

Prompting Student Curiosity About George Washington’s Decision to Participate in the Constitutional Convention

Lee Ann Potter

On March 8, 1787, nearly ten weeks before the gathering that would become known as the Constitutional Convention was to begin in Philadelphia, George Washington sent a letter from his home at Mount Vernon, Virginia, to Major General Henry Knox in New York. In it, Washington was depending on Knox’s “friendship—candour [sic]—and judgment,” as he sought advice on whether or not he should attend the convention as a delegate from Virginia. He asked, “let me pray you, my dear Sir, to inform me confidentially, what the public expectation is on this head—that is, whether I will, or ought to be there?” [Washington’s letter book copy of the note he sent to Knox is available at: www.loc.gov/resource/mgw2.014/?sp=37; www.loc.gov/resource/mgw2.014/?sp=38; and www.loc.gov/resource/mgw2.014/?sp=39.]

Eleven days later, Knox penned his reply (featured in this article and available at www.loc.gov/item/mgw435861), offering his opinion “with the utmost sincerity and frankness.” He wrote, in part,

Were the convention to propose only amendments, and patch work to the present defective confederation, your reputation would in a degree suffer—But were an energetic, and judicious

system to be proposed with Your signature, it would be a circumstance highly honorable to your fame, in the judgement [sic] of the present and future ages; and doubly entitle you to the glorious republican epithet—The Father of Your Country.

In other words, Knox thought the convention should result in more than mere amendments, that Washington should attend, and that doing so would secure

Washington’s place in history.

Knox’s perspective may certainly have influenced Washington’s decision. Three months earlier, on December 6, 1786, Edmund Randolph, the governor of Virginia, had written to Washington to inform him that he had been elected to the Virginia delegation for the federal convention. Washington ambiguously declined the appointment, replying on December 21st, “Sir, there exists at this moment, circumstances, which I am persuaded will render my acceptance of this fresh mark of confidence incompatible with other measures which I had previously adopted.” On March 28th, however, after hearing from Knox, Washington again wrote to Randolph, this time stating that “my friends, with a degree of sollicitude [sic] which is unusual, seem to wish my attendance on this occasion, I have come to a resolution to go.” On May 14th, he was

unanimously elected to serve as the convention's president.

Before the American Revolution, Knox had been a book seller in Boston and learned about military strategy, weapons, the design of fortifications and more by reading countless books. In the summer of 1775, John Adams recommended Knox to Washington

for a position in the Continental Army. Later that year, the 43-year-old Washington directed the 25-year-old Knox to steal the British artillery at Fort Ticonderoga on Lake Champlain and transport the weapons to Boston. Knox and his troops accomplished this incredible task, despite the challenges of terrain and

winter weather. Soon after, Washington named Knox chief of the Continental Army Artillery, and General Knox remained one of Washington's closest advisors and confidants throughout the war and beyond.

The correspondence between Washington and Knox, written between 1775 and

Ordinary People in the Papers of George Washington at the Library of Congress

Julie Miller, Historian, Early America, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress

George Washington's papers at the Library of Congress are about much more than George Washington. Because the first president was a dedicated record-keeper, his papers are also a source of information about the people with whom he lived, worked, and did business. Volunteers for the Library's crowdsourcing program, *By the People*, recently transcribed three groups of unpublished papers once in the possession of George Washington. Two of these: *Revolutionary War Receipts, 1776–1780*, and *Interrogations of British Deserters, 1782–1783*, create a record of the experience of some of the ordinary people Washington encountered during the Revolutionary War.

A third, *Farm Reports, 1789–1798*, is a group of the reports sent weekly to Washington by his farm managers at Mount Vernon. These record the weather, show Washington engaging with the latest agricultural innovations of his time, and document the lives and labor of the enslaved people at Mount Vernon. The transcriptions for these three projects will soon return to the George Washington Papers on the Library's website to help researchers more easily find and explore this important collection.

Revolutionary War Receipts, 1776–1780

One hundred and eighty-five receipts signed by the operators of small businesses, many of them women, who supplied Washington and his household with bread, wine, household furnishings, laundry, tavern meals, and even gingerbread as he pursued the war through New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Delaware between April 1776 and November 1780. Washington's housekeeper and steward kept these so that Washington could submit them to Congress for reimbursement after the war.

Interrogations of British Deserters, 1782–1783

Two small, battered volumes in Washington's papers contain notes made by his aides as they interrogated British deserters. The interrogations took place around New York City in 1782 and 1783 while it was occupied by British troops. These men were Americans pressed into British service, sailors

captured from French ships, escapees from British prison ships, Hessian mercenaries, and Americans serving in loyalist regiments, including the one commanded by Benedict Arnold after his defection. They give their names and histories, describe conditions at British encampments, and tell where, how, and why they left. Their histories, most of no more than a paragraph, are packed with their often adventurous experiences.

Farm Reports, 1789–1798

These previously unpublished farm reports in George Washington's papers are an important source of information about the enslaved people at Mount Vernon. From 1786 until his death, George Washington received detailed, weekly reports from the managers of his five farms. The George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress contain approximately fifty of these, some whole, some fragmentary, ca. 1789–1798, covering the period when Washington was president of the United States. Each is headed by a daily weather report, then lists labor at each farm. Carpentry, spinning and weaving, output of the mill, and other industries are documented. Most of this labor was carried out by enslaved people. The reports show their work, and even their births, illnesses, deaths, and travel.

Find out More

You can see Washington's papers online at the Library of Congress at: www.loc.gov/collections/george-washington-papers/about-this-collection

To see the transcriptions made by *By the People* volunteers, go to: <https://crowd.loc.gov/campaigns/ordinary-lives-in-george-washingtons-papers-the-revolutionary-war/>

For more *By the People* crowdsourcing projects: <https://crowd.loc.gov>

To see the published edition of Washington's papers, digitized, go to Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov>

Transcription of letter from Washington to Knox

Mount Vernon 8th Mar. 1787

My dear Sir,

Will you permit me to give you the trouble of making an indirect, but precise enquiry, into the alligations of the enclosed letters. I flatter myself that from the vicinity of Elizabeth Town to New York, and the constant intercourse between the two, you will be able to do it without much trouble. It is but little in my power to afford the pecuniary aids required by the letter writer; but if the facts as set forth be true, I should feel very happy in offering my mite, and rendering any services in my power on the occasion. Be so good, when you write to me on this subject, to return the letters & translations.¹

The observations contained in your letter of the 22d Ulto (which came duly to hand) respecting the disfranchisement of a number of the Citizens of Massachusetts for their rebellious conduct, may be just; and yet, without exemplary punishment, similar disorders may be excited by other ambitious and discontented characters. Punishment however ought to light on the principals.

I am glad to hear that Congress are about to remove some of the stumbling blocks which lay in the way of the proposed Convention. A Convention I wish to see tried—after which, if the present government is not efficient, conviction of the propriety of a change will dessiminate through every rank, and class of people and may be brought about in peace—till which, however necessary it may appear in the eyes of the more discerning, my opinion is, that it cannot be effected without

great contention, and much confusion. It is among the evils, and perhaps is not the smallest, of democratical governments, that the people must feel, before they will see. When this happens, they are roused to action—hence it is that this form of government is so slow. I am indirectly, and delicately pressed to attend this convention. Several reasons are opposed to it in my mind, and not the least my having declined attending the General Meeting of the Cincinnati, which is to be holden in Philadelphia at the same time, on account of the disrespect it might *seem* to offer to that Society, to be there on another occasion. A thought however has lately run through my mind, which is attended with embarrassment. It is, whether my non-attendance in this Convention will not be considered as a dereliction to republicanism—nay more—whether other motives may not (however injuriously) be ascribed to me for not exerting myself on this occasion in support of it. Under these circumstances let me pray you, my dear Sir, to inform me confidentially, what the public expectation is on this head—that is, whether I will, or ought to be there? You are much in the way of obtaining this knowledge, and I can depend upon your friendship—candour—and judgment in the communication of it, as far as it shall appear to you—My final determination (if what I have already given to the Executive of this State is not considered in that light) cannot be delayed beyond the time necessary for your reply.² With great truth I am yrs most Affectly

Go: Washington

Notes

1. George Washington is referring to the letters from the comtesse d'Anterroches on behalf of her son who was living in New Jersey. See Comtesse d'Anterroches to George Washington, 18 Sept. 1786, and notes. See also Knox's response of 26 Mar. to George Washington's letter.
2. Knox's reply of 19 Mar. was one of the most forceful arguments made in writing to George Washington for his attendance at the convention to be held in Philadelphia.

Washington's death in 1799, is extensive. In addition to the two letters described here, more than 800 other letters between the two men survive—hundreds of the original letters as well as letter book copies (volumes containing reproductions of correspondence, written at the time of the original). The letters cover a wide range of topics—from the British invasion of New York in 1776, to Shay's Rebellion in 1786; from discussions of family life to conversations about politics, economics, and more.

The March 1787 exchange that is featured in this article may prompt student curiosity about the 55 delegates to the Constitutional Convention, how they were chosen, and why they served. It may encourage feelings of empathy, or even surprise, as students learn that even Washington sought advice from friends. It might make them wonder about other leaders' confidants or cause them to consider those in their own lives whom they can depend on for counsel.

Either before or after

students learn about the Constitutional Convention and George Washington's role as its president, share the featured letters with students. Explain that they were written in the late eighteenth century and acknowledge that the language may seem a bit confusing. Encourage students to work with a partner or small group to translate the second half of Knox's letter (beginning with the sentence "Your observations in favor of the experiment of a convention are conclusive")

continued on page 255

Transcription of letter from Knox to Washington

New York 19 March 1787

My dear Sir

The disturbances by the Massachusetts insurgents on the frontiers of this State, were quieted by an action which happened, on the 28th ultimo near great Barrington in which a number of them were taken prisoners. Govr Clinton therefore on his arrival, at the borders of Massachusetts finding no business, congratulated Genl Lincoln and returned to this City.

The leaders of the rebellion are undoubtedly in Canada. What countenance they will receive is uncertain. They were stopped some time at the Isle aux noix untill permission was received for their admission into the province, when they proceeded to Quebec. The insurgents of less note have taken refuge in Vermont, the government of which have too much favored them. some difficulty is likely to arise on this head.

Instead of 1500 Men for four months General Lincoln has concluded one thousand a sufficient number. He is to command them, at the special request of the Legislature

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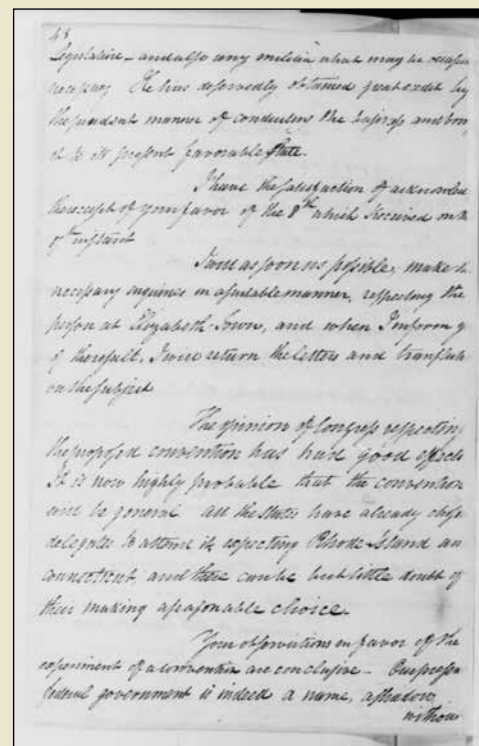
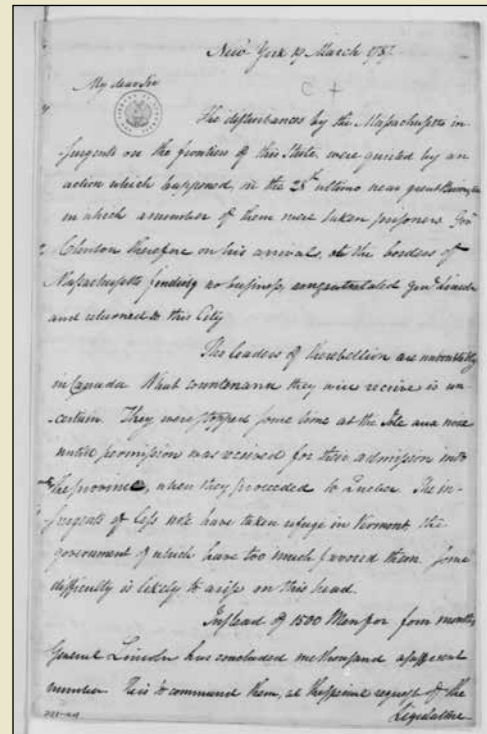
Legislature—and also any militia which may be occasionally necessary[.] He has deservedly obtained great credit by the prudent manner of conducting the business and bringing it to its present favorable state.

I have the satisfaction of acknowledging the receipt of your favor of the 8th which I received on the 17th instant.

I will as soon as possible, make the necessary enquiries in a suitable manner, respecting the person at Elizabeth-Town, and when I inform you of the result, I will return the letters and translations on the subject.¹

The opinion of Congress respecting the proposed convention has had good effects. It is now highly probable that the convention will be general. All the States have already chosen delegates to attend it, excepting² Rhode-Island and Connecticut, and there can be but little doubt of their making a seasonable choice.

Your observations in favor of the experiment of a convention are conclusive—Our present federal government is indeed a name, a shadow without



Notes

1. See George Washington to Knox, 8 March.
2. Knox wrote "expecting."

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without power, or effect. We must either have a government, of the same materials, differently constructed, or we must have a government of events.

But should the convention possess the magnanimity to propose a wise modification of a national government, without regarding the present local, and contracted views, that the mass of the people in the respective States entertain of the subject leaving to time, better information, and events to ripen their judgements much, much might be hoped But if only propositions be obtained for bracing up the present radically defective thing, so as [to] enable us to drag on with pain and labor, for a few years, then better had it been, that the idea of the convention had never been conceived.

As you have thought proper my dear Sir, to request my opinion respecting your attendance at the convention, I shall give it with the utmost sincerity and frankness.

I imagine that your own satisfaction or chagrin and that of your friends will depend entirely on the result of the convention—For I take it for granted that however reluctantly you may acquiesce, that

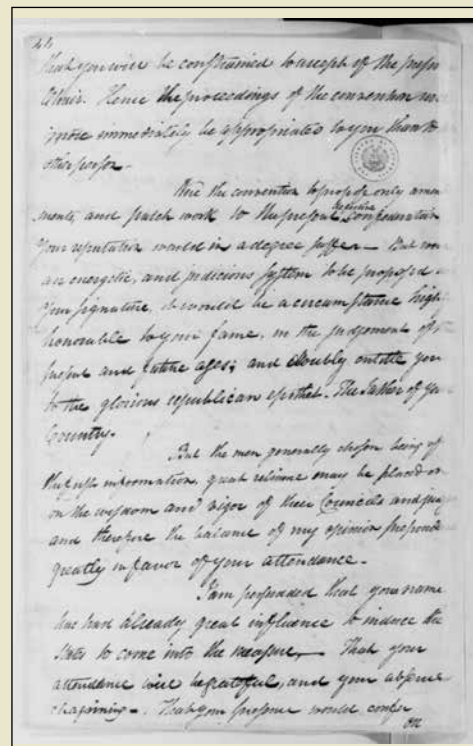
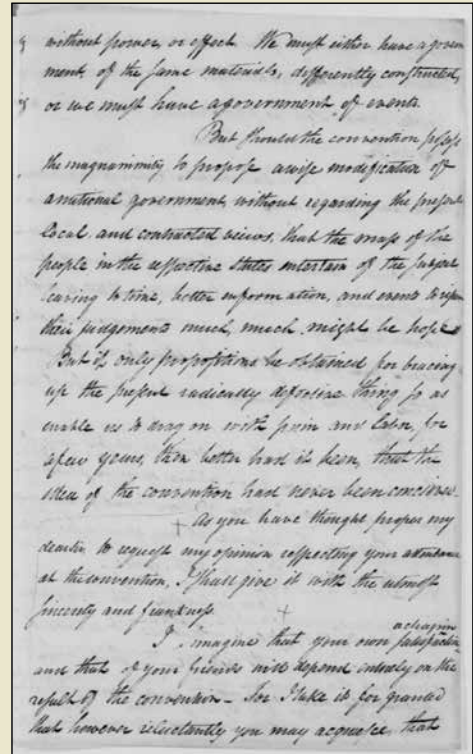
[page 4]

that you will be constrained to accept of the presidents chair. Hence the proceedings of the convention will more immediately be appropriated to you than to any other person.

Were the convention to propose only amendments, and patch work to the present defective confederation, your reputation would in a degree suffer—But were an energetic, and judicious system to be proposed with Your signature, it would be a circumstance highly honorable to your fame, in the judgement of the present and future ages; and doubly entitle you to the glorious republican epithet—The Father of Your Country.

But the men generally chosen, being of the first information, great reliance may be placed on the wisdom and vigor of their Councils and judgements and therefore the balance of my opinion preponderates greatly in favor of your attendance.

I am persuaded that your name has had already great influence to induce the States to come into the measure—That your attendance will be grateful, and your absence chagrining—That your presence would confer



confer on the assembly a national complexion, and that it would more than any other circumstance induce a compliance to the propositions of the convention.

I have never written to you concerning your intention of declining to accept again the presidency of the Cincinnati—I can only say that the idea afflicts me exceedingly.

That the society was formed with pure motives you well know. In the only instance in which it has had the least political operation, the effects have been truly noble. I mean in Massachusetts where the officers are still unpaid and extremely depressed in their private circumstances, but notwithstanding which the moment the government was in danger, they unanimously pledged themselves for its support—While the few wretched officers who were against government were not of the Cincinnati. The clamor and prejudice which existed against it, are no more—The men who have been most against it say, that the society is the only bar to lawless ambition and dreadful anarchy to which the imbecility of government, renders us so liable, and the same

[pages 6-7]

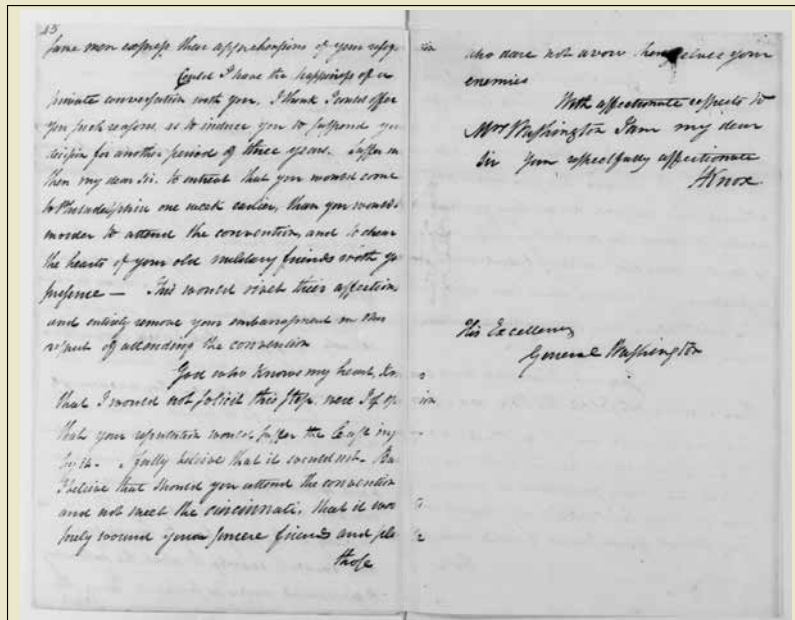
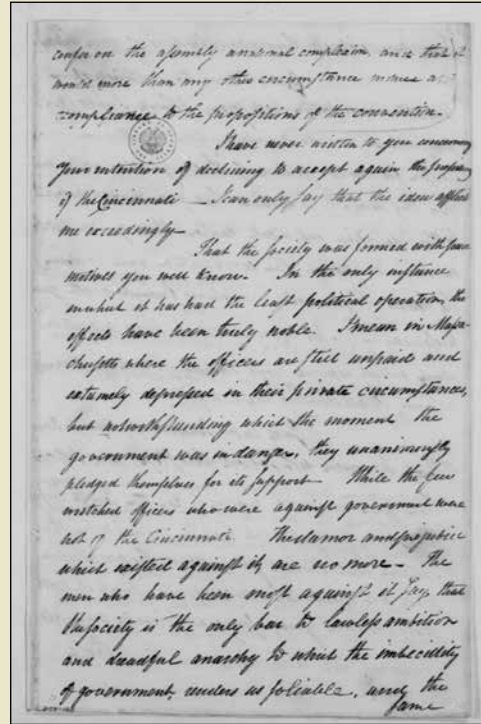
same men express their apprehensions of your resignation.

Could I have the happiness of a private conversation with you, I think I could offer you such reasons, as to induce you to suspend your decision for another period of three years. Suffer me then my dear Sir, to entreat that you would come to Philadelphia one week earlier, than you would do in order to attend the convention, and to cheer the hearts of your old military friends with your presence—This would rivet their affections and entirely remove your embarrassment in this respect of attending the convention.

God who knows my heart, knows that I would not solicit this step, were I of opinion that your reputation would suffer the least injury by it—I fully believe that it would not—But I believe that Should you attend the convention and not meet the Cincinnati, that it would sorely wound your sincere friends and please those who dare not avow themselves your enemies.

With affectionate respects to Mrs Washington I am my dear Sir your respectfully affectionate

H. Knox



GEORGE WASHINGTON'S DECISION

from page 251

into twenty-first-century English, and invite student volunteers to share their translations. Lead a class discussion about the letters and ask students what observations, conclusions, and questions come to their mind. Allow their questions to drive research experiences.

Perhaps they are interested in reading more of the correspondence between Washington and Knox. Perhaps they want to know whether Randolph tried to persuade Washington to change his mind. Perhaps they wonder whether any of Washington's other friends tried to influence him.

Their curiosity can be satisfied by exploring the Papers

Library of Congress Blog

If you try these suggestions, or a variation of them, with your students, **tell us about your experience!** During the last week of September, the Teaching with the Library of Congress Blog at blogs.loc.gov/teachers will feature a post tied to this article and we invite you to comment and share your teaching strategies.

of George Washington on the Library of Congress website at: www.loc.gov/collections/george-washington-papers/about-this-collection. Also, Founders Online, a website administered by the National Archives and Records Administration through the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC), in partnership with the University of Virginia Press, can serve as a helpful finding

aid to the Washington Papers. It enables robust searching of transcribed materials at <https://founders.archives.gov>.

If students are simply curious about what other information might be included in the Papers of George Washington, the sidebar on p. 250 presents opportunities for further exploration. ■



Lee Ann Potter is the Director of Professional Learning and Outreach Initiatives at the Library of Congress and serves as the editor of the "Sources and Strategies" feature. For more information on the education programs of the Library of Congress, please visit www.loc.gov/teachers.

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Kathy Swan, John Lee, and S.G. Grant. | Foreword by Walter Parker.
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