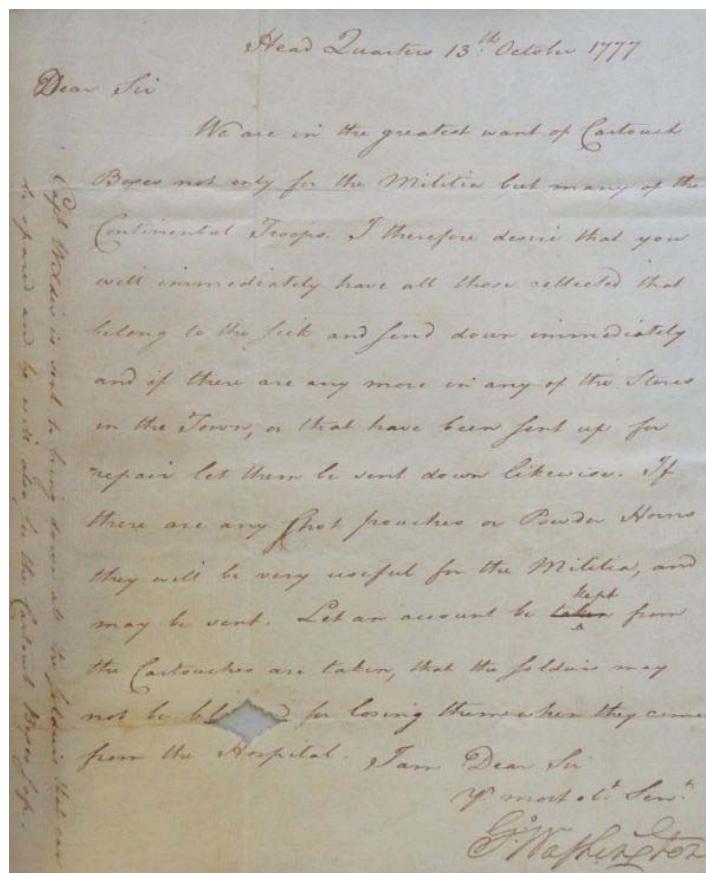


**George Washington and the ammunition crisis of 1777:
New College Archive 9483/60**

There exists in the college archives a manuscript letter, written in brown ink on paper, originally folded and sealed with red wax but long ago opened out flat (after a mouse had nibbled away part of one fold) and pasted into an album. It captures a situation in the American Revolution with the following words:



NCA 9483/60a

Head Quarters 13th: October 1777

Dear Sir

We are in the greatest want of Cartouch Boxes not only for the Militia but [for] many of the Continental Troops. I therefore desire that you will immediately have all those collected that belong to the sick and send [them] down immediately and if there are any more in any of the Stores in the Town, or that have been sent up for repair let them be sent down likewise. If there are any Shot pouches or Powder Horns they will be very useful for the Militia, and may be sent. Let an account be taken kept from the Cartouches [that] are taken, that the soldiers may not be blamed for losing them when they come from the Hospital.

I am Dear Sir

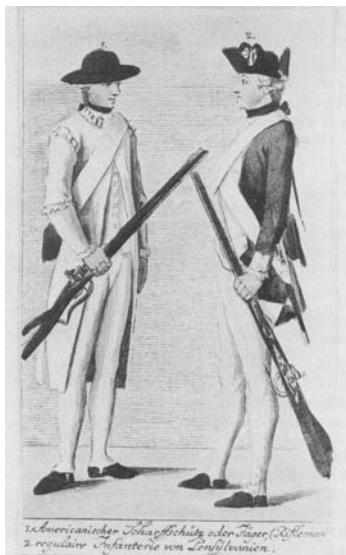
Y[ou]r most ob[edient] Serv[an]t

G^r: Washington

[in the left margin] *Capt[ain] Wilder is sent to bring down all the soldiers that can be spared and he will also see the Cartouch Boxes safe.*

By October 1777 the American Revolution against British rule was in full gallop. General George Washington had made significant advances and was training his Continental Army into what would have been a formidable fighting force had it been large enough, well enough equipped, and able to control its local Militias; the British troops and their German mercenaries were much greater in numbers and better trained, but hampered by the inadequate leadership of General Howe and by huge difficulties in communication both between London and North America and between the regiments within North America. Moreover, both the Continental and Royalist armies were at the mercy of the bitter winter weather and obliged to hole up in camp for two to three months each winter as rivers froze and supply lines foundered.

Washington's army had suffered repeated setbacks around Delaware in the second half of 1777: defeat at Brandywine Creek on 11 September lost him over 1000 killed or wounded and another 400 taken prisoner; Philadelphia fell to Howe's armies on 25 September; and Washington's attempt to surround and attack Howe's forces at Germantown on 4 October proved too complicated and confused to succeed, resulting in heavy casualties which totalled approximately a tenth of Washington's Continental and Militia forces at the time¹. Winter was closing in, and while Howe's forces removed to the comparative comfort of the city of Philadelphia (Congress had fled to York), the Continentals retreated to scattered camps in Pennsylvania before moving to the infamous winter quarters at Valley Forge where they almost died of cold and starvation. Before then, however, Washington took up headquarters briefly at Towamensing (9-15 October) to take stock. Supplying the army had always been a major anxiety, and by mid-October the situation was dire. In particular, the lack of ammunition and means to keep cartridges dry had become an acute problem for the army after torrential rain in September had destroyed all but the most sturdily-made cartouches (the rectangular cartridge boxes worn on a shoulder belt as recorded in engravings by Berger in 1784²).

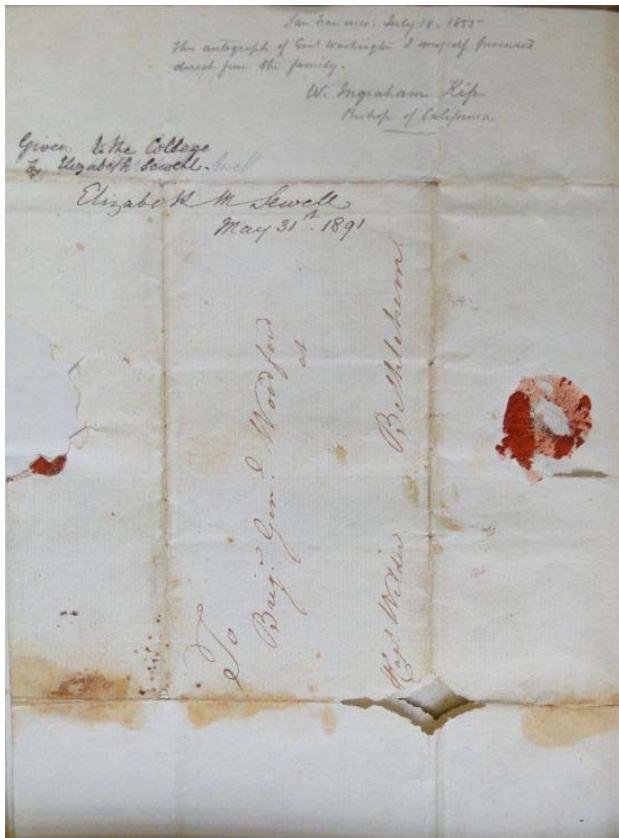


Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection, Providence, Rhode Island.

Thus on 13 October, the letter which is now New College Archive 9483/60 was dictated and signed by Washington and sent off from Towamensing to Brigadier-General William Woodford at Bethlehem near Allentown. It requested him to send down all the cartouch boxes, powder horns and shot pouches that he could gather from the sick and wounded there, and it was almost certainly one of several such standard letters which went out to the other hospitals and camps. This is suggested by its appearance: no personal salutation at the beginning of the letter, words accidentally omitted or crossed through and amended as if copied out in great haste, and the comment added to the margin that (in this instance) Captain Wilder, who may have been the bearer of the letter since it gave him the authority to act, would bring the cartridge boxes back from Bethlehem when he returned to Headquarters with ‘all the able-bodied soldiers that could be spared’. Yet Washington remembered to insist that a proper inventory of cartouches be taken ‘so that the soldiers may not be blamed for losing them when they come from the Hospital’, for by now the humble cartouch box had become a very rare commodity. Writing to Congress on the same day, Washington explained that ‘With respect to Cartouch Boxes, without which it is impossible to act, I cannot find from my inquiries, that there are any in store. Several of the Continental Troops are deficient in this instance, and what adds to our distress, there are but very few of the Southern Militia that are provided. I am trying to make a collection about the Country, but from the information I have receiv'd, the measure will be attended with but little success’....³.

When Washington signed these two letters on 13 October he could have had no knowledge that nearly a hundred miles away Burgoyne’s army, effectively left to its fate by Howe, was already encircled by General Gates’s troops and would shortly be forced to surrender at Saratoga, thereby depriving Howe of essential reinforcements and eliminating the danger of Howe and Burgoyne trapping the Continental Army between Philadelphia and the Hudson River. Saratoga however would not mark the end of the war, and the turning-point in favour of Washington would not come until the Spring of 1778 when the French entered the war to support him. Until that time, the cartouch cases, shot pouches and powder horns of the sick and wounded formed a small but essential part of Washington’s fighting ability.

But why and how did this letter from George Washington come to be in New College’s muniment tower? The answer, as so often with the more unexpected items within our college archives, lies with Warden James Sewell. Alongside his other antiquarian activities Sewell was also an avid collector of autographs of the famous, and while it is fortunate for posterity that he kept the entire document rather than just cutting out the signature, he did conform to a school of vandalism prevalent in the 1890s by gluing the documents onto stubs or sheets of acidic paper bound inside attractive tooled-leather covers of an earlier era, and adding to the volume a new spine proudly labelled ‘AUTOGRAPHS’. Archive 9483 is one of such albums, and the very last item in it (after letters signed by various English kings and a commission signed by Napoleon Bonaparte) is the George Washington letter to William Woodford of 13 October 1777.



NCA 9843/60b

Signed and dated memoranda on the back of the letter indicate that it was given to Warden Sewell for the college by his sister Elizabeth in 1891. When and how she obtained it from William Ingraham Kip, Bishop of California (1811-1893), a Yale scholar and another keen autograph-hunter, is unknown but according to his own pencil note (seen above Miss Sewell's), he had acquired it in 1855 'direct from the family' - presumably the descendants of Woodford rather than of Washington himself. It does not appear in the electronic text and database of George Washington's writings maintained at the University of Virginia Library.

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¹ Christopher Hibbert, *Redcoats and Rebels: the War for America 1770-1781* (London, Grafton Books, 1990), p.161, notes 652 killed or injured and another 438 taken prisoner; Piers Mackesy, *The War for America 1775-1783* (London, Longmans Green, 1964), p. 129, notes 'almost 1100 American casualties'. Neither cites the sources for these figures.

² Illustrated in the exhibition catalogue *1776 The British Story of the American Revolution* (National Maritime Museum, London, 1976), p. 122, no. 288, courtesy of the Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection, Providence, Rhode Island.

³ *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources 1745-1799* (ed. John C. Fitzpatrick, 1931-1944), electronic version <http://etext.virginia.edu/washington/fitzpatrick/> vol. 9: letter to the President of Congress, 13 October 1777.