Jefferson’s Retirement as Secretary of State

Some biographers and historians assume that Jefferson’s desire to resign from Washington’s first cabinet arose from almost anything but his professed longing for the quiet and rest of retirement—his discouragement at Hamilton’s 1792 newspaper attacks and congressional and cabinet victories, the failure of the 1793, congressional Treasury investigation to oust Hamilton, the complex foreign relations situation at the close of 1793, and his then awkward position between personal convictions and his cabinet-forced official position. Moreover, they like to infer that only Washington’s insistence kept him in office beyond the second inauguration.\(^1\) Such assertions, though partly true, are naturally annoying both to Jeffersonians and to scholars who have no political position, and who seek only the unbiased truth. The actual situation appears more clearly when certain hitherto unpublished letters at The Massachusetts Historical Society, in addition to pertinent matter in print, are examined.\(^2\)

It seems that Jefferson’s determination stemmed from about a year after his entrance into office. The Anas (February 29, 1792) record a conversation with the President in which Jefferson told of


\(^2\) The Massachusetts Historical Society letters will be designated as “M. H. S.” Other letters will be referred to merely by date when they are found in either the P. L. Ford or the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association collection.
receiving a letter from Washington on April 1, 1791, revealing the President's intention to retire "ere long," plainly at the end of the term, whereupon he had decided to retire at the same time. The Anas on the day before also record a conversation with Washington, in which Jefferson had said his "career would certainly be exactly as short as his [Washington's] own." Apparently, however, he had already dropped the suggestion both to Washington and Madison. Even before these conversations, he had written in code to William Short (January 28, 1792), "I have unalterably fixed for retiring from my office at the close of our first Federal cycle, which will be first of March, 1793. All this is confided sacredly to your secrecy, being known to no mortal but the President, Madison, and yourself." March 18, he mentioned his intent to Short again.

From this time forth, evidently the matter was no secret. He mentioned it to his daughter Martha on March 22, to Stephen Willis November 12, and terminated his lease to Lieper December 9, 1792. During the early summer, he openly spoke of his coming retirement. It was no longer an issue confined only to friends and relatives. In his letter to Washington of May 23, he spoke of his lack of ambition to continue; and in his wrathful September 9 letter concerning the current Hamilton attacks he referred to his original plan to retire at the close of the administration, and suggested that he would answer Hamilton then, not before.

He made arrangements in Philadelphia and Monticello for his departure, for canal and building operations, and land and crop deals. His finances were causing him considerable concern. At Monticello, his family continued to expect him until about the middle of February, 1793. On January 26, he wrote Martha, mentioning "a check on my purpose of returning home at the close of this session of Congress." Shortly after, February 3, he wrote to his son-in-law, Thomas Mann Randolph, who was managing the estate in his absence, of a sudden change in plans, as follows:

In my letter to my daughter, of last week, I suggested to her that a possibility had arisen that I might not return home as early as I had determined. It happened

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8 M. H. S., February 3, 1793, to T. M. Randolph.
5 M. H. S. An extract from this letter appears in Sarah Randolph's The Domestic Life of Thomas Jefferson (New York, 1871), 215–216.
unfortunately that the attack made on me in the newspapers came out soon after I began to speak freely & publicly of my purpose to retire this spring, and, from the modes of publication, the public were possessed of the former sooner than of the latter: and I find that as well those who are my friends, as those who are not, putting the two thoughts together as cause & effect, conceived I was driven from my office either from want of firmness or perhaps fear of investigation. desirous that my retirement may be clouded with no imputations of this kind, I see not only a possibility, but rather a probability that I shall postpone it for some time. whether for weeks or months I cannot now say. this must depend in some degree on the will of those who troubled the waters before. when they suffer them to get calm, I will go into port—my inclinations never before suffered such violence; and my interests also are materially affected....

The Anas on February 7 record that he told the President he was willing “to continue somewhat longer . . . perhaps till summer, perhaps autumn,” but not as a result of presidential persuasion. His son-in-law, replying February 20 to the letter of February 3, expressed surprise and regret:*

Your letter by the post before last has not yet reached Monto. and consequently we did not know of your having changed your resolution to retire in the spring till last week. The information throws a gloom over our prospects of happiness this summer and of cours gives no joy at Monto. but your determination was received with much applause by the county at large where the interest in your fame is greater than that in your person. . . .

March 10, he wrote his daughter of plans for a short stay in Philadelphia, and March 18 (address unknown) that “my public career is now closing.” April 7, he wrote J. W. Eppes,* discussing a plan to take a small house in the country whence “to take my departure[for] Monticello the first moment I can do it with due respect to myself.” May 12, he again wrote his daughter of “the great inconveniences I experience by having been persuaded by my friends to defer carrying into execution my determination to retire.” On the same day he wrote Eppes again, that he had sent his furniture off, “so as to be in readiness for flight the moment I find an apt occasion.” June 9, he wrote Madison rebuking him for urging him to remain.

* M. H. S.
7 Sarah Randolph, *op. cit.*, 220, 217.
8 M. H. S.
9 M. H. S.
10 M. H. S.
July 31, feeling that now he could retire with self-respect, he wrote to Washington, resigning as of September 30. The Anas of August 6 record Washington's call, protesting this determination; and on August 11 he wrote the President of his willingness to continue until the end of the year. December 21 (he noted in a letter to Martha of the next day), Washington made a last attempt to dissuade him; but he resigned December 31, Washington accepting regretfully January 1, 1794. Except for an attempt by the President to persuade him to re-enter public service late in August, 1794,11 this was the end of Jefferson's Washington-administration relations.

In its broader outlines, the full story of his retirement is simple enough. Returning from France with the expectation of a long rest at home, Jefferson reluctantly accepted the foreign office portfolio and began his duties March 21, 1790. Finding himself almost alone as a republican in the New York federal society, he soon after—April 1, 1791—decided to end his unhappy situation with the close of the first presidential term. He made this determination clear first to Washington and Madison, probably before 1792, then to his family and friends long before Hamilton's attacks upon him12 and the failure of the 1793 congressional investigation to oust the Secretary of the Treasury.

It was as a result of these attacks, not because of them, that he prolonged his stay seven months beyond his original plan. It is plain that he would not quit under fire. Then, at Washington's request, he finished the year, adding three more months of extended service, all at considerable inconvenience to his Virginia interests. When he left, the Genet furore was over, the Jacobin clubs were quiet, and neutrality was no longer a newspaper issue of importance. Freneau's National Gazette, the leading critic of the administration's attitude toward France, had died defiantly, supporting Genet to the last.13

11 Letter to E. Randolph, September 7, 1794.
12 These began with sneers at Freneau as Jefferson's hireling and expanded into bitter personalities and criticisms of Jefferson's attitudes on the Constitution, debt to France, and Presidential ambitions. Toward the last, Hamilton obviously wanted to quit, but was forced to answer damaging attacks on his own fragile, circumstantial case.
13 Freneau did not follow Jefferson in this matter. In his letter to Madison of August 3, 1793, Jefferson had said, "Genet . . . will sink the republican interest if they do not abandon him."
Hamilton had long since given up attacks on his great opponent, silenced by the unknown author of "The Vindication of Mr. Jefferson." The political waters were now calm, and Thomas Jefferson was free to go into port.

These masterful documents, obviously written by a legal mind close to both Madison and Jefferson, kept Hamilton on the defensive from September 22, when he probably would gladly have kept his promise to Washington to withdraw, until late in December. He wrote his last answer December 11 in The Gazette of the United States. December 31, the mysterious opponent again appeared in Dunlap's American Daily Advertiser. This letter was reprinted in Fenno's Gazette of the United States on January 5, 1794; but Hamilton never answered it. A careful perusal of the extent to which these persistent, logical challenges had forced Hamilton into a hopeless position—and the petulance of his own last answer—sufficiently explain his choice of silence, though at this time he was being kept extraordinarily busy preparing an elaborate answer to his congressional critics. He had not won the debate, as most historians assume. He had lost it, and by a wide margin.