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Three Franklin Letters

In January, 1946, The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, with the generous assistance of Mr. Frank H. Moss, purchased indirectly from the Bache family an unusually valuable collection of Frankliniana. Last January, 1947, the Franklin purse, one of the items in the collection, was presented by the Society to the Franklin House in London through the agency of the British Ambassador, Lord Inverchapel.

Of particular significance to students of American history are the more than fifty letters to Franklin written between 1774 and 1790 by associates, friends, and members of his family. Printed versions of some of these letters have apparently been made from copies and not from the originals to be found in this collection. In order to make these letters more readily accessible to a large number of interested Franklin readers and scholars, the Editors of THE MAGAZINE have decided to publish from time to time selected letters from this collection. The first three of these appear in this issue of THE MAGAZINE, and include perhaps the most important of all the letters in the collection, that from Robert Livingston to Franklin, October 20, 1781. The other two letters include Lafayette's letter to Franklin of September 12, 1782, and Franklin's answer dated the following day.

The Editors wish to announce that in the July issue of THE MAGAZINE will appear letters to Benjamin Franklin from his sister, Jane Mecom. As most of the Jane Mecom correspondence is in the possession of the American Philosophical Society, the letters in this collection are of special note. It will be of interest to Franklin students that Carl Van Doren will soon publish the entire Jane Mecom-Benjamin Franklin correspondence.

Philadelphia

FREDERIC R. KIRKLAND

70
Dear Sir

Congress having lately thought it advisable to alter the arrangement of their great executive departments, & to dissolve the boards & committees under whose direction they formerly were, I am to inform you that they have done me the honor to appoint me their Secretary for foreign affairs. In which capacity they have made it my duty, as it will always be my inclination, to maintain an intimate, & regular correspondence with you. I have this day taken the oath of office, and as the recital of fortunate events is the most pleasing task annexed to it, I shall give you a short sketch of the state of our military operations. When Gen\(^1\) Washington was fully apprized that Compt Du Grasse was to visit this Continent, he made every provision for the attack of New York, where the enemy had about 6000 troops, & seven ships of the line, which was thought inadequate to

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1 Robert Livingston's letter to Benjamin Franklin, dated October 20, 1781, has often been printed. In view of its importance it would be strange indeed if it had not been. For years the whereabouts of the original had been unknown, and historians have had to use a copy in the Library of Congress. Now at last Livingston's manuscript letter has a permanent home in the Society Collections.

Scholars are familiar with the liberties that Jared Sparks took in editing the Washington letters, but in editing the Livingston-Franklin letter he seems to have gone to inexcusable lengths, and Wharton and other early writers unfortunately followed his lead. Some of the variations between the original letter and Sparks' transcription are put in brackets. Most of the errors are trivial and there is a general modernization of spelling and punctuation. But in two instances the inaccuracies are of a more serious nature. Sparks places the number of men led by Cornwallis at 7,000 rather than the 5,000 stated by Livingston on page 3 of his letter. Later, where Livingston writes, "they have 5000 of their best troops," Sparks arbitrarily changes this figure to 9,000. Certainly 5,000 men was a figure more nearly correct than 9,000. Jared Sparks, *Diplomatic Correspondence of the American Revolution* (Boston, 1829), III, 238; also Francis Wharton, *The Revolutionary Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States* (Washington, 1889), IV, 795. Henry P. Johnston gives 5,000 and Gordon, Andrews, and Fisher, 7,000. Such inaccurate transcriptions as these help to explain why so many errors have crept into our early history.

For those who want a fuller understanding of the background of this letter, a reading of Henry P. Johnston's *The Yorktown Campaign and the Surrender of Cornwallis* (New York, 1881) is suggested. However, as this little book may not easily be available, any of the standard books on the American Revolution will be adequate. Trevelyan and Fisher give perhaps the most readable accounts.
its defence. He collected the troops, as well those of our [our omitted] allies, as our own, & made a movement towards New York. The delay of our recruits in coming in, a small reinforcement to the enemy from Europe, & some other circumstances, gave us reason to be apprehensive for the event of this attempt, tho the magnitude of the object still urged the Gen¹ to undertake it. It was the enemies place of arms, the repository of their magazines, & the only harbour for large ships left them on this side of Halifax. Every preparation was accordingly made, When some circumstances deemed unfortunate at the time, but which, like many other of our supposed evils, have in the end been productive of good, occasioned an alteration in the destination of Compt Du Grasse. He sailed for Chesapeake. The Gen¹ still appearing to prosecute his first design moved his Army & made such preparations as induced the enemy to believe that he meant to possess himself of Staten Island as preparatory to his design upon New York. In the mean time, the army filed off thro' Hakensack, & New Ark, to keep up the deception, and arrived by expeditious marches to the head of Elk—Compt Du Grasse arrived in [at] the critical moment, and Cornwallis at the head of about 5000 [7000] men found himself compleatly invested at York town² by an army of ab¹ fourteen thousand regular troops. The British fleet which arrived at New York about the time that Compt Du Grasse reached [the] Chesapeake made an ineffectual attempt to relieve their army. They were defeated, & compelled to return to New York after losing the Terrible a 74, & two frigates By which means a junction of the fleet from Rhode Island was formd with that under the Compt Du Grasse. It arrived the day after the action, & narrowly escaped falling in wᵗʰ the English fleet. Our batteries were opened [on] the 7th. the enimy have [having] evacuated their principal out works & been repulsed in one or two sallies, our second parellel was begun on the 11ᵗʰ within 300 yards of their lines and the least sanguine among the

² The mention of Yorktown generally carries with it the question of the responsibility for that campaign. Certainly after the meeting of Washington and Rochambeau at Weathersfield on August 20, 1781, it was decided to attack New York. What changed the plan? Rochambeau in his Mémoires claims all the credit, but this is not likely. Probably DeGrasse was afraid to attack New York and sailed for the Chesapeake, an action which compelled Washington to change his plans. Rupert Hughes exaggerates when he says that "resentment, indignation and despair burst upon him (Washington)." Rupert Hughes, George Washington (New York, 1926–1930), III, 643.
Officers fix the end of the month, as the æra of Cornwallis’s captivity, his whole force at York & on the opposite side of the river, including seamen, & irregulars, amounts to about 7000 Men. The enmy sailed from Sandyhook yesterday with twenty three ships of the line, & three 50s, with several frigates, & a number of fire ships: they have 5000 [9000] of their best troops, if we are rightly informed, on board their ships of war. They are resolved to make some attempt for the relief of Cornwallis, whose capture must draw after it, the loss of all the posts they hold in the Southern States & the total ruin of their affairs in America. Georgia has reestablished her Government, where the enmy have no other footing than in Savannah—South Carolina is about doing the same. Gen Green has very prudently wasted the strength of the enmy, & raised the confidence of the militia, by fighting them in detail, his late victory (which I enclose you an account of in his own words) affords the most promising prospect of our speedily recovering the possession of that country.

Congress are however looking forward to another campaign. They have voted twenty five thousand men for the ensuing year. These, when raised & appointed, together with the success which has hitherto, & which we may promiss ourselves will still continue to attend the Allied arms, will enable you to open your diplomatick [diplomatic] campaign with great advantage, and permit you, Sir, to rejoice in the close of that great work, to which you have so sedulously & ably contributed.

I need not tell you, Sir, how anxious I shall be to hear from you on every occasion, nothing short of the most constant, & regular, information, will satisfy the expectations of Congress. We have much to learn, & but few opportunities of acquiring information. Your situation enables you not only to let us know what passes with you, but to extend your inquiries to courts where we have no ministers, And of whose politicks we would not chuse to be ignorant, tho they may but remotely concern us at present. For my own part, I freely confess, that I rely much upon your knowledge & experience to supply my want of both. I propose to write so frequently to you, as to keep

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8 The battle of Eutaw Springs was fought on September 7, and was one of the bloodiest battles of the war. It was probably a drawn battle, although Greene claimed the victory because he was able to sleep on the field of battle. Congress awarded him a gold medal for this engagement.
you fully informed, not only of what is done [done omitted], but of what is not done, since the last may sometimes be as important to you as the first. As far Sir as you may find a similar task consistant with your health, your leisure, & your various avocations, you will render as essential services in imposing it upon yourself. Congress having resolved, that all communications with their ministers abroad, shall pass thro’ this office you will do me the honor Sir, to direct in future your publick letters to me. I have the honor to be

Dear Sir
With the greatest respect & esteem
Your Most Ob* Hum Serv*
Rob R Livingston*

II
Paris September the 12th 1782*

Dear Sir
Inclosed I have the Honor to Send You a Letter* that Relates to our Continental Stores, and When I am able to Get the Account of them You Have Seemed to desire, I Will immediately Communicate it to Your Excellency—I fear the Army is in Want, and of Course Am Particularly interested in their Safe and Speedy departure—if

* Chancellor Robert R. Livingston (1746-1813), one of the committee to draw up the Declaration of Independence, assisted in the purchase of Louisiana from Napoleon and was, during the last two years of the Revolution, Secretary of Foreign Affairs. After the war, the Livingston family held the balance of power in New York and by supporting Clinton and Jefferson were largely responsible for the downfall of Hamilton and Federalism.

* Lafayette sailed early in January from Boston on the Alliance, which Congress had put at his disposal, and arrived at L'Orient twenty-three days later. He was made Maréchal de Camp (Major General) by Louis XVI for his services in America, probably the only instance of a Frenchman being promoted for voluntary individual service to a foreign nation.

* I have been unable to find the letter alluded to, but Franklin was obviously anxious to know what supplies for the next campaign would be sent.
You Approve of it, I Will Wait Upon M. de Castries, and from Him Know Every Particular About the Convoy.

By a Very Good Information, tho Not Ministerial, I Have found that M. Reynival Has Been truly intended to Go, or perhaps is Gone, in Which I Confess I have Been Mistaken—Having at once Put two Questions to Count de Virgennes, it Appears He Answered But one of them, But Had I Sooner Received Your Letter, I Would Have Been More Pointed in My Enquiries With that Minister.

Upon Recollection, I Cannot Help thinking Mr jay Had Some Notion of My Knowing M. Raynival's departure, and Having With You Some Reserve about it Which it Was But Proper to Return—When I thought of it, it Made me Smile, and As it Was the 11th September I Might Have Spoke to Him pretty Much the Same Way As Scipio did to the Romans Upon a Mistaken Notion of theirs.

7 Charles Eugène Gabriel de la Croix, Marquis de Castries (1727–1801), succeeded the weak Antoine Raymond de Sartine as Minister of Marine in December, 1780. De Castries was an intimate friend of Lafayette and proved an able minister. In 1782, he was leader of the "Whig Party" which did not wish to make peace.

8 Joseph Mathias Gérard de Rayneval was secretary to Vergennes. The allusion to Rayneval's "trip" to London is particularly interesting for it shows that Lafayette himself did not know what was going on in court circles, perhaps because it was felt that his sympathies were too much with America. In any event, Rayneval, who had been urging Vergennes to limit the boundaries of America and to give to England the Ohio Valley and to the Spanish the exclusive right to the Mississippi, suddenly departed for London on September 11 to see Shelburne. Jay, who had been suspicious of France for some time, decided to act immediately and told Oswald that if England would openly acknowledge American independence, America in turn would begin separate peace negotiations.

This is another controversial point in the history of the Revolution. The American minister had been instructed to do nothing without consulting Vergennes. Furthermore, the Treaty of Alliance with France, written in 1778, specified clearly in Article VIII that

Neither of the two parties shall conclude either Truce or Peace with Great Britain, without the formal consent of the other.

Although Jay perhaps did not break the Treaty in deed, he probably did in spirit. Certainly he disobeyed his instructions. No matter how advantageous the action may have been for America, was he right in so doing? His contention was that France was breaking the Treaty by sending Rayneval to Shelburne to arrange either for the surrender of Gibraltar or the equivalent of that action. During these two months of September and October, Franklin was ill in Passy with the stone and the gout. Frank Monaghan, *John Jay* (New York, 1935), 201.

9 Lafayette had been wounded on September 11, 1777 at Brandywine, and he undoubtedly means to imply here that there would have been no peace had he not been wounded and helped win the war. As a result, he should be completely trusted by both Vergennes and Jay. It was a strange coincidence in dates.

Scipio said to the Romans when on trial after winning many victories,

It is not proper for you to listen to anyone, who accuses Scipio, for if it were not for him there would be no accusers.
Be Pleased, My Good Friend, to Let Me Know How You do, and Accept the tender Assurances of the High Respect and Warm Attachement I Have the Honor to Be With

Your obedient Hbl Ser² and devoted Friend

Lafayette

III

Passy, Sept. 13, 1782

Dear Sir,

I am oblig'd to you for communicating M. de V__________ Letter, which I return. I wish you would continue your Application to the Marquis de Castries to provide Means for the Embarkation of the Goods: It is impossible for me to do it.—

I believe Mr Jay did not suspect your knowing of Mr Rayneval's Departure; he only wonder'd that you did not know it.

I am oblig'd by your kind Enquiries. I have had a bad Night, but at present have some Ease. Your natural Activity will always preserve you from the cruel Disorders that arise from too little Exercise. God give you good Health & long Life for the Advantage of our two Countries.—

With the greatest Esteem & Affection, I am,

Your most obedient
and most humble Servant

B Franklin

P. S. In congratulate you on the Improvement of your Hand-writing since yesterday. It is more legible than Mr V__________.

M. les Marquis de la Fayette