Introduction

In 1762, Virginia planter and future president George Washington, just thirty years old, had reason for optimism. He had inherited Mount Vernon a decade earlier, and it had prospered under his management; plus he had married Martha Dandridge Custis, widely regarded as the wealthiest marriageable woman in Virginia, some three years earlier.

This August 1762 letter from Washington to his brother-in-law Burwell Bassett (who had married Martha's youngest sister, Betty Dandridge) reveals the young Washington as a lively and convivial correspondent—remarkable for a man who would come to be known as extremely remote and unbendingly formal, evincing little lightheartedness even with close associates. In his letter, Washington facetiously chastises Bassett for writing when he "ought to have been at Church, praying as becomes every good Christian Man who has as much to answer for as you have." Washington also alludes to his own church attendance—which we know to have been infrequent: "could you but behold with what religious zeal I hye me to Church on every Lord's day, it wo[ul]d do your heart good, and fill it I hope with e[qual] fervency."

Burwell Bassett, the recipient of this letter, was one of Washington's closest friends—one of very few. Perhaps the intimate friendship between Bassett and Washington helps explain the future president's light, jocular tone in this letter. Washington and Bassett's other extant correspondence conveys a sense of easy familiarity rarely encountered in Washington's letters, but the bantering levity of this August 1762 letter is completely unparalleled. Though Washington would be remembered for his gravity and his accomplishments, this letters offers us a glimpse of another side of the man who would become president.

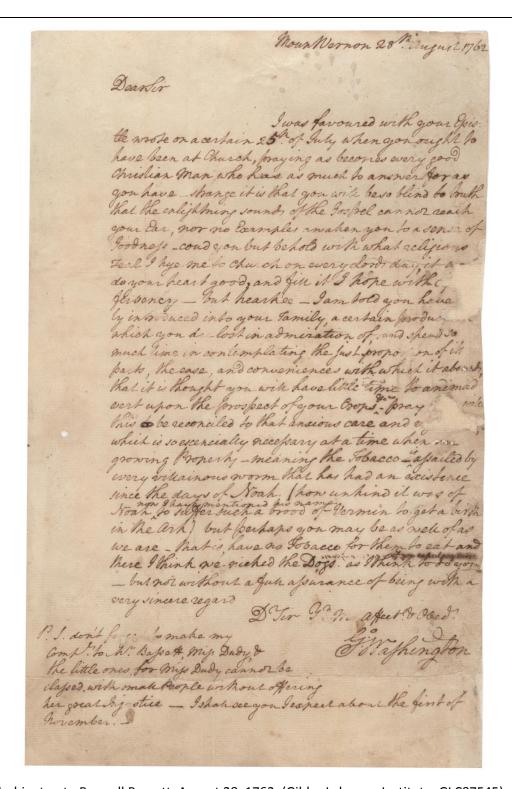
Excerpt

I was favoured with your Epistle wrote on a certain 25th. of July when you ought to have been at Church, praying as becomes every good Christian Man who has as much to answer for as you have – strange it is that you will be so blind to truth that the enlightening sounds of the Gospel cannot reach your Ear, nor no Examples awaken you to a sense of Goodness – could you but behold with what religious zeal I hye me to church on every Lords day, it [*text loss*] do your heart good, and fill it I hope with [*text loss*] fervency.

Questions for Discussion

Based on the introduction, transcript, document image and your knowledge of American History, answer the following questions.

- 1. The introduction by the Gilder Lehrman Collection archivist notes that George Washington's popular image has been "known as extremely remote and unbendingly formal." From a biography of George Washington, written by a well-respected historian such as Joseph Ellis, locate some description of Washington's gravity and compare it to this letter.
- 2. In his letter, Washington twice refers to tobacco. Research the effort needed to plant, grow, harvest, and market tobacco in the eighteenth century and connect this to Washington's comments.
- 3. What events and changes in circumstances might explain the shift in Washington's personality between 1762 and his Revolutionary / Presidential period?



George Washington to Burwell Bassett, August 28, 1762. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC07545)

Transcript

George Washington to Burwell Bassett, August 28, 1762. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC07545)

Mount Vernon 28th. August 1762

Dear Sir

I was favoured with your Epistle wrote on a certain 25th. of July when you ought to have been at Church, praying as becomes every good Christian Man who has as much to answer for as you have – strange it is that you will be so blind to truth that the enlightening sounds of the Gospel cannot reach your Ear, nor no Examples awaken you to a sense of Goodness – could you but behold with what religious zeal I hye me to church on every Lords day, it w[text loss] do your heart good, and fill it I hope with [text loss] fervency – but heark'ee – I am told you have [text loss]ly introduced into your Family, a certain produc[text loss] which you are lost in admiration of, and spend so much time in contemplating the just proposition of its parts, the ease, and convenience with which it abounds, that it is thought you will have little time to animadvert &ca*

upon the prospect of your Crops ^ – pray this be reconciled to that anxious care and e[text loss], which is so esencially necessary at a time when [text loss] growing Property – meaning the

is

Tobacco – ^ assailed by every villainous worm that has had an existence since the days of Noah:
now I have mentioned his name

(how unkind it was of Noah ^ to suffer such a brood of Vermin to get a berth in the Ark.) but perhaps you may be as well of as we are -that is, have no Tobacco for them to eat and there I think we nicked the Dogs, as I think so do you, - but not without a full assurance of being with a very sincere regard

D^r Sir Y^r Ms^t Affect^e. & Obed^t.

G^o: Washington

P.S. I don't fo[*text loss*] to make my comp^{ls}. to M^{rs}. Bassett, Miss Judy, & the little ones, for Miss Judy cannot be classed with small People without offering her great Injustice – I shall see you I expect about the first of November. –