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Editors' Dialogue: Reading the Continental Congress men's Mail


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Editors' Dialogue: Reading the Continental Congressmen's Mail

EDITOR'S NOTE: For this feature, which is designed to promote that exchange of ideas for which the Association for Documentary Editing exists, the reviewer was instructed to focus his comments on two aspects of the work under examination—one thing done well and one thing that might have been done differently. Admittedly, when the perfect editor produces the perfect edition the flaw in this contrived format shall stand exposed. Yet, even when that perfect edition comes to hand we mortal editors are likely to benefit when one of our number, forced to write about something "that might have been done differently," describes those lesser alternatives to which the perfect editor said No.

The review, with its author's name deleted, was sent to the editor of the reviewed work, who was asked to comment on the reviewer's observations. Again, the intention is to foster constructive dialogue. Although the etiquette of some scholarly periodicals suggests that a reply to a review is evidence of ill grace, we stress here that Mr. Smith's comments were invited. In the months before the arrival of that perfect edition exposes our contrivance to public ridicule, we trust that we may generate light, not heat. We are especially grateful to Messrs. Tarter and Smith for graciously accomodating the deadlines that circumstances imposed for this issue of the *Newsletter*. —JK

Paul H. Smith et al., eds., *Letters of Delegates to Congress 1774-1789* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress), vol. 1 (1976), *August 1774-August 1775*, \$8.50; vol. 2 (1977), *September-December 1775*, \$9.00; vol. 3 (1978), *January 1-May 15, 1776*, \$10.25; vol. 4 (1979), *May 16-August 15, 1776*, \$11.25; vol. 5 (1979), *August 16-December 31, 1776*, \$16.50.

The publication of these 3,100 documents in less than four years is an editorial achievement of tremendous proportions. It is true that the editors had a head start in the form of the eight volume *Letters of Members of the Continental Congress* (Washington, D.C., 1921-1936), edited by Edmund C. Burnett and the files compiled by that pioneering scholar; but Paul Smith and his highly skilled team systematically searched the archives and libraries of the United States and Europe and tripled the size of the file. Moreover, their annotation of the documents, though spare when compared with the style employed by many of today's editors, displays a deep mastery of the sources. As a feat of scholarship, the *Letters of Delegates to Congress* is almost a *tour de force*. The project displays a master's touch in the assembly of documents, the conceptualization of the project, and the

execution of the editing craft. The speed with which all this excellent work has been done is amazing. The editorial art (science, skill, mystery?) would benefit as substantially as the study of the American Revolution is already benefiting from the publication of this new edition if Editor Smith would divulge his secrets and explain how he and his people can accomplish this much good work in this short a time.

The editors have taken a broad view of what constitutes letters of delegates: they include many diary entries, memoranda, draft resolutions and speeches, and miscellaneous documents that broaden the scope to make the volumes a contemporaneous running commentary on the Continental Congress. This is pure gain. But, to borrow a phrase from Mayor Daley, it is not what they included in that raises questions, it is what they included out.

In the short "Editorial Method" (1:ix), the editors forewarn: "A few items deemed trivial or repetitious in nature have been omitted on the ground that they ultimately would detract rather than add to the work, but such omissions have been appropriately noted." Many other documents are given in excerpt or abstract or are banished to notes. This is not necessarily faulty, because many circular letters went out. Thus, subjoined to John Hancock's letter of 10 June 1775 to the New York Provincial Congress is a note: "Under this date Hancock sent an identical letter to the Massachusetts Provincial Council," with citation to the MS (1:474 and n. 1). On 1 March 1776, Hancock wrote to William Alexander informing him that Congress had named him a brigadier general and enclosing his commission; the text is from the president's letterbook, and the note reads: "Hancock wrote letters transmitting commissions to Robert Howe, Andrew Lewis, and James Moore on March 1, and to John Armstrong and William Thompson on March 2" (3:316 and n.1). This clearly saves uninformative duplication. But on 5 June 1776, when Hancock wrote General Washington to inform him of the appointment of a new adjutant general, a new quarter master general, and two new brigadiers, the note indicates when and to whom letters of notification were sent, but the basic text is omitted (4:145-146 and n. 2). The text of the letters to the appointees is likewise omitted on 10 August 1776, upon which date Hancock informed Washington of the appointment of four major generals, six brigadier generals, and one lieutenant colonel (4: 648 and n. 3). This is a loss.

It is also a loss when the editors noted under the date of 8 January 1776 what John Adams "wrote a letter to Mercy Otis Warren discussing the advantages of a republican form of government" (3:55 and n. 1). The citation is to one of several readily-available printed texts of the letter, but because the development of Adams's thinking is critical to the unfolding of his role in Congress, there seems no clear justification for omitting this letter but not

several others also readily available elsewhere.

Abstracting letters can also pose problems which the desire to avoid duplication probably should not override. Sandwiched between two quotations from Abraham Clark's letter of 26 October 1776 to Elias Dayton is the editors' note: "Recapitulates recent military developments" (5:391). We might have profited by seeing for ourselves whether Clark understood the then parlous military situation in the same way other delegates did. Even more tantalizing is a note to a letter written on 6 November 1776 by North Carolina delegate William Hooper: "Hooper also wrote a letter this day to Gov. William Livingston of New Jersey, discussing, among other things, a November 5 resolve of Congress relating to that state" (5:443 n. 2).

Passages containing purely personal, family, or business matters are often left out, and this saving of space and refusal to let the delegates ravel off into extraneous fields may be justifiable. But under that rule, Benjamin Franklin's letter of 19 September 1776 to his grandson, William Temple Franklin, containing a glancing reference to Temple's loyalist father, could have been deleted (5:199-200), as could John Adams's letter of 21 August 1776 to Abigail, recounting a visit to the studio of Charles Willson Peale (5:39-40). This last, however, contains a passage ripe for excerption, in which Adams described Delegate Francis Hopkinson, whose "Head is not bigger, than a large Apple."

There are more than 200 such omissions, abstractions, and extractions in the first five volumes of this extremely valuable series. It is questionable whether such omissions from an otherwise authoritative edition can be justified when the rules apparently do not always apply with the same rigor. Even the trivial and repetitious items have their values independent of other, more weighty documents. Adding about six percent to the number of documents in a project of this size should not be a problem. Set along side the many enormous contributions of this series, these may be trifling weaknesses, but as Sherlock Holmes said, "There is nothing so important as trifles."

BRENT TARTER

Virginia Independence Bicentennial Commission



It was a pleasure to read this flattering review of the first five volumes of our edition of *Letters of Delegates to Congress*. I am disappointed only in being unable to reciprocate by divulging any extraordinary "secrets" about the "amazing" speed with which we have done our work. However, I can cite at least four factors that partially explain our productivity. First, the assistant editors on this project are excellent hard-working scholars, whose names—Gerard W. Gawalt, Rosemary Fry Plakas, and Eugene R. Sheridan—are noted here because one of the

purposes of this association should be to call attention to the indispensable contributions of these often unsung practitioners of the editing art. Second, the Library of Congress contains the finest collections in the world for the study of the American Revolution, which often enable us to locate in minutes information that might otherwise require hours or days to track down. Third, we have benefited enormously not only from Burnett's pioneering work but also from the labors of the editors of such related projects as the papers of John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, Thomas Jefferson, Lafayette, Henry Laurens, James Madison, and George Washington, the Naval Documents of the American Revolution, and the Papers of the Continental Congress. Finally, we endeavor, insofar as possible, to provide the minimum annotation necessary to make the documents intelligible to modern readers, though we often find that the complexity of the issues requires considerable commentary. Allowing documents to speak for themselves as much as possible without instructing readers in their interpretation is an approach to editing that strikes me as no great mystery, and if readers conclude that it has produced useful results, I shall be greatly pleased.

The questions raised in the review about our selection policy are, I am convinced, less significant than they might appear at first sight. As we discovered early on, no general statement of principles can cover all the concrete problems encountered in dealing with the myriad extant documents pertaining to Congress' work. We hope, of course, that each document will fit easily within the scheme of the project, but seldom does a day pass, and certainly never a week, without the appearance of perplexing new problems not covered by our guidelines. Although we attempt to solve these on the basis of an informed editorial judgment, many decisions are invariably subjective and open to honest disagreement from other practitioners of the art.

Nevertheless, it bears repeating that the primary focus of this project is the writings produced by the delegates during the periods they attended Congress or served on committees operating away from the seat of government. In choosing documents to print, we are guided by two overriding goals—to supplement the official record contained in the *Journals* of Congress and to reveal the lives, attitudes, political alignments, and social and economic interests of the delegates who shaped the actions and policies of Congress. Accordingly, we generally exclude addresses, motions, presidential letters, and committee reports that appear in the *Journals*, though variant drafts of significant documents are included to enable scholars to trace their textual evolution. Also, with the exception of the small number abstracted or footnoted, all documents are printed in full. It is misleading to state that we "often" omit "Passages containing purely personal, family, or business matters." Admittedly, such information is sometimes excluded in the small proportion

of letters abstracted or footnoted, but only when, in our judgment, this material has no bearing on the history of Congress or the role of a particular delegate. Otherwise such passages are retained as a matter of course, which in my opinion is one of the significant improvements our edition makes on Burnett's.

A similar exercise of editorial discretion is involved in deciding when to abstract or footnote a document. Not every document produced by a delegate during his term of service is relevant to the history of Congress. Generally speaking, however, we abstract or footnote a document only if it is merely a duplicate presidential letter, a routine letter of transmittal simply announcing an action of Congress described elsewhere in our documents, a purely personal letter having no discernible relation to the writer's congressional career, or a manuscript badly damaged and virtually unusable in its present form. We also take into consideration whether or not a printed text is conveniently available of documents falling into these categories, in which case we feel we remain true to the purpose of this edition by citing rather than reproducing them. Deciding that some documents are historically less relevant than others is a subjective judgment, but this is an unavoidable part of the editor's function of separating wheat from chaff and seems preferable to printing mechanically documents that are of marginal utility to the purpose of the project.

Although documents written by delegates while actually serving in Congress are the focus of this work, we do not restrict ourselves to these. We have printed over fifty documents, for instance, to bridge the nearly seven-month gap between the First and Second Continental Congresses, and we also print letters written by delegates during leaves of absence from Congress and even after the expiration of their terms. In dealing with documents of this sort, however, we follow a policy of printing only those that bear directly upon Congress' proceedings or a delegate's congressional activities, and for this reason we often only abstract or footnote such letters. This too requires exercising judgment on matters where editors may differ, but I believe it is a necessary part of the editorial art.

Turning from the general to the particular, I hope to show that the specific examples cited in the review represent no significant "loss" to users of this work. The letters footnoted to President Hancock's June 5 and August 10, 1776, letters to Washington are all routine letters of transmittal that offer no important information about the appointments of the officers to whom they were written and are readily available in Peter Force's *American Archives*. John Adams' January 8, 1776, letter to Mercy Otis Warren and Abraham Clark's October 26, 1776, letter to Elias Dayton were written when both men were at home on leave from Congress. The first is not a "delegate" letter, does not deal with congressional affairs, and is readily available elsewhere. The second is abstracted

because it does contain some passages that concern Congress. William Hooper's letter of November 6, 1776, to William Livingston is only referred to in a footnote because it is mutilated and almost impossible to read—a fact that is also mentioned in the same footnote. On the other hand, Benjamin Franklin's September 19, 1776, letter to his grandson and John Adams' August 21, 1776, letter to his wife are printed in full precisely because, let me repeat, we do not suppress discussions of "purely personal, family, or business matters."

Perhaps in detective work "There is nothing so important as trifles," but in editing I believe we can safely abstract or footnote many of them. Even your generous reviewer seems to agree with this position and differs only on the issue of what constitutes a "trifle." Unfortunately, given the inescapable element of subjectivity in many editorial decisions, I am afraid this is an argument that can never be resolved to everyone's satisfaction

PAUL H. SMITH
Library of Congress