

Possibly the most significant date in Annapolis's 300 years, apart from the granting of its charter from Queen Anne on June 6, 1708, is December 23, 1783. At noon that Monday, General Washington had written to Baron von Steuben, "I shall become a private Citizen on the Banks of the Potomack."

The unspoken question was whether he really could withdraw that completely from public life. The long war had left the 13 fledgling states flimsily united in a shaky union. Many unsolved problems remained. Still, the country was finally at peace, and a treaty had been negotiated to confirm its freedom. Like Roman consul Lucius Cincinnatus, to whom he would be compared, he hoped to withdraw from fame and return to his plough. But could he? No one then, referring to the Roman hero, whom the histories described as "[once] victorious, left the tented field, covered with honor, and withdrew from public life," recalled that as times again became desperate, Cincinnatus was twice recalled to Rome from his farm to become dictator.

In an audience with George III in London, the official Court history painter, Benjamin West of Philadelphia, had been asked what he thought the general would do after America's formal independence. The godlike Washington, who many expected would be another King George if he wanted a throne, was more likely, West predicted, to return to his plantation in Virginia. The general was nearly fifty-two, and eager to live out his remaining years as a gentleman farmer. If Washington did that, exclaimed His Majesty, who could not believe that anyone willingly relinquished supreme authority, he would be the greatest man in the world.

Washington could be anything he wanted to be. Yet he did intend to resign his commission, hedging only slightly in revising the draft of his address to the Confederation Congress. He wrote it in his own hand and expected to read it aloud, rather than submit a piece of paper to the president of the Congress, Thomas Mifflin. Only a public presentation would dramatize the yielding of military authority to the civil sector.

As early as Washington's farewell to his officers at Newburgh in New York on March 15, he had urged the men to resist any attempts at Caesarism in "our common Country;" and "to express your utmost horror and detestation of the Man who wishes, under any specious pretences, to overturn the liberties of our Country, and who wickedly attempts to open the flood Gates of Civil Discord. . . ." Had that day never happened, Captain Samuel Shaw of Boston, who was there in Newburgh, wrote in awe, the world would have never seen "the last stage of perfection to which human nature is capable of attaining."

Washington implied throughout the year of his withdrawal from power that Americans should value their fought-for freedom above the symbolic or authoritarian value they saw in any individual. The survival of the infant republic depended upon its utilizing all its people in participatory democracy. From Mount Vernon, he would watch, and wait. He realized that the Articles of Confederation under which the nation was then governed was a patchwork in need of repair. The Confederation Congress was weak; its elected president (theoretically the nation's central figure) had little authority and less prestige; the national army was melting into state militias; the sovereign states

were much too selfishly sovereign. The former colonies preferred having no standing army to paying for one.

Congress often unhelpfully--had overseen the war, and now the peace, almost without money and without the authority to coerce funds from the states or their citizens. States retained taxing and many other--powers. Congress under the Articles of Confederation, ratified seven months before Yorktown in 1781, was little more than a discussion group. Only South Carolina had paid its full 1782 quota to the depleted federal treasury by July 1783 and had furnished that contribution "in kind" rather than in coin--supplies for the former army in the south, now disbanding at Charleston. Virginia had contributed half its quota; Rhode Island had paid a fourth, Pennsylvania a fifth; Connecticut and New Jersey each a seventh, Massachusetts an eighth, New York and Maryland a token twentieth, New Hampshire less than one percent. North Carolina, Delaware, and Georgia had paid in nothing at all. Nevertheless, Washington, en route home, had felt compelled to praise the states for their support of their war for their own independence. He could do little else.

The governors of the states were an awkward civilian balance to the Congress, for Washington was the only informal and unifying contact with them. Few communicated with each other. At one point there had been serious talk of the "necessity" of appointing the General as "sole dictator of America" to stop the drift into disintegration. Seeing only ruin ahead, Lewis Nicola, a general of French-Irish origin whom Washington despised, but who was a darling of the Congress, wrote to him that the colonies ought to merge as a monarchy, with the already revered commander-in-chief as king. Washington replied angrily, "I must view [this suggestion] with abhorrence and reprehend [it] with severity."

He intended to return, in person, his commission as commander-in-chief from what had been, in 1775, the Continental Congress. Like a practiced actor making his final exit, he wanted to achieve a dramatic public gesture, confirming that a workable society that did not depend upon generals could exist in America. He enjoyed the stage and often applied its lessons and employed its metaphors. (It would be his only real farewell address. The more famous farewell from the presidency, in 1796, was largely written by Alexander Hamilton, and only published in a newspaper. Washington never delivered it.)

“Nothing now remains,” he wrote for his grand gesture in Annapolis, “but for the actors of this mighty scene—to preserve a perfect, unvarying constancy of character through the very last act, to close the drama with applause, and to retire from the military theatre with the same approbation of angels and men which have crowned all their former virtuous actions.”

He did not intend to return to national life in any way whatever. One might be cynical about his motives regarding monarchy by noting that he was childless and had no direct heirs. If he became a king, his demise would plunge his regime into succession difficulties. No such speculation appears in his writings nor in records of his conversations, and I’ve brought it up only to write it off as he did himself to Lewis Nicola.

With all sincerity, six years later, Ben Franklin, in his will, would write, “My fine crab-tree walking stick, with a gold head . . . wrought in the form of the cap of liberty, I give to my friend, and the friend of mankind, George Washington. If it were a [king’s] sceptre, he has merited it and would become it.”

Reviewing the draft of his address in his rooms at George Mann's Hotel, at the corner of Main and Conduit streets (Mann's adjacent house, later a tavern, remains, but the hotel burned down a century ago), Washington went over his phrases "final farewell" and "ultimate leave" of public service, and chose to expunge some of the finality. He was going home to Mount Vernon, but should he bar the door to any urgent calls upon him? The sustained adulation, amounting to near worship, he had experienced en route home, and his recognition as he traveled of the unstable state of the infant republic, were shifting his obduracy by a degree or two. He struck out "final" and "ultimate." The difficult year of transition to peace and independence had made a difference to his, and to the new nation's, future. Whatever he intended, he was likely to remain the overwhelming personality in American life. Without the experience of what he called his "long farewell," he might not have become the republic's first constitutional president.

The document in Washington's hand remained in the possession of Maryland congressman James McHenry, a member of the protocol committee, and then McHenry's heirs, for more than two centuries. It was acquired by the Maryland State Archives in 2007, and is now on display.

Scheduled for the evening before his formal resignation was the last and most elaborate of the farewell dinners and balls at which he was saluted en route home. Annapolis was the appropriate place for it. Charles Thomson, the secretary of Congress, considered Annapolis a town "where Pleasure holds her Court," where there was an abundance of "turkies, fine fish and oysters." The delegate from rigid Rhode Island, David Howell, was told that "here in Annapolis is a play house, a ball-room & a good many taverns, but there is no place of public worship." (Howell was misinformed.) He deplored

‘the amusements . . . such as Balls, Concerts, routs, Fandangoes & fox hunting;’ and considered ‘the tone’ of Annapolis as ‘profligate.’ Howells’s gloomy view was borne out the evening before Washington’s resignation when the newly re-elected Maryland governor, Charles Paca (a signer of the Declaration of Independence) arranged, to honor the General, a festive, wine-drenched, dinner and ball for more than 200 guests at the State House.

That the event was indeed spirited is obvious from hotel-keeper George Mann’s bill to Congress for 98 bottles of wine and two-and-a-half gallons of liquor. Since there were 13 toasts to represent the 13 states, perhaps that seems a considerable intake. The first toast was to the United States; the symbolic 13th was ‘Long Health and Happiness to our illustrious General.’ Ladies were excluded from these alcoholic preliminaries.

After the litany of toasts, a men-only tradition, the elegantly attired women invitees entered. Once the musicians struck up the post-prandial music, Washington danced reels and minuets with the ladies as closely as was possible since fashion decreed stiff stays and hoop skirts which kept him two feet distant from his partners. Nevertheless, the ladies formally gloved as were the men--vied eagerly for a chance, as an observer put it, ‘to get a touch of him.’

The General got little sleep after the ball and was up early to prepare for the assembly and pack for his departure, immediately afterward, for home. With his draft address, and his original general’s commission (engrossed on parchment) tucked into his coat pocket, and accompanied by two wartime aides, he appeared at the State House on schedule, just before noon. At well over six feet and attired in his striking buff-and-blue

uniform which he expected to hang up for good in Mount Vernon, he appeared stately and formidable, overshadowing everyone else; yet Washington was more anxious than he appeared to be.

Delegates were present from Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North and South Carolina, and New Hampshire--only twenty members in all, seated in the chamber with hats perched on their heads in English parliamentary custom. (Delegates took off their hats only when rising to speak.) No members had turned up from New York, New Jersey, Vermont and Georgia, and it took a special appeal from the president of Congress to secure a quorum of nine states to conduct business.

Washington was directed to a seat next to Thomas Mifflin. Attendants then reopened the doors to admit invited VIP guests, described by Abiel Foster of New Hampshire as "the Governor & [his] Council, [members of] the Senate & House of Assembly . . . and the principal Gentlemen & Ladies of the City." The ladies were escorted to the gallery above, and the men clustered along the walls, aisles and stairs. The occasion drew a full house.

A painting of the scene exists by John Trumbull, who was not even there, having left for London earlier in the month. He had learned about the event while abroad from Benjamin West. On returning, Trumbull began a crowded canvas including some prominent Americans who were not actually present. It was a common artistic practice then--redrawing history to flatter eminent absentees. From the balcony looking down he included Martha Washington, then awaiting her husband at Mount Vernon, and three of her grandchildren.

Thomas Jefferson had drawn up the agenda, even the opening words for President Mifflin, who, turning to Washington, began formally, "Sir, the United States in Congress assembled are prepared to receive your communications." (The verb *are* actually suggests the condition of disunion.) As the General rose and bowed, members raised their cocked hats in lieu of a return bow. Despite the formalities, the crowded assembly room radiated with emotion. James McHenry recalled that Washington's hand trembled as he read from his text, and that his voice faltered at times. The whole house, McHenry wrote, "felt his agitations." When Washington "recover[ed] himself he proceeded . . . in the most penetrating manner."

The "great events" on which his resignation depended, the General began, had now taken place. Independence and sovereignty were now assured by treaty, and the United States had the "opportunity" to become he did not say *had become* a respectable nation. He offered his congratulations to the members of Congress for their roles in those achievements. It was now time, he declared, to "surrender into their hands the trust committed to me, and to claim the indulgence of retiring from the Service of my Country?" He expected no shouts of "No, no, we want you to stay!" as it would have marred the decorum of the occasion. Besides, everyone knew why he was there.

Not religious in a theological sense Martha was the assiduous churchgoer in the family and took Anglican Communion—Washington first referred, in deference to the devout, to "the interposition of Providence" in the nation's behalf, and "the patronage of Heaven." (A further reference to the Almighty would come later.) He praised the "assistance" of his "Countrymen, although he knew that many colonists had offered none, and he visibly, although only briefly, broke down when referring to the service "of the

Gentlemen who have been attached to my person during the War.” He commended them to “the favorable notice and patronage of Congress.” According to McHenry, Washington had to grip his paper with both hands to steady it enough to proceed.

A paragraph remained. “I consider it an indispensable duty,” he continued, “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 superintendence of [those interests], to his holy keeping. Having now finished the work assigned to 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.”

From his coat pocket, Washington withdrew his general’s commission, dated June 15, 1775, and handed it ceremoniously to Thomas Mifflin. For his audience it was a moment of consummate drama. For its implications, it was much, much more. By his action he had made clear the principle that the new nation was a civil society, that its elected representatives retained authority over the military dimension of the republic. Through the ballot box, former generals have become presidents throughout our history, but each since Washington has recognized that he represented the people.

No American generals have become Caesars. The memorable sacking of General Douglas MacArthur for insubordination by President Harry Truman in April 1951 during the Korean War dramatized the ascendancy of civilian authority over the military sector. Ironically, MacArthur was a self-styled Caesar aspiring to become President, but given his comeuppance by a president who had been an artillery captain drawn out of civilian life in a war in which MacArthur, a career officer, first rose to general’s rank. (That

event is doubly memorable to me: it was the week in which I was activated as a second lieutenant.)

Jefferson, who had read Washington's address in advance, wrote the words read by Thomas Mifflin in acknowledgment of Washington's stepping down. The General, so the president of the Congress, who had once, in the darker days of 1777, conspired unsuccessfully to oust Washington, conceded, "had conducted the great military conflict with wisdom and fortitude, invariably regarding the rights of the civil powers." Washington, Mifflin continued, had been able to gain "the love and confidence of your fellow citizens" as he achieved their "freedom, safety and independence. . . . The glory of your virtues will continue to animate [the] remotest ages," for Washington had "defended the standard of liberty in this new world. . . ."

Everywhere Washington had paused on his way home he had heard much the same thing. If he wanted to stay on in any capacity whatever, even on a throne created for him, he had only to hint at it. But his most quoted remark in each informal address was the biblical wish to retire under his own vine and fig tree. He intended to set that example for the nation, and Americans understood. From Richmond, the Virginia capital, John Marshall, a former army captain at Valley Forge and now a state assemblyman and lawyer, would write to James Monroe in language far more effusive than he would ever employ as Chief Justice of the United States, "At length the military career of the greatest Man on earth is closed. May happiness attend him wherever he goes. May he long enjoy those blessings he has secured to his Country."

A generation later, Marshall's Virginia compatriot James Madison told John Trumbull, who had painted him and Martha Washington into his epic canvas although

neither was present, that Washington's relinquishing of power was "a glorious action . . . as a contrast to the military usurpations so conspicuous in history."

In the State House, Washington quietly stepped into an anteroom while Mifflin dismissed the spectators and formally adjourned the assembly. Then the General, a private citizen after more than eight years, during which he had been home to Mount Vernon only once, for a fleeting few days before Yorktown, re-entered the assembly room. According to McHenry, Washington shook hands with each delegate, and said goodbye, not expecting to see most of them again. It was a vast, rough country. Travel was difficult and distances were long.

Many men it was OK in that century shed tears. With his two aides, the General left the State House for their horses and gear. Governor William Paca and his party accompanied Washington as far as the South River ferry below Annapolis. Darkness came early in late December. The Potomac would not be crossed until the next morning.

Although a civilian again, Washington was entitled, as were his soldiers, to going-home expenses, and he continued to itemize them, even the tips to servants at his final overnight stopping place for "assisting with my Bags," which including his camp chest and a leatherbound trunk. He noted the costs of the final ferry crossing early on December 24th as \$1.40. By afternoon he was home in time for a Christmas dinner the next day which he described in military fashion as "an Attack of Christmas Pyes."

As he settled gratefully into what he hoped would be retirement, in *Bailey's Pocket Almanack* for 1784, Yankee poet Philip Freneau wrote of Washington,

In [Mount] Vernon's groves you shun the throne,
Admir'd by kings, but seen by none.

Stirred by the General's unqualified renunciation of command, John Trumbull, painting in London, wrote to his brother in Connecticut, that Washington's stepping aside had earned 'the commendation and admiration of this part of the world. 'Tis a conduct so novel, so inconceivable to People who, far from giving up powers they possess, are willing to convulse the Empire to acquire more.'

Both dimensions of Washington's implicit rejection of a crown—prestige and power—would be recalled a generation later by ex-emperor Napoleon when in dreary exile in remote St. Helena. "They wanted me to be another Washington," he explained, defending his own imperial ambitions, but he claimed unpersuasively that circumstances ruled out his republican faith. On Washington's death late in 1799, when Napoleon was still only a Consul of France, he had ordered the French army into mourning for ten days. He even made a speech to the troops eulogizing the American who had "put his country's freedom on a sure basis." But Napoleon would become, Lord Byron would charge bitterly, "the Washington of worlds betrayed," while the squire of Mount Vernon remained

. . . the first~~the last~~the best-

The Cincinnatus of the West,

Whom Envy dared not hate.

Bequeath the name of Washington;

To make man blush there was but one.