

General George Washington Resigning His Commission

The painting General George Washington Resigning His Commission by John Trumbull is on display in the Rotunda of the U.S. Capitol. This painting depicts the scene on December 23, 1783, in the Maryland State House in Annapolis when George Washington resigned his commission as commander-in-chief of the Continental Army. The action was significant for establishing civilian authority over the military, a fundamental principle of American democracy.

Washington, illuminated by the light falling into the room, stands in uniform before the president of the Continental Congress, Thomas Mifflin, and the delegates, among whom is Thomas Jefferson. Behind Washington are his aides-de-camp, Col. Benjamin Walker and Col. David Humphreys, and spectators. The delegates and spectators direct their attention to Washington as he extends his right hand to return his commission. The empty chair draped in a cloak, suggestive of a throne covered with a king's robe, symbolizes Washington's act of retiring from his position of power.

GEN. WASHINGTON RESIGNING HIS COMMISSION
to Congress at Annapolis Md. Decemb. 23^d 1783



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| 1. Thomas Mifflin, Pennsylvania, President
Delegate | 9. Richard D. Spaight, North Carolina
Delegate | 17. James Madison, Virginia
Secretary | 25. General Smallwood, Maryland
Spectator |
| 2. Charles Thompson, Pennsylvania
Secretary | 10. Benjamin Hawkins, North Carolina
Delegate | 18. William Ellery, Rhode Island
Delegate | 26. Gen. Ohio Holland Williams, Maryland
Spectator |
| 3. Elbridge Gerry, Massachusetts
Delegate | 11. Abbot Foster, New Hampshire
Delegate | 19. J. Townley Chase, Maryland
Delegate | 27. Col. Samuel Smith, Maryland
Spectator |
| 4. Hugh Williamson, North Carolina
Delegate | 12. Thomas Jefferson, Virginia
Delegate | 20. Samuel Hardy, Virginia
Delegate | 28. Col. John E. Howard, Maryland
Spectator |
| 5. Samuel Osgood, Massachusetts
Delegate | 13. Arthur Lee, Virginia
Delegate | 21. Charles Morris, Pennsylvania
Delegate | 29. Charles Carroll and two daughters,
Maryland |
| 6. Heister McCook, Delaware
Delegate | 14. David Howell, Rhode Island
Delegate | 22. General Washington
Aide-de-camp | 30. Mrs. Washington and her three grand-
children |
| 7. George Partridge, Massachusetts
Delegate | 15. James Monroe, Virginia
Delegate | 23. Col. Benjamin Walker
Aide-de-camp | 31. Daniel of St. Julien, Maryland
Spectator |
| 8. Edward Lloyd, Maryland
Delegate | 16. Jacob Read, South Carolina
Delegate | | |



Click on the image above to [enlarge the key](#).

General George Washington Resigning His Commission, painted between 1822 and 1824, was the last of the four paintings that [John Trumbull](#) created under his 1817 commission from the U.S. Congress. To depict accurately the figures in the painting, Trumbull copied miniatures he had painted previously, studied portraits by fellow artists, and contacted members of Congress for portraits of the delegates. He based the representation of George Washington on one of his own earlier portraits. Some figures not present at the actual event are shown, including James Madison and Martha Washington and her grandchildren, who appear in the gallery. Trumbull visited and sketched the room, the Senate Chamber of the State House, in 1822, but in creating the painting he altered some elements. The Chamber no longer contained the furnishings used at the time of Washington's resignation. Rather than depict the newer furniture created for the room in 1796, Trumbull copied the chairs he had painted in [Declaration of Independence](#); Washington's larger chair differs from those in which the delegates are seated, which contributes to the suggestion of a throne. The painting was completed in April 1824, and Trumbull took it

on tour during the rest of the year in Boston, Providence, Hartford, Albany, Philadelphia, and New York City.

General George Washington Resigning His Commission balances the first of Trumbull's [Rotunda](#) paintings, *Declaration of Independence*. The two paintings are similar in composition, with figures seated and standing in the background. The central action in each is the presentation of papers: here, by Washington; in *Declaration*, by Thomas Jefferson. Both scenes take place in the chambers of a civilian legislature, and Trumbull's use of similar chairs subtly reinforces the relationship between the two paintings. A smaller version of *Washington Resigning* that Trumbull completed in 1828 is part of the collection of Yale University Art Gallery.

Trumbull performed the first cleaning and restoration of his Rotunda paintings in 1828, applying wax to their backs to protect them from dampness and cleaning and re-varnishing their surfaces. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries the painting was cleaned, restored, varnished, and relined. All of the Rotunda paintings were most recently cleaned in 2008.

III. Washington's Address to Congress Resigning his Commission, [23 December 1783]

III. Washington's Address to Congress Resigning his Commission

[23 Dec. 1783]

Mr. President

The great events on which my resignation depended having at length taken place; I have now the honor of offering my sincere Congratulations to Congress and of presenting myself before them to surrender into their hands the trust committed to me, and to claim the indulgence of retiring from the Service of my Country.

Happy in the confirmation of our Independence and Sovereignty, and pleased with the opportunity afforded the United States of becoming a respectable Nation, I resign with satisfaction the Appointment I accepted with diffidence. A diffidence in my abilities to accomplish so arduous a task, which however was superseded by a confidence in the rectitude of our Cause, the support of the Supreme Power of the Union, and the patronage of Heaven.

The Successful termination of the War has verified the most sanguine expectations, and my gratitude for the interposition of Providence, and the assistance I have received from my Country-men, encreases with every review of the momentous Contest.

While I repeat my obligations to the Army in general, I should do injustice to my own feelings not to acknowledge in this place the peculiar Services and distinguished merits of the Gentlemen who have been attached to my person during the War. It was impossible the choice of confidential Officers to compose my family should have been more fortunate. Permit me Sir, to recommend in particular those, who have continued in Service to the present moment, as worthy of the favorable notice and patronage of Congress.

I consider it an indispensable duty to close this last solemn act of my Official life, by commending the Interests of our dearest Country to the protection of Almighty God, and those who have the superintendence of them, to his holy keeping.

Having now finished the work assigned me, I retire from the great theatre of Action; and bidding an Affectionate farewell to this August body under whose orders I have so long acted, I here offer my Commission, and take my leave of all the employments of public life.

Text from Washington's *Writings*, ed. Fitzpatrick, xxvii, 284–5, from a photostat of the original draft in his hand that Washington presented to McHenry (DLC: McHenry Photostats). Steiner, writing in 1907, said that this “original draft ... was given to McHenry and has been preserved by his descendants to this day” (Steiner, *McHenry*, p. 68). A facsimile was published in the *Magazine of American History*, vii (1881), p. 106. This was doubtless the copy made available to the committee engaged in framing a response; it may not have been actually presented to McHenry by Washington, but may have been retained by him as a member of the committee, its presence among his papers leading Steiner and others to assume that it was a more formal gift. A fair copy (and doubtless the copy that Washington employed in his appearance before Congress), in David Humphreys’

hand and signed by Washington, is in DLC: Washington Papers; it was the text employed in Washington's *Writings*, ed. Ford, x (1891), p. 338.