 19, he wrote to Congress to ask about his resignation. He wrote, “I am informed that the President of Congress, Thomas Mifflin, has had confidence enough to communicate to Congress his intention of resigning his commission; and, especially, the officers who served with him from the commencement of the war.”

Washington’s stay in Annapolis in December 1783 was the last stop on a long and emotional tour of the United States. He traveled to New York, Philadelphia, and, especially, the officers who served with him from the commencement of the war.

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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 depends, having at length taken place, I have the happiness to add, that with the wish of quitting the美味しい of public life, I shall now return to my home, and to the pursuits of a private station.

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 officers. He arrived in Annapolis on December 14 and stopped in Philadelphia and Baltimore before arriving in Annapolis on December 19.

In his famous resignation speech, Washington addressed Congress in a short speech but very affecting many tears were shed. "I resign with satisfaction the appointment I accepted with diffidence — farewell to this august body, under whose orders I have so long acted, I here offer my Commission, and take my place among the private citizens."

The words in italics were inserted by Washington as he contemplated his first draft of the speech. This version of the speech includes 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.

The speech begins with a personal statement about his resignation. Washington wrote about his desire to resign and his confidence in the ability of Congress to guide the nation successfully. He also expressed his confidence in the people he worked with and the nation's future. Washington also expressed his gratitude for the assistance and support he received throughout the war and in particular to the officers who served with him.

Washington went on to express his hope that the military would be subject to civilian authority and that the nation would become a respectable Nation. He also expressed his confidence in the people of the United States and their ability to fund the pensions of his officers.

Washington then concluded his speech, saying that he had been satisfied with the performance of his officers and that he was leaving his commission to Congress. He also thanked Congress for the assistance and support he received throughout the war.

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Cover Image: Washington Resigning His Commission (detail) Edwin White, 1858