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 executive 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 last taken place, I have now the honor of addressing myself before Congress to surrender into their hands the trust committed to me, and to request the favorable interposition of the President from the Service of my Country. —

Haply in the confirmation of our Independence and Sovereignty, as well as in the glorious conduct of our late host of noble & Christian soldiers, I conclude 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 surpased 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 my Army in general, I should do injustice to my own feelings not to acknowledge the peculiar services and distinguished merits of the Gentle- 
men who have been attached to my per- 
son during the war. — It was impos- 
sible the choice of confidential Officers to 
comprise my family should have been 
more fortunate. — Permit me, sir, to 
recommend in particular those whom 
continued in service to the most mo- 
ment, as worthy of the favorable notice 
of Congress. —

I consider it as indispensable 
the duty, duty, to close this last solemn 
act of my official life, by command- 
ing the interest of our nearest country to 
the protection of Almighty God, and those 
who have the direction of men to his 
protection. —

Having now finished 
the work assigned me, retire from 
the great theatre of action — and bid- 
dip an affectionate — farewell. 
to this August body under whose eyes 
I have so long acted. There 
my Commission, and take my leave of all the employments of pub- 
lic 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 them, to surrender into their hands the trust committed to me, and to claim the indulgence of retiring 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 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 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 to this August 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.--

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.