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GEORGE WASHINGTON FORGERIES AND FACSIMILES

Dorothy Twohig

In preparation for a new and complete edition of George Washington's correspondence, the editors of the Papers of George Washington at the University of Virginia have over a ten year period collected copies of some 135,000 items of correspondence. This includes letters and documents written to Washington as well as those written by him. Among these thousands of documents are some 150 to 200 that bear a special relationship to the rest of the project's holdings. These are the documents produced over the last hundred years by forgers of varying skill and which are often still masquerading as authentic Washington documents.

Forgeries of literary and historical documents go back at least to the eighteenth century, when Thomas Chatterton created a medieval monk named Rowley who wrote verse, William Ireland fabricated Shakespeare plays, and James Macpherson concocted collections of ancient Gaelic poetry until he was unmasked by Samuel Johnson. In the 1830s John Payne Collier, one of the most erudite of British Shakespeare scholars, set out to solve the silences in the history of Elizabethan drama by fitting his own forgeries into existing documents with such skill that scholars occasionally still are deceived. Thomas J. Wise, the leading English bibliographer of his day, fabricated first editions of Ruskin, Browning, Arnold, and other Victorian authors. More recently, the forgers of the Horn Papers and the Vineland Map perpetrated large scale hoaxes with far-reaching implications. Modern discoveries of Robert Burns material are viewed suspiciously by literary scholars and dealers until they are convinced the documents are not the work of Alexander Howland ("Antique") Smith, whose crude

imitations of Burns not only took in his nineteenth century contemporaries but still deceive unwary researchers. And no twentieth century forger has rivaled the chutzpah of Frenchman Denis Vrain-Lucas who in the 1860s managed to dispose not only of letters of Pontius Pilate, Mary Magdalene, and Judas Iscariot but of his major find, the love letters between Anthony and Cleopatra.¹

So widespread are some of these concoctions that at least one institution, the New York Public Library, deliberately acquires forgeries both for the documents' own intrinsic interest as curiosities and to provide a reservoir of authenticated samples of the work of noted forgers.²

None of the Washington forgers has shown the skill or ingenuity of these nineteenth century masters of fraud. Probably the most prolific--certainly the one most frequently encountered by the Washington Papers staff--was an enterprising Englishman named Robert Spring.³ Born in England in 1813, Spring came to the United States as a young man and opened a book shop in Philadelphia. He may well have intended to make an honest living, but when he found the bookseller's trade less than profitable he soon discovered that he had a freewheeling imagination and a real talent for larceny.

Boasting a dignified demeanor and an impeccable British accent, Spring used his bookshop as a base for launching a new venture into free enterprise. Using a goose quill pen and his own special mixture of antiquated ink, he began forging letters on sheets of paper cut from the front or back of old books. Capitalizing on the enormous veneration nineteenth century Americans had for the first president, Spring specialized in Washington autographs. When he could acquire access to genuine documents he simply traced them, but most of his Washington forgeries were written freehand, after hours of practice in an attempt to reproduce Washington's flowing script.

Spring's operating procedures were outlined at his trial for forgery in Philadelphia in 1869: "He would obtain, by some means, a genuine letter and

then trace it on a sheet of paper, which he stained with coffee grounds to give it the appearance of age. The bogus letter would be inclosed in a note and addressed to some gentleman who had a fine private library. The note stated that the writer was in want of money, and if the recipient desired the autograph letter he could send money to a certain address. He received a number of replies containing remittances varying from \$10 to \$15, the letters being addressed to several post offices within a few miles of this city."⁴

Spring's demands were modest, and apparently, the customers lined up. His activities were soon detected, however, and he was arrested in Philadelphia in 1858. He skipped bail and took his business elsewhere--namely, to Canada where he posed as an impecunious widow attempting to dispose of her husband's estate. Naturally the widow's inheritance consisted principally of handsome autograph letters of important historical personages. Encouraged by the credulity of Canadians, Spring made another attempt on the American market. He returned to the United States--probably in the early 1860s--settled in Baltimore, and proceeded to open a lively trade in Washington documents, following generally the same procedure he had used in Philadelphia but with a new twist. He now offered his products primarily to British autograph collectors.

Capitalizing on the popularity of Stonewall Jackson in England, he posed as the Confederate general's daughter, fallen on hard times and compelled to sell her father's papers, which coincidentally seemed to consist largely of handsome specimens of Washington, Franklin, Jefferson, and of course Jackson, documents. Although Spring's movements during the 1860s are still unclear, he apparently did not confine his activities entirely to the Baltimore area since he was again arrested for forgery in Philadelphia in 1869. Candidly admitting his guilt, he again stood trial and this time served a prison term, dying in poverty in the charity ward of a Philadelphia hospital in 1876.

Spring's forgeries fall into several categories. Although there are a number of multipage letters, perhaps copies from an original document, Spring's most common forgeries consist of an order drawn by Washington on the Office of Discount and Deposit in Baltimore or a Revolutionary pass through American lines. A typical example of the pass reads:

Head Quarters
Valley Forge
Feby 5th 1778

Permission is granted to Mr. John Edwards with his Negro boy Jack to pass and repass this picket at Ramapo.

Go: Washington

The Papers of George Washington staff has acquired innumerable copies of this pass issued to Mr. Johnson and Sam, to Mr. Smith and Tim, to Mr. Carson and Henry, and so on. The pass is so frequently issued to variously named persons and their servants to pass the lines at Ramapo, New Jersey, that manuscript dealer Charles Hamilton has quoted one disgruntled owner as observing that Ramapo may indeed have seen the first traffic jam in American history.⁵ Since none of the passes unearthed so far bears the same name, it is evident that Spring changed the names on the document each time he encountered an affluent victim, simply making out a pass to order.

The pass and indeed other Spring forgeries often have a convincing provenance. Present-day owners are able to claim with complete sincerity that the document has been in their family for generations. Since the pass was issued to someone bearing their name there is no reason to doubt that it was not indeed issued to a Revolutionary ancestor. Spring's passes early found their way into public repositories both in the United States and abroad. The Washington project has received one pass through the lines from a major state historical society accompanied by a provenance indicating that it had been presented to the society by the governor of the state in 1867.

Even more common than the pass through the lines is a short letter addressed to Jabez Huntington, "Sheriff of the County of Windham, Connt.," stating that "at the urgent solicitation of several of the Selectmen and respectable inhabitants of the town of Poughkeepsie, I hereby authorize you to discharge from custody Daniel Elliott now a prisoner and confined by Military Warrant to the Gaol of sd. County." The document is purportedly signed by Washington at headquarters at New Windsor, Connecticut. As in the Revolutionary pass, both the name of the prisoner and the date vary with each document.

These release orders represent some of Spring's best work, and even manuscript dealers are occasionally taken in. Several years ago one of these Spring letters to Huntington was offered for sale in a manuscript catalog for \$950. The unwary dealer described it as having "slight fading; slight trace of mounting remains at corners. An unusual document; and early form of executive clemency." At least two or three times a year the Washington Papers staff receives an excited call from some friend who has unearthed a "new" Washington document addressed to Jabez Huntington.

Another of Spring's favorites of which he produced innumerable copies was Washington's exhortation to an army captain (whose name also changes with each document) to "extend your picket across the bridge with a patrol on the Norristown Road as far as the King of Prussia tavern, with orders to bring in all Strangers unable to give a good account of themselves, also all persons found loitering near the lines." The sample of Spring's work which surfaced most frequently during the Washington Papers' search for documents, however, is an order supposedly drawn by Washington during the 1790s on the Office of Discount and Deposit in Baltimore. Again, Spring apparently produced these on demand and sold them to credulous Baltimore citizens during his residence in that city.

Although Spring favored short and pithy documents

which did not put too much strain on his orthographic powers, he occasionally produced more ambitious products. His ingenuity sometimes evokes a grudging admiration. While searching in England, the Washington Papers staff acquired from a member of the British peerage a copy of a letter mentioning an ancestor who was Washington's contemporary and with whom Washington frequently corresponded. Unfortunately, the handsome letter which the earl sent to the project was the product of Robert Spring's creativity, probably forged during the period he was peddling Washington and Jackson autographs in England. Undoubtedly a mid-nineteenth century member of the family was delighted to purchase from Spring a letter of so much family interest.⁶

Several other examples of Spring's more ambitious documents have surfaced. One--of which there are at least four versions known--is a letter to James Wood, dated Philadelphia, 12 September 1796. Copies of this document are owned by the Jervis Library, Oberlin College, Mount Vernon, and the Tennessee State Library and Archives. The Washington Papers staff has never located the original letter actually sent to Wood, but a copy of the letter is recorded in Washington's letter books at the Library of Congress. Either Spring somehow saw this version or, less likely, he had access to the letter actually sent to Wood.⁷ A privately owned version of the same letter but addressed to a James Overton has also surfaced. Spring also tried his hand at fabricating copies of Washington addresses. He sold his products for five or ten dollars, only occasionally asking as much as five pounds from some of his English purchasers.

In the course of collecting Washington manuscripts over a ten-year period, the editors of the Washington Papers have unearthed perhaps 150 examples of Spring's work, but obviously, this is only the tip of the iceberg. Most come from public and university repositories in the United States and Europe, but a large number are also in the possession of private owners. Perhaps less than half of the libraries, and almost none of the private owners, are

aware that their Washington document is a Spring forgery. It is not at all uncommon to find Spring documents that have migrated--probably from England--into European repositories. Copies have been acquired by the Washington Papers from sources as far afield as Germany's Kestner Museum.

One of the more recent Washington forgers to surface is Joseph Cosey, born Martin Coneely in Syracuse, New York.⁸ After a brief career as a printer's assistant, Cosey served in the army for four years (from 1909 to 1912); then, after receiving a dishonorable discharge in the latter year, he moved on to become thief, convict, and check forger. The turning point in Cosey's career came in 1929 when a chance visit to the Library of Congress and a glimpse of a pay warrant signed in 1786 by Benjamin Franklin opened new vistas to him. Pocketing the warrant he slipped out of the library ready to begin a new career. He was not really a thief, Cosey later explained, because the Library of Congress belonged to the people and he was after all one of the people.⁹

Cosey quickly became adept at producing signatures of historical figures. Instead of tracing his forgeries, the method most easily detected, he adopted a more sophisticated and deceptive freehand style, using a mixture of Waterman's brown ink and rusted iron filings. He became expert at foxing and staining to simulate age. More astute than most forgers, he even attempted to duplicate the type of paper used by the individuals whose autographs he was producing. Selling his products for under fifty dollars, he found a ready market, and many of his forgeries have probably gone undetected.

Few prominent Americans were safe from Cosey's attentions. He expertly forged the signatures of John Marshall, Patrick Henry, John Adams, and even that rarest of American autographs--Button Gwinnett. Washington was a speciality. His Washington forgeries are among the best--far superior to the productions of Robert Spring, although Cosey too had some problems in reproducing Washington's signature. The Cosey Washington forgeries are usually short

routine forms and letters and rarely as ambitious in content as the Jefferson draft of the Declaration of Independence, which he offered for sale to a Virginia college, or his notable collection of Edgar Allan Poe autographs.

Cosey forgeries appear frequently in manuscript dealers' catalogs, usually identified as the bogus documents they are. Ironically, his forgeries often bring as much today from collectors of curiosities as his original offerings. Sold at auction in 1970, two Cosey letters—one "bearing a forged docket at head, and with forged integral address-leaf," and the other "bearing forged Washington frank and remnants of red-wax seals (very good, with simulated stains and minor defects)"—carried a suggested auction value of \$30. Another Cosey forgery of a Washington document—a discharge for one Edward Bear also bearing a signature of Major John Trumbull was offered for sale by dealer Charles Hamilton in 1982 with a suggested price of \$75 to \$100. Hamilton noted in the catalog that the document bore stains skillfully applied by Cosey.¹⁰

More colorful than either Cosey or Spring was Charles Weisberg, or "The Baron," who surfaced on the New York police blotters in 1935 for minor forgery. Weisberg's Washington speciality was occasional letters and surveys of Mount Vernon, although he was equally adept at producing letters of Stephen Collins, Walt Whitman, Abraham Lincoln, and Katharine Mansfield. Eventually apprehended, Weisberg died in prison in 1945. Some of Weisberg's Washington forgeries are skillfully executed but are usually marred by his tendency to drop the beginning G in Washington's signature below the W and his omission of the o in Go.¹¹

The Papers of George Washington has acquired copies of forgeries from many sources—historical societies, university libraries, major manuscript repositories, state libraries, and private owners. Very few private owners of a forgery are aware that their highly prized Washington document is in fact the product of a nineteenth or twentieth century

forger. But more significantly, perhaps less than half of the manuscript repositories know that one or two of their Washington documents are not authentic. Because scholars are increasingly working with xerox and photostatic copies of documents rather than the originals, they are compelled to rely on the judgment of the keepers of manuscripts on the question of authenticity.

Letters of Washington, or indeed of any other historical or literary figure, which are purchased by a library or manuscript repository from a reputable manuscript dealer are usually accompanied by a guarantee of authenticity. The major dealers are conscientious in verifying the manuscripts they offer in their catalogs. While forgeries are often offered for sale by dealers for the documents' own intrinsic interest, they are invariably labeled as forgeries. Once in a while, of course, the dealer himself is misled, and although they are greatly in the minority, there is the occasionally unscrupulous dealer. The pitfall for libraries is more likely to occur when letters are presented as gifts or purchased from private owners.

One state library in recent years was presented with a handsome multipage Washington letter by the family of an alumnus. The acquisition was hailed with considerable fanfare and placed on public exhibition, and only several months later was it discovered that the document was in fact the product of Robert Spring's versatile pen. Obviously, both donor and repository were acting in good faith, but the results caused a certain amount of embarrassment. Forgeries and facsimiles produced in the nineteenth and even early twentieth century have not only acquired an attractive patina of age, but also often a convincing provenance, and neither donor nor recipient has any particular reason to doubt.

Although mistaking a facsimile for an original document is not as embarrassing as not recognizing a forgery, the problems for libraries are somewhat similar. Many facsimiles produced in the nineteenth century have undergone a respectable aging process.

If they were originally printed on a good quality rag paper, they can be difficult to recognize on a casual examination and, since the handwriting is authentic, can be even more misleading than forgeries. The original documents chosen for reproduction usually consist of one page and represent a desirable example of the signer's handwriting. The original facsimiles often had the printer's name and occasionally the date printed at the bottom of the page, but over the years this has commonly been removed either accidentally or deliberately.

The Papers of George Washington has dozens of facsimile copies of a number of original Washington documents. In a few cases the library owning the original letter was aware of the facsimile edition and had its own document authenticated, but most assume that their copy is an original document. The project has, for example, acquired some fifteen copies of a letter from George Washington to Nathanael Greene complaining of the loss of a favorite penknife. It is a handsome one-page document, an admirable example of Washington's handwriting. The copies were all acquired from major repositories, and less than half are aware that the document in their collection is a facsimile.

Very few forgeries will deceive an expert in the forged author's handwriting, and neither forgeries nor facsimiles will remain undetected if sophisticated testing devices are used.¹² Unfortunately, these are not usually available for most libraries or individual collectors. A system for authentication of documents requires a considerable amount of technical equipment: standard and comparison microscopes, a knowledge of their use, familiarity with the watermarks most commonly used, the facilities for chemical testing of ink, and an extensive knowledge of writing implements and postal procedures.

Clues can be obtained, however, from the documents themselves. Some forgeries more readily reveal themselves, even to examiners not having access to a laboratory, and can at least raise

suspensions as to the authenticity of a document. Familiarity with the historical background of a document may reveal anachronisms and errors in content and terminology which will indicate a suspicious document. Amateurish attempts at aging papers with coffee and heat are often apparent to the eye. A comparison of the writing with an authenticated document by the same author, paying particular attention to the evenness of the writing, slant, formation of letters, and wording of the documents, may readily reveal discrepancies.

Most handwriting changes over the course of a lifetime. Washington's handwriting as a young man was a sharp, angular script very different from the familiar flowing writing of his later years. Few forgers bother to make sure their product is accurate in this respect. For a widely varying fee repositories and individuals can have documents authenticated, and it is probably advisable in the case of suspicious documents to take advantage of this service.

No contemporary forger of Washington documents appears to have emerged since Cosey ceased his activities. However, good examples of Washington letters written in his own hand are now fetching well in excess of \$5000. Given such temptations, it is impossible to escape a disquieting feeling that somewhere an ingenious scribe, surrounded by quill pens and antiques paper, is quietly preparing new confusion for future generations of scholars.

NOTES

¹For discussions of the careers of various forgers and famous forgeries, see J.A. Farrer, Literary Forgeries (London, 1907); Richard Altick, The Scholar Adventurers (New York, 1950); S.A. Tannenbaum, Shakspeare Forgeries in the Revels Account (New York, 1928); William Routhead, The Riddle of the Ruthvens and Other Studies (Edinburgh, 1919). The unmasking of the Horn Papers is described in Arthur Pierce Middleton and

Douglass Adair, "The Mystery of the Horn Papers," William and Mary Quarterly 3, 4 (1947): 409-43. The conference at the Smithsonian Institution on the authenticity of the Vineland Map is in Wilcomb E. Washburn, ed., Vineland Map Conference, Proceedings (Chicago, 1971). Wise's activities are described in John Carter and Graham Pollard, An Enquiry into the Nature of Certain Nineteenth Century Pamphlets (London and New York, 1934) and in Wilfred Partington, Forging Ahead (New York, 1939). Vrain-Lucas's colorful career is covered in Etienne Charavay, Faux Autographs: Affaire Vrain-Lucas... (Paris, 1870). A number of prominent forgers are discussed and illustrations of their work reproduced in Charles Hamilton, Great Forgers and Famous Fakes (New York, 1980).

²New York Public Library Bulletin, 37 (1933): 200-04 and ibid. 41 (1937): 623-28.

³For an account of Spring's activities, see Charles Hamilton, Scribblers and Scoundrels (New York, 1968), 164-73 and idem, Great Forgers, 44-61, which contains illustrations of Spring's forgeries. See also The New York World, 8 November 1869. Some of the records for Spring's trial are in the Court of Oyer and Terminer, Philadelphia.

⁴Philadelphia Age, 5 November 1869.

⁵Hamilton, Great Forgers, 49.

⁶A copy of this forgery is also among the Public Records of Scotland in the Scottish Record Office, Edinburgh.

⁷In the Spring version, sections of the letter book copy have been deleted. This forged letter was offered in evidence at Spring's trial in 1869.

⁸For a brief account of Cosey's career, see Hamilton, Great Forgers, 88-120.

⁹Hamilton, Scribblers, 128.

¹⁰Auction 149, item 165.

¹¹For Weisberg's career and samples of his forgeries, see Hamilton, Great Forgers, 8-10, 63-65.

¹²A concise description of the technical aspects of authentication is KennethH Rendell, "The Detection of Forgeries," in Autographs and Manuscripts: A Collectors Manual, ed. Edmund Berkeley, Jr.