

THE WASHINGTON LETTERS

By GEORGE P. SCHMIDT

In addition to the letters which are described in the following article, the Rutgers Library is fortunate in owning two compasses which once belonged to George Washington. The first of these was presented by Washington to Simeon DeWitt. The second, used by Washington when he surveyed Virginia in 1748, was given to the Library by Mr. Frederick William Parker, of the Class of 1888, and his brother and sister. Another treasured Washington possession is a portrait by Sharples a reproduction of which accompanies this article. It came to the Library as a part of the legacy of James Neilson. The author of the following article, Dr. Schmidt, has written The Old Time College President and various articles on American history. He is the head of the Department of History at the New Jersey College for Women.

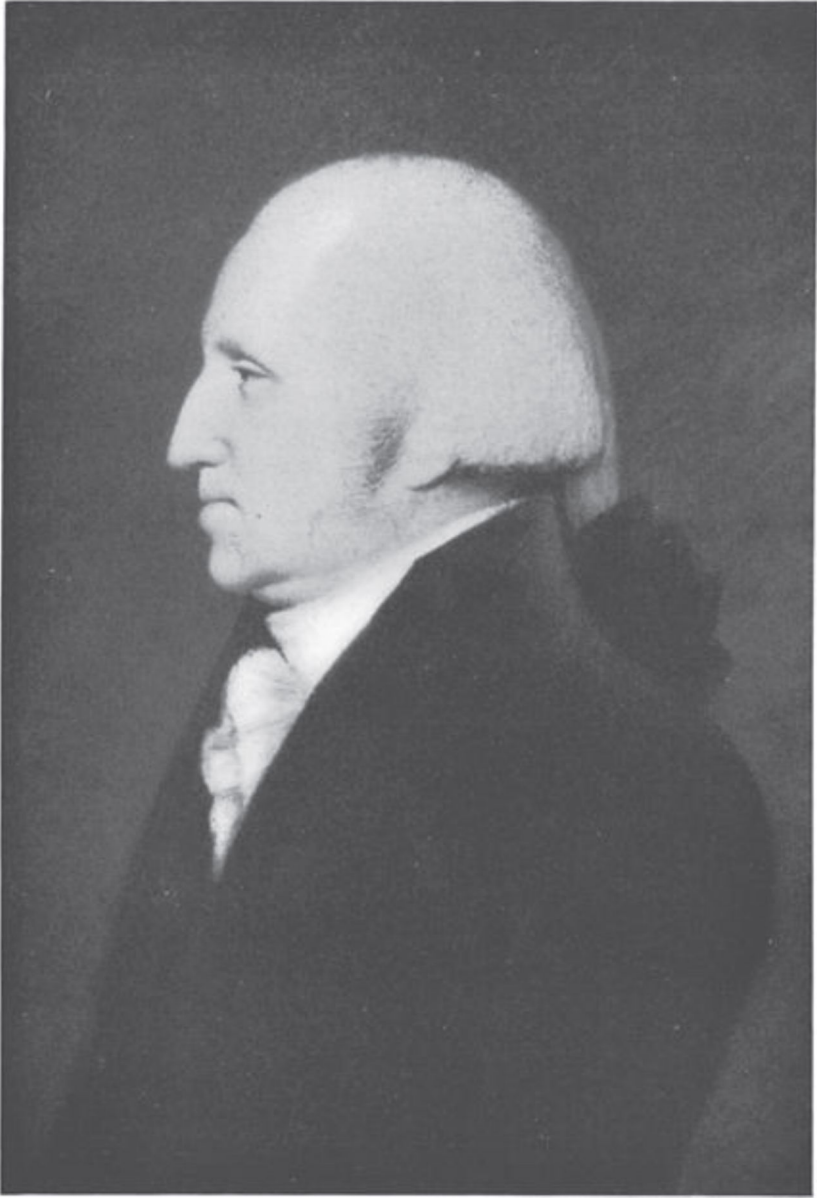
THERE is a perennial fascination in anything written by George Washington, as the recent new edition of his collected writings,¹ the third and most complete such publication, amply attests. This continued interest is natural enough when one remembers that for half a century Washington was sending letters, orders, and instructions, in quantities that rose, during the most strenuous years of the Revolution, to as high as fifteen a day.² Handed down in the families of the recipients as treasured heirlooms, these communications, scattered over the country, have kept the interest alive. Today, to be sure, most of the ten thousand or more letters from Washington have been gathered in the national capital and rest in orderly files in the Library of Congress; for that very reason all the more import attaches to the few, scarcely two per cent of the whole,³ which still remain outside of the main collection. Among these latter are the eleven Washington letters in the Rutgers Library.

Though by no means of first importance in all the voluminous Washington correspondence, these eleven originals carry more than mere antiquarian interest. They were all written, as might be expected from their present location, in or near New Jersey, during those anxious years when the Commander-

¹ John C. Fitzpatrick, ed. *The Writings of George Washington 1745-1799*. Washington, Government Printing Office, 1931 *et seq.* Twenty-four volumes have appeared, covering the period to the close of the Revolutionary War.

² *Ibid.*, vol. i, Introductory Note.

³ *Ibid.*



GEORGE WASHINGTON
Portrait by Sharples

in-Chief, maneuvering between New York and Philadelphia, was desperately trying to hold his own against the British forces and to keep the waning enthusiasm for independence alive. The span covered is from January 11, 1777, to August 29, 1781; collectively they furnish a glimpse of the problems and difficulties of the period of the most stirring campaigns. Six are addressed to Colonel David Forman, three to Colonel John Neilson, one to Simeon DeWitt, and one to the justices of Somerset county. The last-named, the least personal of all the letters, is a requisition for cattle and grain for the army. Though courteous in tone, it veils a threat of more summary action in case the request is not met.

The Forman letters are dated from January 11, 1777, to October 19, 1777. David Forman of Monmouth county decided for independence and against the king, and became a colonel, then a general, in the Jersey militia. For a short time he served on General Lee's staff—he was one of the officers to testify against Lee after the battle of Monmouth—then resumed his independent command. His principal duties, as indicated in the six letters addressed to him, were to act as recruiting agent for the army, to furnish intelligence about British troop movements, and to suppress Loyalist activities in his home territory. To the last-named of these tasks he brought such enthusiasm that his victims, who had remained faithful to the old allegiance, remembered him for years after as "Devil David."⁴ The letters, dated from January 11 to October 19, 1777, refer to these activities. Forman is authorized to raise a regiment; he receives recruiting instructions, along with other officers; he also receives instructions as to the exchange of prisoners; he is to ascertain the direction taken by Howe's fleet; and he is directed to defend the salt works along the coast against British raids.⁵ Behind the clipped sentences of this correspondence one detects the anxieties of Washington. Recruits were not coming in fast enough, even though bounties were offered "over and above the pay and provisions already allowed . . . of Twenty Dollars and a suit of Cloaths."⁶ After Howe had taken Philadelphia, the

⁴ Biographical sketch in *Dictionary of American Biography*.

⁵ For an account of the salt industry in New Jersey and of Colonel Forman's part in defending it, see "Colonel Neilson: Salt Merchant," by Robert T. Thompson, *The Journal of the Rutgers University Library*, I, 1 (December 1937), 11-16.

⁶ In the later war years, as the paper currency depreciated, these bounties ran to much higher figures.

situation became critical: "It is my earnest request that you immediately collect all the Men you possibly can & send them on . . . to join this Army. . . . I wish you to use all your Influence & Interest with your Legislative Body that they may give you what Assistance they can . . ." Even Washington had his difficulties with the Jersey legislature.

Besides the Forman letters there are three addressed to Colonel John Neilson of the Militia, well-known New Brunswick merchant and lifelong trustee of Rutgers College. One, written at Cranbury just before the Monmouth action, asks for details as to the speed and direction of the British retreat. The other two, in the summer of '79, likewise request accurate and confidential information about the British movements out of New York.

Most famous of the Rutgers collection is the letter, written at New Brunswick in Washington's own hand, to Simeon De Witt, directing the latter to survey the road south, for the advance into Virginia. DeWitt, a native of New York, had attended Queen's College and had received his degree in 1776, though the college was scattered at the time. After the Saratoga campaign, in which he served as a private, his knowledge of surveying came to Washington's attention, and he was made assistant to Robert Erskine, Geographer of the Army, at two dollars a day, a horse and traveling expenses.⁷ After Erskine's death, DeWitt advanced to his position and in that capacity was given the order to prepare the way for the army. In this letter, of August 29, 1781, the destination of the march becomes apparent; here is positive confirmation of the daring plan, guardedly rumored heretofore, to leave Clinton in New York and to converge on Cornwallis, the plan that led to Yorktown and independence. Simeon DeWitt, Rutgers 1776, blazed the trail.

Two of the letters, the earliest and the latest, are holographs. In each of these the smooth flowing hand of Washington is unmistakable. The rest were written by one or another of the many aides and secretaries who served at headquarters. Careful scrutiny of facsimiles⁸ indicates that three are in the hand

⁷ Albert H. Heusser, *The Forgotten General* (Paterson, N. J., 1928), p. 137.

⁸ Specimens of the writing of the aides are in Fitzpatrick's *Calendar of the Correspondence of George Washington with the Continental Congress* (Washington, 1906), *passim*. The names of thirty-two are listed, p. 9.

of Tench Tilghman, two were drawn up by James McHenry, one by John Fitzgerald, and one by John Laurens. In one case, that of the recruiting instructions to Forman, the present writer has not been able to identify the hand. These instructions, by the way, do not appear to have been published in the form of the Rutgers letter; however the Fitzpatrick edition contains a set, almost identical, under a different date. Since any given letter of Washington may exist in several forms, this is not surprising. Washington's letters were dictated to an aide, or composed by an aide from verbal or written memorandums; or written out by Washington himself. If not changed or corrected, this letter, as first written, was signed and sent, and a copy was made for Headquarters' file. If changes were made, a fair copy was taken and this was signed and sent. The corrected composition, or draft, was put in the file. There are many instances where Washington changed his own draft and then made the fair copy himself; but whether this was caused by a lack of secretarial assistance at the moment cannot be known. Secretarial aid was obviously lacking at times, for colonels and generals, casual visitors, and even Mrs. Washington, were pressed into service.

With the exception of one of the Neilson letters, all of the Rutgers collection consists of originals received by the addressees. This one, lacking the seal and folded as though intended for the file, may be a draft copy. In a comparison of each letter with the published version,⁹ minor variations were found, indicative of the rewording of Washington's original thoughts by one of the secretaries. To attach any significance to such variants of expression and spelling would be idle pedantry. Thus a singular noun in one copy is pluralized in another; "I inclose" becomes "I transmit"; troops "enlisted" in one copy are "engaged" in another. Spelling, of course, is erratic, for Noah Webster had not yet strait-jacketed the language, and Washington, along with his contemporaries, spelled "like a gentleman," with vigor and freedom. A more significant variant occurs in the recruiting instructions, where the Rutgers letter gives the minimum age as fifteen, while the Fitzpatrick version has it as seventeen. Was this a secretary's slip or was urgent need driving the general to extremes? A list of names

⁹ The Fitzpatrick edition was consulted in each case.

of recruits gathered by Colonel Forman in compliance with the orders, also in the library, includes several boys aged seventeen, but none younger.

No momentous discoveries, nothing of world-shaking importance, is disclosed in the Rutgers collection of Washington papers. Nevertheless the library is justly proud of its treasures, so intimately bound up with the history of the University and of the State.

CHRONOLOGICAL LIST OF THE LETTERS

- Jan. 11, 1777. To Col. Forman. From Morristown. Suggests officers for proposed regiment. Holograph.
- Jan. 27, 1777. For David Forman Esqr. Probably from Morristown. Recruiting instructions. The Fitzpatrick edition has a copy of these, not addressed to Forman, under date of Jan. 13. Handwriting not determined. Fitzpatrick suggests John Fitzgerald (vol. 7, p. 7 note); I do not think so, for it does not resemble the specimen of Fitzgerald's writing which I have seen.
- May 15, 1777. To Col. Forman. From Morristown. Deals with the exchange of prisoners. Civil war raises peculiar problems. Written by Tilghman.
- July 18, 1777. To Brigadier Genl. Forman. From headquarters (at Smith's Clove, Orange County, N. Y.). Discusses recruiting problems, and asks him to watch the British fleet. Written by Tilghman.
- Oct. 16, 1777. To Brigadier Genl. Forman. From headquarters (near Philadelphia). He is to stir Jersey to action. Written by Fitzgerald.
- Oct. 19, 1777. To Brigadier Genl. Forman. From headquarters (near Philadelphia). He is to defend the salt works. Written by Tilghman.
- June 26, 1778. To Colonel Neilson. From Cranbury. Asks information of British retreat. Written by Laurens. This letter is framed and on display in the library.
- May 31, 1779. To Col. John Neilson. From Middlebrook. He is to report on British movements, also find boats at Elizabeth. Washington signed twice, at the close of the letter proper and also at the close of a postscript. Written by McHenry.
- June 2, 1779. To Colonel Nielson. From Middlebrook. Neilson is to reconnoiter positions on Staten Island. Secrecy urged. Written by McHenry.
- Jan. 7, 1780. To the Justices of Somerset County. From Morristown. Requisition for supplies.
- Aug. 29, 1781. To Simeon DeWitt. From Brunswick. He is to survey the road to Head of Elk. Holograph.