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Too Much of a Good Thing?: Review of *The Papers of George Washington*, W. W. Abbot and Dorothy Twohig, Editors; Philander D. Chase and Beverly H. Runge, Associate Editors. *Revolutionary War Series, Volume 4: April-June 1776*, Philander D. Chase, Editor.

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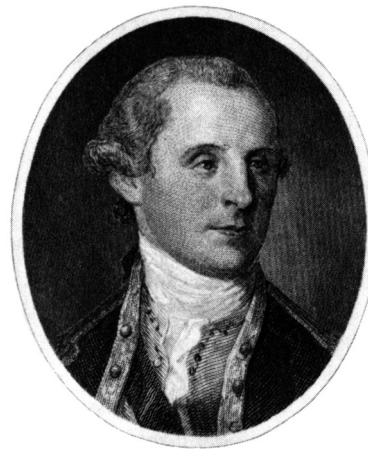
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A Review

Too Much of a Good Thing?

CHARLES H. LESSER



The Papers of George Washington, W. W. Abbot and Dorothy Twohig, Editors; Philander D. Chase and Beverly H. Runge, Associate Editors. *Revolutionary War Series*, Volume 4: *April–June 1776*, Philander D. Chase, Editor. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991. Pp. xxv, 589. \$47.50.

George Washington at age twenty-five, engraved by John DeMare from a miniature by Charles Willson Peale (courtesy of the Indiana Historical Society: Mitten Collection).

One hundred and seventy-two pages into this exemplar of many of the best aspects of contemporary historical documentary editing, Philander D. Chase prints George Washington's 29 April 1776 letter to his brother John Augustine Washington. His last letter to his brother had been penned on 31 March, the last date included in the previous volume, and thus this renewal of the correspondence afforded the opportunity to summarize the activities of the first month encompassed in this book's covers. At the beginning of the month, General Washington had been preparing to leave Cambridge for New York after a successful siege had caused the British to abandon Boston. Washington had detached reinforcements to Canada. Additional regiments were just now "Imbarking . . . for the same place," but the general was "affraid we are rather too late." Every effort, including skillful handling of the New York Committee of Safety, had also gone into fortifying New York. Pieced together from the recipient's copy in the Washington Papers at the Library of Congress and the clipped closing, signature, and dateline now at Cornell, the letter to John Augustine Washington is carefully transcribed, intelligently annotated, and handsomely printed. One hopes that John Richard Alden, who directed Chase's 1973 dissertation on Baron von Steuben and to whom the

volume is dedicated, had it "in hand" in these covers before his recent death. Washington's letter to his brother, however, raises the issue of "How much is enough?," a fundamental question that must be asked of the Revolutionary War Series. One hundred and thirty-four letters to and from Washington precede it in this volume, yet this one letter succinctly summarizes the content of all those letters and provides insight into the general's rationale that is missing in their day-to-day detail. Military historians will want every false alarm, troop movement, promotion, question of supply, and sign and countersign presented here in so elegant and useful a way, but previous efforts to make these sources accessible suggest the title of this essay.

The 29 April letter appeared, of course, in the John C. Fitzpatrick edition of Washington's writings published in thirty-nine volumes between 1931 and 1944.¹ The Fitzpatrick edition included only Washington's outgoing letters, added minimal annotation, and lacked the textual sophistication expected today. As Chase's volumes now begin to supplant Fitzpatrick's for the Revolutionary War years, so Fitzpatrick's supplanted the Worthington C. Ford edition of Washington's letters issued a half century earlier and Jared Sparks's bowdlerized texts of the 1830s.² But the tale of printed Washington correspondence, to which we shall return, is but one part of the royal treatment lavished on what may be the best documented aspect of the nation's history. All but 39 of the 406 letters printed or abstracted in volume four of this new edition exist in some form in one of two great archival collections, the Washington Papers at the Library of Congress and the Papers of

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the Continental Congress at the National Archives. Lt. Col. Richard Varick, George Washington's recording secretary, and Charles Thomson, secretary of the Continental Congress, would be pleased with twentieth-century work on the records they so carefully kept more than two hundred years ago.

Both the Washington Papers at the Library of Congress and the Papers of the Continental Congress are widely available on microfilm, and that microfilm is better served by printed finding aids than is usually the case. The library, which then had the Papers of the Continental Congress, received the Washington Papers from the State Department in 1904. In the next few years, Fitzpatrick, then a curator in the Manuscript Division, produced a one-volume *Calendar of the Correspondence of George Washington, Commander in Chief of the Continental Army with the Continental Congress* and a four-volume *Calendar of the Correspondence of . . . Washington . . . with the Officers*.³ Fitzpatrick relied on retained drafts and letter book copies as his principal sources for Washington's own letters in these calendars and followed the same practice later in his edition, but the calendars included incoming as well as outgoing correspondence and mined not only the Washington Papers but also the Papers of the Continental Congress and a variety of other collections available at the library. The abstracts of incoming letters in these calendars are still of some use because so few of them for the war years have ever been printed.⁴ In 1952, the Library of Congress transferred the Papers of the Continental Congress to the National Archives, where, within a few years, they were microfilmed.⁵ The library issued microfilm of its George Washington Papers in 1964 and, by congressional mandate, included a new computer-generated, printed, sender and recipient index as well as a thoroughly documented essay on their history.⁶ A subsequent six-year project at the National Archives used a more sophisticated version of the same computer program to produce a massive five-volume index and chronological list of the Papers of the Continental Congress. This effort indexed subjects and geographic locations and went beyond senders and recipients to include "all personal names mentioned in those documents."⁷

As early as the late 1920s, the Library of Congress began collecting photocopies of Washington manuscripts in other institutions and in private hands. Fitzpatrick printed letters from these photocopies in his edition when texts were not available in the draft or letter book copies in the Washington Papers, but the photocopies were excluded from the Library of Congress microfilm publication. Fitzpatrick also made use of the transcripts of Washington letters assembled by the late-nineteenth-century Washington collector and

author Joseph Meredith Toner and reprinted additional texts that Ford had found in other repositories. The new edition has been justified, in part, by the importance of additional Washington items discovered through further searching.⁸ The project has located a "corpus of Washington's documentary legacy" of "more than 100,000 documents," a notable increase over the 64,786 included in the Washington Papers microfilm.⁹ H. James Henderson, reviewing the first two volumes of the Presidential Series for the *Journal of Southern History*, found relatively few new Washington letters there and speculated that the additional documents, "if written by Washington," must have "come from a different period in his life."¹⁰ This volume suggests, instead, that a considerable bulk of the additional documents must be variant manuscript copies of letters that are in the Washington Papers in some form, and that a substantial portion of these additional copies must have come from the Papers of the Continental Congress. To cite the most extreme example, communications between the commander-in-chief and the president of the Continental Congress usually resulted in five manuscript copies of every letter from George Washington to John Hancock, two in the Washington Papers, two in the Papers of the Continental Congress, and one in Hancock's own papers. Though other correspondents did not create this degree of duplication, large numbers of additional copies have also been located for other figures, and these copies, when they are the actual letters sent, offer better texts.

The list of "Repository Symbols and Abbreviations" at the front of volume four contains fifteen institutions not represented in the equivalent list in the Fitzpatrick edition, but the volume does not contain a large quantity of hitherto unavailable texts. The relic status of every scrap of Washington's handwriting caused alienation from his papers of some documents and the clipping of signatures from others in the nineteenth century. That status has also allowed location of his letters to a degree that does not apply to items addressed to him. Of the thirty-nine items in volume four that are not present in either the Washington Papers or the Papers of the Continental Congress, twenty-four are letters from Washington. Thirteen of those twenty-four were printed in Fitzpatrick and an additional seven letters, six to Washington and one from him, are derived in the current edition from previous printings in Peter Force's *American Archives*. In short, of the items contained in the volume under review, only ten letters from Washington and another nine to him were not already easily accessible to scholars. E. Wayne Carp, who has been reviewing this series for the *North Carolina Historical Review*, counted only five outgoing Washington documents in volume one and ten in volume two

that were not printed in Fitzpatrick.¹¹

In 1983, the editors of the Washington Papers thought that the Revolutionary War Series and the Presidential Series might “each run to perhaps thirty volumes.”¹² By 1985, when the first volume in the Revolutionary War Series appeared, the estimate was an unspecified “many more printed volumes than any other series in this comprehensive edition of Washington’s papers.”¹³ Volume four ends on 15 June 1776, presumably because the papers for the remainder of the month would have made an unwieldy volume and delayed its publication. If future volumes cover an equivalent two-and-one-half-month span, a total of forty volumes will be required for the Revolutionary War years. At the current excellent average publication rate of a volume every two years, more than seventy more years will elapse before the series is completed in anno Domini 2064. One hesitates to contemplate what the overall termination date would have been if the editors had not decided to divide the project into at least six separate series to expedite its publication.¹⁴

The title of this essay is not meant as criticism of this series for extravagance in decisions about what a “comprehensive” Washington edition should extract from the mass of headquarters papers. A larger text block and the extensive annotation complicate the comparison, but forty volumes for the Revolutionary War Series is not excessive when one considers that it took Fitzpatrick twenty-four to print only the outgoing letters for this period. In 1985 in the first volume of this series, Editor Chase outlined the kinds of documents that would be included and the categories that would be excluded or described in notes. “A number of documents that in later volumes would have been omitted,” he continued, “have in the first volume been calendared, and others that would have been calendared have been printed in full.”¹⁵ Except for volume two, this announced reduction in inclusiveness for subsequent volumes has not resulted in coverage of longer time spans; volume four covers the shortest span yet.¹⁶ No further discussion of this issue has appeared in the Revolutionary War Series. Volumes two through four contain no front matter of any sort except a list of the contents, a statement of transcription practice, and lists of symbols and short titles.

Chase should be more explicit in explaining the criteria for printing and abstracting documents, citing them in the notes, or omitting them entirely, but volume four demonstrates a very high level of restraint. Letters written and signed by aides on the general’s behalf are only summarized in the notes,¹⁷ and the bulk of enclosures are treated in the same fashion. In two cases brevity is clearly carried too far. In this volume, four letters to Washington and two letters *from* him

appear only in the annotation, though all six are cross-referenced in the contents list at the front of the volume. The note referring to one of the outgoing letters quotes its complete text but does not tell the reader of that fact. The other Washington letter, which is only noted as “similar” to one that is included, is in fact shorter by half and different in wording. The reader is not told that both letters were printed in full in Fitzpatrick.¹⁸

The letters included in the new edition take their bow in a form that is truer to life and with better apparel. The George Washington project has a stated transcription policy of providing “as close to a literal reproduction of the manuscript as possible.”¹⁹ The editors do not take this as far as the intrusive textual apparatus in recent volumes of *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, but they avoid the needless emendations of the “expanded method” that still mar *The Papers of General Nathanael Greene*. Deletions on the manuscript are not indicated unless they contain substantive material, which is then included in a footnote, and interlineations and marginal notes are silently placed where the writer intended. Otherwise, treatment is thoroughly literal, even to retention of per signs and placement of brackets around every added mark of punctuation. The recipient’s copy is used for copy-text whenever it is available, and notes provide the location of all known contemporary manuscript versions and explain textual differences between the retained and transmitted copies, even when they are only minor matters of wording. Transcription practice, notes, and the lists of symbols at the front of the volume make both the texts and their derivation from the various manuscript versions clearly intelligible, though this reviewer had to scurry to volume one to refresh his memory on the origin of the Varick transcripts.

Several letters that were partly burned in the New York State Library fire of 1911 make their appearance in this volume, and the form of their presentation almost allows the reader to see and smell the originals. One of these, a short 9 June letter to the New York Provincial Congress, is among a number in the volume that illustrate Washington’s carefully deferential handling of “Civil authority.”²⁰ The 9 June letter is one of the ten Washington letters in the volume that are not easily accessible elsewhere. The other partially burned manuscripts are graphically revealed in the edition’s careful amplification of their damaged texts from either Washington’s retained copies at the Library of Congress or previous printings in Peter Force’s *American Archives*. Like the rendering of Washington’s letter to his brother cited at the beginning of this review, this is surely a good thing, indeed a feat of scholarship. But how important is it to know where the cut closing and

signature of the letter to his brother can now be found? How important is it to know that four words apparently damaged since Fitzpatrick printed the letter cannot now be read on the original?²¹

The annotation in volume four, especially the comprehensive reference to related documents of the era, is also a remarkable achievement. Though the notes in some cases exceed the letters themselves in length, the editors are not guilty of parading extraneous erudition. The numerous officers mentioned are briefly identified in terms of their military service. No attempt is made to do the same for the poor blokes among the common soldiers who ended up sentenced by courts-martial, though it doubtless also could have been done for many of them. Index entries cross-reference identifications that were made in the earlier volumes in the series. Criticism of the lack of source citations for most of these identifications could have been blunted by some explicit discussion of the criteria used and the standard reference works that provided the information. Given the effort expended, the omission, as well, of any summary of the volumes except the blurbs on their jackets is needless parsimony. The military historian Charles Royster, who has been reviewing both this series and the Colonial Series, has repeatedly criticized the lack of clear new maps.²² The only illustrations in this volume are reproductions of three contemporary maps sent to Washington by Lord Stirling and designs for the medal that the Continental Congress presented Washington in commemoration of the reduction of Boston.

The pious notion that somehow George Washington “deserves” his own full-blown printed edition prepared to the highest of contemporary standards may have some validity for the “Father of Our Country.” More to the point, the combination of Washington’s central position and the annotation’s superb referencing of other documentation for events that came to his attention make the Revolutionary War Series a kind of grand item-level finding aid for the birth of the nation. At the collection level, the Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN) library bibliographic data base is emerging as a national archival location system. In that effort, subject indexing has proven one of the most difficult nuts for the archival community to crack, and, as witnessed by this volume, is difficult for editors, too. (How would one quickly find the prostitution and riot on pp. 140–42 from the index?) Automation guru David Packard in the last few years has pushed the Washington Papers into the forefront of an access revolution in the documentary editing field; the project’s draft transcripts will soon be available on compact disk-read only memory (CD-ROM).²³ Your reviewer is a bibliophile and can’t yet force himself to advocate abandoning the

printed book. Preliminary reports on the CD-ROM edition indicate that it will not supplant the need for further volumes like the one in hand, but surely the Washington Papers owes the profession more explicit statements of their methodology, rationale, and long-range plans. High quality editorial work may require a different cast of mind than inventing new forms of intellectual control and communication, but radical innovation seems to be called for. Most readers of this review aren’t going to be around in 2064!

NOTES

1. John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745–1799; Prepared under the Direction of the United States George Washington Bicentennial Commission and Published by Authority of Congress*, 39 vols. (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1931–44), 4:529–31.

2. Worthington Chauncey Ford, ed., *The Writings of George Washington*, 14 vols. (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1889–93); Jared Sparks, ed., *The Writings of George Washington; Being His Correspondence, Addresses, Messages, and Other Papers, Official and Private . . .*, 12 vols. (Boston: American Stationers’ Co., 1834–37).

3. Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, *Calendar of the Correspondence of George Washington, Commander in Chief of the Continental Army, with the Continental Congress . . .* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1906); Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, *Calendar of the Correspondence of George Washington, Commander in Chief of the Continental Army, with the Officers . . .* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1915).

4. Jared Sparks, ed., *Correspondence of the American Revolution, Being Letters of Eminent Men to George Washington, from the Time of His Taking Command of the Army to the End of His Presidency*, 4 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1853; reprint edition, Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries, 1970); Louis Gottschalk and Shirley A. Bill, eds., *The Letters of Lafayette to Washington, 1777–1799*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1976). Most of volume four of the Sparks edition (p. 54 ff.) covers the years “From the Time of Washington’s Retirement from the Army to the End of His Presidency.” Stanislaus Murray Hamilton, ed., *Letters to Washington and Accompanying Papers; Published by the Society of Colonial Dames of America*, 5 vols. (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1898–1902), covers only the period prior to 2 July 1775, when Washington took command.

5. Kenneth E. Harris, ed., *Pamphlet Describing M247, Papers of the Continental Congress, 1774–1789* (Washington: National Archives and Records Service, 1971), 1, 15. The papers were filmed in 1959.

6. Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, *Index to the George Washington Papers* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1964).

7. John P. Butler, comp., *Index: The Papers of the Continental Congress, 1774–1789*, 5 vols. (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1978), 1:viii. The index includes portions of the papers that were microfilmed in four other National Archives microcopies as well as the main body included in

Microcopy 247; see p. vi. of the introduction to the *Index*.

8. Donald Jackson, "The Papers of George Washington," *Manuscripts* 22 (1970): 3-11; W. W. Abbot and Dorothy Twohig, eds., *The Papers of George Washington: Colonial Series*, 7 vols. to date (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1983-), 1: xv; Chase, ed., *Revolutionary War Series*, 1: xx.

9. Chase, ed., *Revolutionary War Series*, 1: xvii; *Index to the George Washington Papers*, xvii.

10. *Journal of Southern History* 54 (1988): 488-89. Henderson has also reviewed volume three of that series in *ibid.*, 57 (1991): 501-2.

11. His reviews can be found in *North Carolina Historical Review* 63 (1986): 138; 64 (1987): 662-63; 66 (1989): 262-63; and 68 (1991): 485. It should be emphasized that my use of these figures is different from Carp's, who praises the finding of these additional items.

12. Abbot and Twohig, eds., *Colonial Series*, 1: xvi.

13. Chase, ed., *Revolutionary War Series*, 1: xvii.

14. Donald Jackson, ed., *The Diaries of George Washington*, 6 vols. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976-79); Abbot and Twohig, eds., *Colonial Series*; Chase, ed., *Revolutionary War Series*; Dorothy Twohig, ed., *The Papers of George Washington: Presidential Series*, 3 vols. to date (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1987-); a forthcoming Confederation Series; and Washington's ledger books and schoolboy exercise books noted in volume one of the Colonial Series (p. xvii) as "set aside for separate publication." Volume one of the Revolutionary War Series (p. xxi) also notes that "construction of Washington's military and personal accounts for publication must be deferred." The project has also issued Dorothy Twohig, ed., *The Journal of the Proceedings of the President, 1793-1797* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1981).

15. Chase, ed., *Revolutionary War Series*, 1: xx-xxi. The project earlier announced a commitment "to make the definition of a Washington document as encompassing as good sense will permit and always to make clear the criteria used"; Abbot, ed., *Colonial Series*, 1: xvii.

16. Three months in volume one, three and one-half in volume two, three in volume three, and two and one-half in volume four.

17. Similar documents are printed in full in Richard K. Showman and Dennis M. Conrad, eds., *The Papers of General Nathanael Greene*, 6 vols. to date (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press for the Rhode Island Historical Society, 1976-).

18. Chase, ed., *Revolutionary War Series*, 4: 101 n. 2 and 316 n. 1; Fitzpatrick, ed., *Writings of Washington*, 5: 41-42, 49. Except where they are actually used in constructing texts, the new edition does not cite previous printings of Washington letters.

19. Chase, ed., *Revolutionary War Series*, 4: xix.

20. *Ibid.*, 99, 206, 354, 473, 520.

21. If my memory from a tour of the Manuscript Division years ago serves me right, the Library of Congress Washington Papers were laminated by the Barrow method after they were printed by Fitzpatrick. The nature of the damage, at the top of a page, is not decipherable on the microfilm!

22. *Journal of Southern History* 50 (1984): 108-10; 51 (1985): 616; 52 (1986): 449-50; 56 (1990): 333-35, 737-38.

23. Summary of W. W. Abbot's paper at the Charleston, October 1990, Association for Documentary Editing meeting and "A Message from the President," *Documentary Editing* 13 (1991): 17-18, 99.

Editors and Their Work

The appointment of **Jon Kukla** as director of the Historic New Orleans Collection was announced on 16 January 1992 by Mary Louise Christovich, president of the Kemper and Leila Williams Foundation, which oversees the Collection. Dr. Kukla joined the Historic New Orleans Collection as curator of collections in May 1990. He succeeds Dode Platou, who has become director emerita. Dr. Kukla was editor of the *Newsletter of the Association for Documentary Editing* (the forerunner of *Documentary Editing*) in 1980.

Roger B. Beck, who teaches African and Third World history at Eastern Illinois University, was recently promoted to associate professor and awarded a Faculty Excellence Award for Teaching. He has spent two months conducting research in South Africa and six weeks in Brazil preparing teaching materials for a Fulbright-Hays project.

Obituary

The Association regrets to announce the death, on 8 November 1991, of **David Allen Shannon** in Charlottesville, Virginia. At the time of his death at age seventy, he was Commonwealth Professor of History emeritus at the University of Virginia. A distinguished historian of the United States in the twentieth century, he served as provost of the university from 1971 to 1981. He edited Beatrice Webb's *American Diary, 1898* (1963) and chaired the Advisory Board of the Papers of James Madison from 1974 to 1988.

Syllabus Exchange Service

The Education and Information Committee maintains a file of syllabi for courses devoted to or focused upon documentary editing. A complete file may be obtained at cost of copying and mailing, \$12.

Those whose syllabi have been submitted are requested to provide updates. Anyone who has recently begun such a course is encouraged to send in a syllabus to be added to the packet.

Please send requests and new or updated materials to Fredrika J. Teute, Institute of Early American History and Culture, P. O. Box 220, Williamsburg, VA 23187.