

# TO BIGOTRY NO SANCTION

GEORGE WASHINGTON AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

2012



NATIONAL MUSEUM OF  
AMERICAN JEWISH HISTORY



Detail, *Portrait of George Washington (The Dunn-Robinson Portrait of Washington)*

Gilbert Charles Stuart, ca. 1800

Philadelphia Museum of Art

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# George Washington's Correspondence with the Jews of Newport

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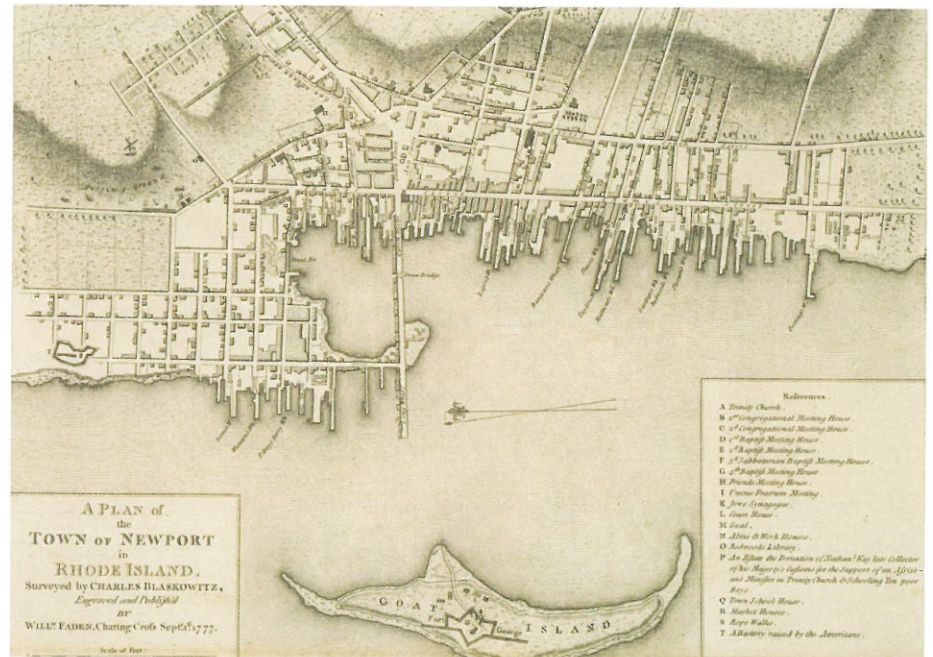
George Washington was inaugurated as president of the United States of America on April 30, 1789. The federal Constitution, by then, had been ratified by the requisite nine states and was in effect. Two other states soon signed on, and a twelfth state, North Carolina, ratified the Constitution in November 1789. Only Rhode Island, fearful that as a small state its rights would be trampled upon by the others, held back. It refused to ratify the Constitution, although it was already bound by it.

The new Constitution did not contain any clause guaranteeing religious liberty; that would only appear in the Bill of Rights in 1791. Article Six of the Constitution did outlaw religious tests "as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States." That, for Jews and other non-Christians, marked a huge step forward as it guaranteed them the right to hold public offices in the federal government. The United States, unlike most countries with Christian majorities, promised non-Christians that they could, at least in theory, hold the highest governmental office in the land.

Washington wanted the new Constitution to be unanimously approved. He believed that would make all Americans feel a part of the great experiment that the United States represented; it would signify consensus. When Rhode Island held out against ratification, Washington publicly demonstrated his unhappiness by refusing to visit the state when he toured New England in the autumn of 1789. Only after Rhode Island finally ratified the Constitution on May 29, 1790, did he agree to travel there.

Three days after Congress adjourned, on August 15, he and a large entourage, including Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson, set out for Newport.

On August 18 four addresses (written, in keeping with the literary style of the day, in the form of open letters) were read out to the president at a prearranged ceremony; it was customary to greet visiting dignitaries in this way. There was an address from the town, a joint statement of welcome from all of the Christian clergy, and a greeting from the Masonic order (whose president was also the warden of the city's synagogue, Moses Seixas). The final and most historically important address came from the "Hebrew Congregation" – the community's Jews.



Map of Newport, 1777  
Newport Historical Society

The fact that Jews were included at all is noteworthy. They formed a small but significant merchant community in Newport, and had built a beautiful synagogue, Yeshuat Israel, now known as the Touro Synagogue, in 1763. So, at the very end of Washington's visit to Newport, their representative stepped up to read an address to him. This was not the first Jewish address to Washington. That had come from the Jews of Savannah months earlier. And it was also not the last Jewish communication he received that year. Jews of New York, Philadelphia, Charleston, and Richmond sent him a joint letter several months later. But the Newport letter was, by general consensus, the most important of the lot, partly because of its content, and mostly because of his celebrated reply, sent a few days later from New York City.

Both letters were carefully written documents that reward close reading and minute study. To facilitate this, the letters are reprinted here; a commentary appears beside the text.

George Washington's correspondence with the Hebrew Congregation in Newport was published in newspapers across the country in 1790 and was frequently reprinted thereafter. A search on Google Books yields thousands of volumes that quote or reprint the letters, spanning the entire history of the United States. Though Washington directed his address to a small community of Newport Jews, it was understood, from the beginning, that his words carried far wider significance. In defining religious liberty as an "inherent natural right" and promising that "the Government of the United States. . . gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance," George Washington set a high bar, not only for his successors, but for Americans of every faith and creed.



*The American Star (George Washington)*  
Frederick Kemmelmeyer, ca. 1803

Gift of Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch, 1962 (62.256.7).  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, U.S.A.

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# To the President of the United States of America.

Sir

Permit the **children of the stock of Abraham**<sup>1</sup> to approach you with the most cordial affection and esteem for your person and merits – and to join with our **fellow citizens**<sup>2</sup> in welcoming you to NewPort.

With pleasure we reflect on those days – those days of difficulty, and danger, when the God of Israel, **who delivered David from the peril of the sword**,<sup>3</sup> – shielded Your head in the day of battle: – and we rejoice to think, that the same Spirit, who rested in the Bosom of the greatly beloved **Daniel**<sup>4</sup> enabling him to preside over the Provinces of the Babylonish Empire, rests and ever will rest upon you, enabling you to discharge the arduous duties of **Chief Magistrate**<sup>5</sup> in these States.

Deprived as we heretofore have been of the **invaluable rights of free Citizens**,<sup>6</sup> we now with a deep sense

<sup>1</sup> In colonial America, the word “Jew” carried negative associations in some Christian circles. Therefore, in writing to George Washington, Newport’s Jews used a more positive term which, ironically, they found in the King James version of the Book of Acts (13:26) which describes Paul’s address to “Men and brethren, children of the stock of Abraham.”

<sup>2</sup> In 1790, Jews could speak of themselves as “fellow citizens” almost nowhere else in the world. Newport’s Jews emphasized this point in the opening sentence of their address. Later in the text, they again underscored how much citizenship meant to them: “Deprived as we heretofore have been of the invaluable rights of free Citizens...”

<sup>3</sup> From Psalms 144:10, this verse is also included in the traditional Jewish prayer for the government (hanoten teshu’a), regularly recited in early American synagogues.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel 5–6. Note that Babylon, where Daniel resided, was, like America, a diaspora land. The various references to Daniel, an apocalyptic book of the Bible, also hint at an apocalyptic interpretation of the American Revolution. Some Jews viewed the colonists’ miraculous victory as a harbinger of the messiah.

<sup>5</sup> The term “president” had not yet come into common usage.

<sup>6</sup> In 1762, Aaron Lopez and Isaac Elizer had petitioned to obtain naturalization in Newport, and were denied. The court ruled that the 1740 Naturalization Act only applied to under-populated settlements and that local law limited citizenship to believing Christians. This may well have been what Newport’s Jews had in mind when writing to the President.

of gratitude to the **Almighty disposer**<sup>7</sup> of all events behold a Government, erected by the Majesty of the People. – a Government, which to bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance– but generously affording to **all Liberty of conscience, and immunities of Citizenship**<sup>8</sup> : – deeming every one, of whatever Nation, tongue, or language equal parts of the great governmental Machine: – This so ample and extensive Federal Union whose basis is Philanthropy, Mutual confidence and Public Virtue, we cannot but acknowledge to be the work of the Great God, who ruleth in the Armies of Heaven and among the **Inhabitants of the Earth**,<sup>9</sup> doing whatever seemeth him good.

For all these Blessings of civil and religious liberty which we enjoy under an equal and benign administration, we desire to send up our thanks to the **Ancient of Days**,<sup>10</sup> the **great preserver of Men**<sup>11</sup>– beseeching him, that the Angel who conducted our forefathers **through the wilderness**<sup>12</sup> into the promised Land, may graciously conduct you through all the difficulties and dangers of this mortal life: – And, when, like **Joshua**<sup>13</sup> full of days and full of honour, you are gathered to your Fathers, may you be admitted into the Heavenly Paradise to partake of the water of life, and the tree of **immortality**.<sup>14</sup>

Done and Signed by order of the Hebrew **Congregation**<sup>15</sup>  
in Newport, Rhode Island August 17, 1790

**Moses Seixas**,<sup>16</sup> Warden

**7** On March 20, 1779, the Continental Congress employed a similar term: “WHEREAS, in just Punishment of our manifold Transgressions it hath pleased the Supreme Disposer of all Events to visit these United States with a calamitous War...”.

**8** Washington understood that the Jewish community sought his personal guarantee that Jews would be included in the word “all.” He therefore sent the congregation’s words back to them as if they were his own: “All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship.” His slight modification of language is nevertheless noteworthy. The Jewish community viewed its liberty as an act of American generosity (“generously affording”). George Washington let Jews know that they possessed these liberties and immunities as a matter of right (“all possess alike”).

**9** Daniel 4:32 (4:35 in King James Version).

**10** Daniel 7:9.

**11** Job 7:20.

**12** Exodus 23:20.

**13** The comparison to the biblical Joshua was apt for he both entered the Promised Land and, like Washington, was a military leader.

**14** Judaism does not hold that heaven is restricted only to Jews. Here Washington is considered to be among “the righteous among the nations” who will find their repose in paradise.

**15** Once again, the congregation deliberately avoided using the term “Jewish” (see n. 1). The official name of the “Hebrew Congregation” was Yeshuat Israel (Salvation of Israel), and it became known as the Touro Synagogue in the nineteenth century.

**16** Moses Mendes Seixas (1744–1809) of Newport signed the letter to Washington in the name of the city’s entire Jewish community. Seixas was a banker, an organizer of the Bank of Rhode Island, the grand master of Rhode Island’s Masons, and a Jewish communal leader. He was also a community leader and served as both *parnas* (president or, as he was sometimes called, “warden”) of Newport’s Jewish congregation. His brother was Gershom Seixas, famed *hazan* (reader) of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York.

# To the Hebrew Congregation in Newport Rhode Island

Gentlemen,

While I receive, with much satisfaction, your Address replete with expressions of affection and esteem; I rejoice in the opportunity of assuring you, that I shall always retain a grateful remembrance of the cordial welcome **I experienced in my visit to Newport**,<sup>1</sup> from all classes of **Citizens**.<sup>2</sup>

The reflection on the days of difficulty and danger which are past is rendered the more sweet, from a consciousness that they are succeeded by days of uncommon prosperity and security. If we have wisdom to make the best use of the advantages with which we are now favored, we cannot fail, under the just administration of a good Government, **to become a great and a happy people**.<sup>3</sup>

The Citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy: a policy **worthy of imitation**.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The use of the past tense confirms that Washington did not send his letter from Newport, but after he had departed. The letter to the Jews of Newport is undated, but since the handwriting is that of Tobias Lear, who did not accompany Washington to Newport, there can be no doubt that it was sent from New York.

<sup>2</sup> Just as the Jews referred to themselves as “citizens” in the first sentence of their letter, so Washington underscored in his first sentence that they form a “class of citizens.”

<sup>3</sup> Washington wrote in a similar vein to other groups. See, for example, his letter to Roman Catholics in America (March 1790): “The prospect of national prosperity now before us is truly animating, and ought to excite the exertions of all good men to establish and secure the happiness of their Country, in the permanent duration of its Freedom and Independence. America, under the smiles of a Divine Providence—the protection of a good Government—and the cultivation of manners, morals and piety, cannot fail of attaining an uncommon degree of eminence, in literature, commerce, agriculture, improvements at home and respectability abroad.” A transcript of this letter is printed later in this catalogue.

<sup>4</sup> The idea that America would serve as an example to other countries was commonplace at that time. The bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church, for example, praised the Constitution in a letter to Washington as “at present the admiration of the world, and may in future become its great exemplar for imitation.” Washington himself had used similar language in his letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Savannah: “Happily the people of the United States of America have, in many instances, exhibited examples worthy of imitation.”

All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now **no more that toleration is spoken of**,<sup>5</sup> as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent **natural rights**.<sup>6</sup> For happily the Government of the United States, which gives **to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance**,<sup>7</sup> requires only that they who live under its protection should **demean themselves as good citizens**,<sup>8</sup> in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.

It would be inconsistent with the frankness of my character not to avow that I am pleased with your favorable opinion of my Administration, and fervent wishes for my felicity. May the Children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants; while **every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig-tree**,<sup>9</sup> and there shall be none to make him afraid. May the father of all mercies scatter light and not darkness in our paths, and make us all in our several vocations useful here, and in his own due time and way **everlastingly happy**.<sup>10</sup>

## G. Washington

**5** Washington's aside concerning toleration has long puzzled scholars, for the Jewish community made no mention of toleration in their letter to him. Moreover, the indulgent religious "toleration" practiced by the British and much of enlightened Europe was generally viewed with favor by Jews, especially when contrasted to the intolerant treatment and second-class legal status that plagued them elsewhere in the world. The idea that toleration was inadequate, implying less than complete religious freedom, is more closely associated with Thomas Jefferson than with George Washington. For this reason, the editor of Jefferson's papers suggested that Jefferson himself added these words to the letter. Yet in 1789, in corresponding with Quakers, Washington also had made clear that liberty of worship belonged to the category of "rights" and not just of "toleration."

**6** The language of "inherent natural rights" distinguished religious liberty in the United States from Jewish "emancipation" in Europe. In Europe, emancipation was generally a "quid pro quo" arrangement. It assumed that Jews would change their ways and left open the possibility (often later realized) that privileges granted to Jews would be taken away if they did not sufficiently "improve." Washington, by contrast, described religious liberty as an "inherent natural right" that can never be taken away.

**7** This phrase became the most frequently quoted passage from the letter. It improved upon a phrase used by Newport's Jews in their letter to the President.

**8** Some scholars argue that Washington's use of the phrase "demean themselves as good citizens" actually conditioned his promise of religious liberty, as if it only held as long as Jews maintained appropriate behavior. Others point to the fact that Washington frequently linked discussions of liberty with the need for Americans to "demean themselves as good citizens." In the wake of widespread resistance to federal taxation, as evidenced by Shays' Rebellion (1786-87) in Massachusetts and the Whiskey Rebellion (1790s) in Western Pennsylvania, his concern for responsible citizenship is perhaps unsurprising. In his letter to the United Baptist Churches of Virginia (May 1789), he made clear that he held people of every faith to the same standard of good citizenship: "I have often expressed my sentiment, that every man, conducting himself as a good citizen, and being accountable to God alone for his religious opinions, ought to be protected in worshipping the Deity according to the dictates of his own conscience." A transcript of this letter is printed later in this catalogue.

**9** A close study of this phrase revealed that this particular biblical passage, that of the ancient Hebrew blessing and prophetic vision of the New Jerusalem in which every man sits safely "under his vine and under his fig tree," was employed by Washington in his own writings more than any other passage. Like the Puritans, he evokes the idea of Zion being in America, as if the prophet's vision would find its fulfillment in the United States. That he applied his own favorite scriptural phrase to the Jewish people is extraordinary.

**10** The Declaration of Independence had declared "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" to be "unalienable rights." Happiness, at that time, implied not just an emotional state, but a deeper sense of wellbeing.



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