

The Story Behind the George Washington Letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, RI, August 21, 1790

Back in 1789, the Constitution that we Americans today take so for granted, had still not been ratified by all of the Colonies, much less had the First Amendment to the Constitution been adopted. George Washington, in his first presidency, decided to tour all of the New England states that fall of 1789. (Today we might consider it a public relations trip.) But he didn't visit Rhode Island. Some scholars believe that was because Rhode Island hadn't yet ratified the new Constitution.

By 1790, Rhode Island had finally signed it, so after Congress adjourned that year, President Washington decided he would pay a good-will visit to Rhode Island after all. He took along with him Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson and New York Governor George Clinton. They sailed from New York City (then the American capital) in a little packet passenger boat to Newport where the group spent the night of August 17, 1790.

The next morning on August 18, notables and officials of that city, and representatives from various religious groups, jockeyed for the honor of reading the president letters of welcome to their city. Among them was one of the officials of the congregation, Moses Seixas, who was allowed to read his letter aloud to the president.

Moses Seixas poured out his heart full of gratitude to George Washington for his leadership in the establishment of a new government. He expressed the hope that this new country would accord all of its citizens respect and tolerance, whatever their background and religious beliefs.

The Seixas letter moved the president. He responded to that letter on August 21, 1790, assuring the Hebrew congregation that "every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and figtree, and there shall be none to make him afraid." This was a very poetic way of saying they would be safe in their homes and houses of worship. He also said this would be a country which "gives to bigotry no sanction." A copy of the entire letter he wrote is attached for you to read for yourselves.

Beginning in 1789, George Washington wrote letters to various religious organizations in this country:

- On May 10, 1789 he wrote to the United Baptist churches in Virginia;
- That same month, he wrote to the General Assembly of Presbyterian churches;
- In September of 1789 he wrote to the annual meeting of the Quakers;

- In March, 1790 he wrote to the Roman Catholics;
- And on August 21 of 1790, on a trip to Rhode Island, as part of his campaign around the colonies to pass what became known as the Bill of Rights, George Washington sent his now famous letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport.

The tone of this last one was different from the other letters—it was declarative, assertive, and unusually crisp compared with Washington’s ordinary style. It was a clarion call that has echoed down through the centuries. Washington promised in his letter not just tolerance, but full liberty of conscience no matter what one’s religious beliefs happen to be. He was paving the way for the First Amendment, which would be added to the Constitution on December 15, 1791.

Some of the words in that George Washington letter never fail to move me:

It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights.

And he goes on:

For happily the Government of the United States gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support. Everyone shall sit in safety under his own vine and figtree, and there shall be none to make him afraid.

American historian Melvin Urofsky has written “Although this letter carries with it a unique and cherished significance for American Jewry, in many ways it is a treasure of the entire nation. America, as de Tocqueville (a French political thinker and historian who visited America in the early 1800’s) famously wrote, had been ‘born free,’ unfettered by the religious and social bigotries of medieval Europe. The United States, although initially founded by people from the British Isles, had well before the Revolution become a haven of many peoples from continental Europe seeking political and religious freedom and economic opportunity. The new nation recognized this diversity for what it was, one of the country’s greatest assets, and took as its motto *E Pluribus Unum—Out of Many, One...* The separation of church and state, and with it the freedom of religion enshrined in the First Amendment to the Constitution, has made the United States a beacon of hope to oppressed peoples everywhere.”

George Washington's Letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island

Gentlemen:

While I received with much satisfaction your address replete with expressions of esteem, I rejoice in the opportunity of assuring you that I shall always retain grateful remembrance of the cordial welcome I experienced on my visit to Newport from all classes of citizens.

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 happy people.

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. All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship.

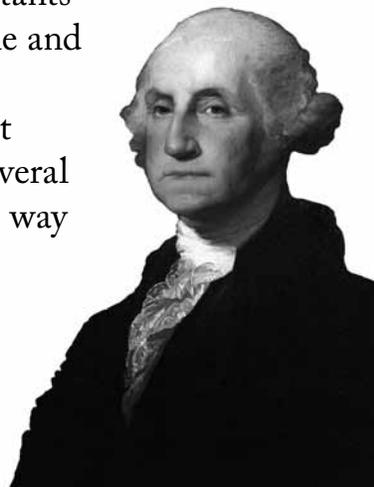
It is now no more that toleration is spoken of as if it were the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights, for, happily, the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens 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 and there shall be none to make him afraid.

May the father of all mercies scatter light, and not darkness, upon our paths, and make us all in our several vocations useful here, and in His own due time and way everlastingly happy.

G. Washington



*Letter from the Hebrew Congregation
in Newport, Rhode Island, to President George Washington*

Sir:

Permit the children of the stock of Abraham to approach you with the most cordial affection and esteem for your person and merits—and to join with our fellow citizens 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—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 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 in these States.

Deprived as we heretofore have been of the invaluable rights of free Citizens, we now with a deep sense of gratitude to the Almighty disposer 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: 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, doing whatever seemeth him good.

For all these Blessings of civil and religious liberty which we enjoy under an equal benign administration, we desire to send up our thanks to the Ancient of Days, the great preserver of Men beseeching him, that the Angel who conducted our forefathers through the wilderness into the promised Land, may graciously conduct you through all the difficulties and dangers of this mortal life: And, when, like Joshua 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.

Done and Signed by order of the Hebrew Congregation in NewPort,
Rhode Island August 17th 1790.

Moses Seixas, warden

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Moses Seixas". The signature is written in dark ink and features a large, decorative flourish at the end.