

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association
for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)


Documentary Editing, Association for

Spring 2003

A Democracy of Knowledge

Henry Wiencek
Historian

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/docedit>

 Part of the [Digital Humanities Commons](#), [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Reading and Language Commons](#), and the [Technical and Professional Writing Commons](#)

Wiencek, Henry, "A Democracy of Knowledge" (2003). *Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)*. 350.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/docedit/350>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Documentary Editing, Association for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)* by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

A Democracy of Knowledge

Henry Wienczek

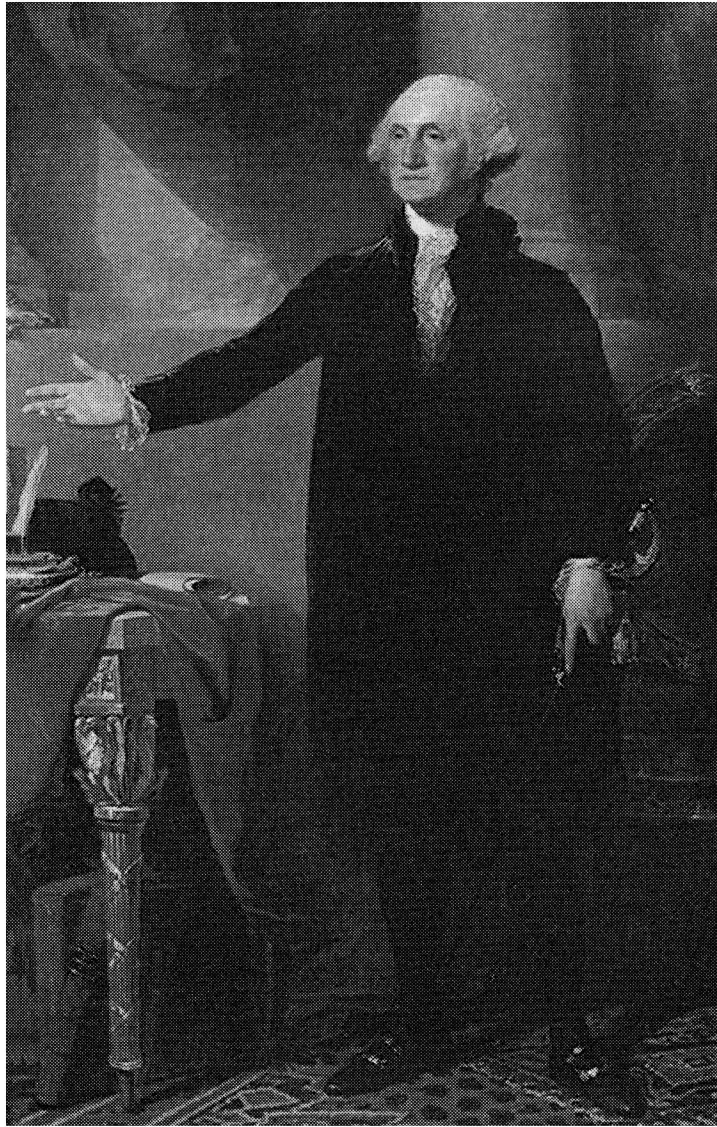
I am very honored to speak to this group today. I owe an enormous debt to the work that you do and I very sincerely thank you for it. Documentary editing has, for me, an almost priestly connotation. I went to a Jesuit high school where my toughest teacher was Fr. Alphonse Yumont, who taught Latin. Every night we had to pore over a long section of Vergil, and the next morning had to translate it aloud in class. Errors were not allowed. And by “errors” I mean any deviations whatever from a precisely literal translation. We were not allowed to glide over obscurities or embellish with flights of fancy. I can still hear the slap of Fr. Yumont’s stick on the desk as he shrieked, “Mister! Look at the text! Don’t tell me what you think it means. Tell me what it says!”

From Fr. Yumont I acquired a habit of paying meticulous, maniacal attention to “the text”—the holy object right in front of you. From him I learned that if you paid very close attention to the text you would learn things richer and more complex than the interpretations created by your imagination. If you refused to gloss over the obscurities and the ambiguities, but struggled instead to comprehend a text exactly as it came down to you, you would enter the mind and the distant world of someone else from long ago. And if your translation turned out to be a bit duller than you wished, at least it had the advantage of being true.

Well, what if you do not have the text, but only selections from the text in biographies or histories? How do you know you can rely on the quotations selected by others? In fact, you cannot. That is why the work you do is so important.

I was reminded very recently that we almost lost the George Washington texts. I was hunched over a fuzzy printout of a Washington letter I had downloaded from the Library of Congress, and the phone rang. It was my father calling from Boston—“Turn on the TV! George Washington’s on the Discovery Channel!” I grabbed the remote and began poking through the channels. “Which one is Discovery?” I asked my father in Boston as I searched a cable system in Charlottesville. “No, wait—it’s History Channel.” That one I knew, and I heard Edward Hermann narrating a segment on “history lost and found,” about how Washington’s first editor, Jared Sparks, cut up the manuscripts to give away souvenirs of Washington’s handwriting. The government stepped in and bought the papers from the Washington family, which was why I had just been able to download a Washington letter, for free, from the Library of Congress. The dangers faced by historical documents are very real, and still very much with us.

My previous book was about a southern plantation family, the Hairstons, and their slaves. The white Hairstons had one of the largest plantation empires in the South, stretching from Virginia to Mississippi. Being Scottish, the Hairstons had saved every piece of paper having to do with money. These papers had been piled up in the attics of various family mansions in Virginia and North Carolina and had sat there for a century and a half. The mice did a job



"The Lansdowne Portrait"
by Gilbert Stuart, 1796
Photograph courtesy of The Papers of George Washington

on some items but thankfully the great bulk seems to have survived. One member of the family, Judge Peter Wilson Hairston, decided in the 1960s that the papers had too much value to remain in attics. He transported his holdings to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and urged his cousins to do likewise. All together there are about 25,000 items, dating from the 1760s to the 1930s. It was a great relief for me, as a documentary researcher, to know that everything was in one place—a relief, that is, until one day I was having lunch with Judge Hairston at his plantation when he mentioned, casually, “Did you ever get a chance to look at the papers cousin Rufus had?” I nearly choked on my Brunswick Stew. “Cousin Rufus’s papers?” I said. “Oh yes. He’s dead but his widow has all the stuff he took out of Oak Hill.” Next day I was on the road to Rufus’s house, where his widow opened the drawer of a sideboard that was three inches deep and four feet across with a mass of old letters. There used to be more she said, but thirty years earlier her son had brought some of the original royal land grants to grade school for show and tell. The teachers asked to hold on to them to show them around, and they never got them back. But in that drawer I found one of the most important documents I discovered in a decade of searching. It was a five-generation genealogy of an extended slave family. Through this document I was able to show a blood tie between the masters and slaves.

Authors are, notoriously, loners, so it is easy for us to lose sight of the fact that whenever we sit down to write we invisibly link hands with hundreds of other writers, scholars, researchers, and editors. The creation of a biographical or historical work is inevitably a collective enterprise. A magnificent infrastructure of knowledge surrounds and supports every scholarly effort—libraries and microfilm collections and dissertations and archives. But the foundation stone of this superstructure of knowledge is the text. I call my talk “A Democracy of Knowledge” because unless all citizens have reasonably easy access to reliable, accurate texts, true knowledge is restricted to the mandarin class, the specialists with the funds, the time, and the connections to gain access to original documents. This may sound like populist ranting except that it is true. For my book on George Washington and his slaves I have access to the superlative new work, *The Papers of George Washington*, which supersedes the previous standard edition, *The Writings of George Washington*, a 37-volume compilation edited by John C. Fitzpatrick. The new edition of Washington’s papers is vastly more comprehensive, and places in the hands of the public accurate transcriptions of the text as it is. It includes not only documents written by Washington, but letters and other documents sent to him, so we now have a much more complete picture than the one presented by Fitzpatrick.

Let me go back to my point about the mandarins. Some fifty years ago Douglas Southall Freeman wrote his seven-volume biography of Washington, which I suspect will forever be the standard work. Freeman’s own papers are at the Library of Congress, and I have spent some time reviewing them. I was amazed at what I found—one binder after another containing typescripts of Washington documents. He had Fitzpatrick’s edition at his disposal, but it was inadequate. Whenever Freeman needed to have an accurate copy of a document, he would dispatch a researcher from his office in Richmond to the Library of Congress or to Mount Vernon, to copy out the document by hand and make a typescript for him. (At that time, routine, high-volume photocopying was not an option.) Freeman had a staff supported by grants from the Carnegie, Guggenheim, and Rockefeller foundations. He had the time and

the funds to support a massive document-collection effort. He had to do that in order to create the highly accurate, supremely researched biography he wished to write. Who could afford that today? The publication of the new edition of Washington's papers makes available to all citizens a collection of documents which, just fifty years ago, only a Freeman, with his foundation-supported staff, could afford to have.

A budget-cutter will now interrupt me to say—"Hey! What about the Internet? All that stuff is out there. For free." Well, yes and no. The old rule still applies—you get what you pay for. Let me use as an example the Washington letter I was downloading, for free, when my father called.

A year ago I was reading letters from Washington to his Mount Vernon manager William Pearce. I was trying to understand Washington's work records for the slaves to make sense of mysterious markings in his diary. This week, a year later, I am writing a section about Washington's aborted attempts to emancipate his slaves in the 1790s. I recalled that, in one of the letters to Pearce in the 1790s, Washington, writing from Philadelphia, had asked him about marriages among the Mount Vernon slaves. A year ago I did not think much of this, but this week it is crucially important. Fortunately, I had made a note with the date of the letter. I was able to go online to the Library of Congress website for the Washington Papers, type in the date and the word Pearce, and in the blink of an eye I had the image of the original of the letter, which I was printing out when my father called to say "turn on the Discovery Channel!" That letter, by the way, seems to indicate that perhaps for the third time, Washington was seriously thinking of freeing the Mount Vernon slaves. He asked Pearce to find out how much he could get for renting out his mill and his farms, and the question about the marriages indicates that the family connections among the slaves will be important in some transaction he is planning, the nature of which he kept secret from Pearce.

So now that we have all these things on the world wide web we can do away with the editors—right? Hardly. That letter from Washington to Pearce also says—I can't tell you why I'm asking you to do this. I'll tell you later. The actual text is, "I will let you know shortly the object I have in view by making these enquiries." Now, when the editors of the Washington Papers get to that item, they will scour the rest of the letters, not just at the Library of Congress, but elsewhere, to find out if Washington ever did explain his reasons in another letter, and they will cross-reference it. Or they will say the other letters from that particular period are missing. They will also note if any list of dower slaves has actually been found; and if they did find it somewhere, they will print it, with the names cross-referenced to every other roster of slaves Washington ever drew up. That is what good editors do. And it is indispensable.

George Washington was, for his entire married life, ensnared in the financial web of Martha's family, the Custises. I would never have been able to figure this out had it not been for the herculean efforts of the editors of the Washington Papers. The Custis papers were buried during the Civil War and suffered heavy damage. In an amazing act of documentary resurrection, the editors laboriously transcribed these severely damaged items, which are crucial to understanding Washington. I know how difficult this was because I looked at the films of the surviving papers— it is astonishing what they did.

When you are working with someone of the stature and broad influence of George Washington, the ripples go out endlessly and so do the papers. I pulled a volume of the *Papers*

of *George Washington* from my shelf, volume 4 of the Retirement Series, covering the period April to December 1799 (*The Papers of George Washington. Retirement Series.*, ed. Philander D. Chase, *Volume 4: April–December 1799*, ed. W. W. Abbot [Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999]). For just those nine months, the editors had gathered items from 46 different repositories. I flipped to the back of the volume, which contains Washington's last will and testament. The will itself, naturally, is printed in its entirety, but there is also a two-page introduction and twenty pages of commentary and explanation. Near this is the list of slaves Washington drew up in the last summer of his life. The editors cross-referenced the slaves on this list to other lists where Washington had described their characteristics and work habits. Footnote 5 reads: "Molly, Charlotte, and Caroline—all listed here among the dower slaves—were in Washington's room when he died. See Tobias Lear's *Narrative Accounts of the Death of George Washington*, printed below." For students, professional scholars, and average readers, the work of the editors has opened a door onto one of the obscure rooms of Washington's life.

Let me give just one more example. In a letter of April 1799 Washington mentions in a postscript that he has lately seen a book that describes Mount Vernon and comments rather favorably on it—"not as many mistakes as I expected." Well, the editors went out and tracked down that book. Footnote 5 says "the book was undoubtedly Isaac Weld's *Travels through the States of North America . . .*" And then they reprint Weld's commentary on Mount Vernon. This is not pedantry, but extremely useful scholarship, for in the footnote describing this obscure tome we find a quotation from it stating that, "the house and offices are out of repair; the old part of the building is in a perishable state; the furniture is dropping to pieces." So thanks to the diligent efforts of dedicated editors, we get this revealing snapshot of Mount Vernon's appearance in Washington's final year.

Do you have any idea what it is like for me to have an index of the names of Washington's slaves? That is an amazing resource. Do you know what it is like to have scholarly annotations to Washington's cash accounts? This kind of editing is a great gift to me, and a great gift to anyone who tries to understand the enigmatic man who stands at the core of the American enterprise.

Yes, the Internet can produce, in the blink of an eye, an image of a text. But no machine can tell you what that text might mean. The Internet is giving us, for free, an anarchy of facts. What documentary editing tries to create is a democracy of knowledge. Which would we rather have?