

## The Controversy Surrounding the Publication of Washington's Letter to Charles Carter, 27 December 1787–14 February 1788

Throughout the debate over ratification, Federalists urged others to accept the Constitution because Washington had signed it. Washington did not make a public statement on the Constitution, but his private letters reveal he supported it. He wrote one such letter on 14 December to Charles Carter (1733–1796) of Ludlow, a Stafford County, Va., planter, who also owned a home in Fredericksburg. After discussing farming matters, Washington concluded by briefly giving his opinion on the Constitution. On 27 December Washington's opinion was printed in the Fredericksburg *Virginia Herald* apparently under the heading of an "Extract of a letter of a late date from a member of the late Fœderal Convention, to his friend in this town." The *Herald* has not been located. but on 3 January 1788 the *Pennsylvania Mercury* published this heading under the dateline, "Fredericksburg, December 27." Two days earlier, on 1 January, the *Maryland Journal* had reprinted the *Herald's* extract as a letter "from the illustrious President of the late Federal Convention."

Washington wrote Carter on 12 January that "I find that an extract of my letter to you, is running through all the news papers; and published in that of Baltimore with the addition of my name." Five days later Carter explained that he had distributed copies of Washington's remarks "under a prohibition ... that they should not go to the press." Washington accepted the explanation and was sorry that his concern had given Carter "so much trouble."

By 27 March 1788 Washington's letter was reprinted in the January issue of the Philadelphia *American Museum* and in forty-nine newspapers. All but two of these newspapers—the *Pennsylvania Mercury*, 3 January, and Philadelphia *Independent Gazetteer*, 4 January—identified Washington as the letter writer.

The letter precipitated an exchange between Antifederalists and Federalists, especially in Massachusetts, concerning its authenticity and the validity of its opinions. Commenting on this debate, James Madison said that "I cannot but think on the whole that it [the letter] may have been of service, notwithstanding the scandalous misinterpretations of it which have been attempted.