"Properly Arranged and So Correctly Recorded"

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SHORTLY after Benedict Arnold's treason in the fall of 1780, an incensed Lt. Col. Richard Varick, late member of the traitor's military family, wrote to George Washington reminding him of his promise of a court of inquiry into Varick's conduct while serving under Arnold. "It is Sir, a wish," he wrote, "natural to a young man, whose rise and happiness in life depend on a fair & unblemished reputation, to preserve it inviolate . . ."[1] Outraged as he was by the possibility of guilt through association, Varick further requested that the court be allowed to extend its coverage to his entire military career. This Washington denied him, as it could not be done with "propriety,"[2] but when the court absolved him from the implications of corruption, he again wrote to Washington fortified by "a consciousness of the rectitude of [his] intentions" desiring distribution as wide as possible for the findings of the court.[3]

Washington must have sympathized with the young patriot, who had had a solid if not distinguished military record, serving as secretary to General Schuyler and later as Deputy Mustermaster General of the Northern Army, a position abolished by Congress in January 1780. Varick yearned to serve until the reduction of the British in New York, "if not to the close of the war," but there seemed to be no opening for him.[4] His chance came in May of the following year, when Washington named him as his recording secretary, with the responsibility of recording his wartime papers.[5]

In early June of 1781 Varick established his office in Poughkeepsie, N. Y., at the house of Dr. Peter Tappen, Governor George Clinton's brother-in-law. The house was close to Clinton's and thus enjoyed the Governor's protection. This Varick felt was necessary

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[1] Varick to George Washington, Oct. 12, 1780, in the Washington papers, Library of Congress. Hereafter materials in the Library of Congress are indicated by the symbol LC.

[2] Washington to Varick, Oct. 21, 1780, in Washington papers, LC.

[3] Varick to Washington, Nov. 12, 1780, in Washington papers, LC.

[4] *Idem.*

[5] Washington to Varick, May 25, 1781, in Washington papers, LC.

because of the great value of the papers entrusted to his care, even though he found "the inhabitants are generally Whigs."[6]

The Commander in Chief had ordered that the papers be arranged and recorded in the five classifications following:

A. All Letters to Congress, Committees of Congress, the Board of War, Individual Members of Congress in their public Characters, and American Ministers Plenipotentiary at Foreign Courts, . . .

B. All letters, Orders, and Instructions to Officers of the line, of the Staff, and all other Military Characters, . . .

C. All letters to Governors, Presidents and other Executives of States, Civil Magistrates and Citizens of every Denomination, . . .

D. Letters to Foreign Ministers, Foreign Officers, and subjects of Foreign Nations not in the immediate service of America, in Virtue of Commissions from Congress, . . .

E. Letters to Officers of every Denomination in the service of the Enemy, and to British subjects of every Character with the Enemy, or applying to go in to them.

F. Proceedings of Councils of War in the Order of their dates.[7]

A sixth group *P* was added late in the project to cover all of Washington's personal correspondence.

After some preliminary arrangement of the papers by Varick, writers were hired, one of whom requested a draft exemption for fear of militia duty.[8] Each writer was required to sign an oath of office, which read in part:

. . . that I will not read to, or permit to be read by any person not employed in the service of the aforesaid [Varick] any of the said papers or any others in the office of the said Lt. Col. Varick, and that I will not take or with my privity or knowledge permit to be taken from the office of the said Lt. Col. Varick any original Papers or copy or Extract . . .[9]

The hours were settled following a few months' work, when, after a conference with Governor Clinton, Varick wrote to Washington that the task was "but a continued Series of drudgery" and that he and the Governor thought that two 4-hour shifts, 6 days a week, were all a transcriber could face.[10] John Stagg, a prospective copyist, appraising the task offered to him, refused it, writing to Varick, "the business which you wish me to undertake is of such a

[6] Varick to Washington, June 19, 1781, in Washington papers, LC.
[7] Washington to Varick, May 25, 1781, in Washington papers, LC.
[8] Z. Sickles to Varick, July 10, 1781, in New-York Historical Society.
[9] Z. Sickles, Oath, July 29, 1781, in Washington papers, LC.
[10] Varick to Washington, Oct. 1, 1781, in Washington papers, LC. The drudgery theme runs through all of Varick's letters during the project.

nature, as is rather disagreeable: having had experience in a *siege* of a similar kind while in the orderly office . . ."[11]

Washington sent much encouragement to Varick during the 2½ years it took to complete the transcripts, and whenever his business took him near Poughkeepsie he and Varick held conferences on the irregularities and the problems of the task, not the least of which was pay, as "prices were extravagantly high."[12] The writers badgered Varick; Varick, Washington; and Washington, Robert Morris. Morris somehow managed to keep accounts near to, but never at, the monthly wage. Even though the pay was not regular—each writer was hired at $50 per month payable in specie and Varick got $100—it was well regarded, for "the idea of receiving that rare article hard money . . . has such fascinating charms as will induce them to continue."[13]

One writer took a spare-time job with the New York Assembly, then meeting in Poughkeepsie, when his pay was not forthcoming—a move that caused Varick to dismiss him, as his "repeated and uncivil Declarations" for money ended in an ultimatum.[14] Another wanted to work overtime, and a third left because Varick found him inattentive and he "took my frequent reproofs and Directions in dudgeon." This, said Varick, "was the ostensible cause, but the real one was a Dissappointment in his wish and expectations to make a *Jobb* of the Business."[15] Zachariah Sickles, a writer who had signed on early and stayed to the finish, wrote to Washington in 1789 seeking a Federal position and reminding Washington of his past service "for which [he] received a handsome compensation . . . [and] should heartily rejoice to be again employed in business of the like kind."[16]

Not only did Varick superintend the project, he also read law, maintained a small practice, and supplied Washington with legal opinions. Furthermore, he docketed the entire collection of papers entrusted to his care, a task supplying information that would have

[11] J. Stagg to Varick, June 15, 1781, in New-York Historical Society. The siege that Stagg had participated in was the transcription of seven volumes of Washington's general orders by the Adjutant General's Office, volumes that until recently were thought to be a part of the "Varick Transcripts" in the Washington papers. Although they were done in books similar to those Varick used, they were not prepared under his supervision. Late in 1783 they were packed along with all the transcripts and papers held by Varick and shipped to Mount Vernon. They have been associated ever since with Varick's work.

[12] Varick to Washington, Oct. 1, 1781, in Washington papers, LC.

[13] Varick to Washington, Oct. 6, 1781, in Washington papers, LC.

[14] Varick to Washington, Dec. 18, 1781, in Washington papers, LC.

[15] Varick to Washington, Feb. 7, 1782, in Washington papers, LC.

[16] Z. Sickles to Washington, September 1789, in Washington papers, LC.

taken many years of painstaking study to reproduce at a later date.

By late 1783 the project had nearly run its course. Even though both Washington and Varick had greatly underestimated the time necessary for completion, both were satisfied with the results: 37 folio volumes had been produced, each bound in tooled sheep with vellum backs and corners and each containing its own index. Richard Varick had served to the war's end; the British were gone and he wrote that he would bid "happy adieu to public service and return to the pleasant, tho fatiguing, amusements of a city lawyer. . . ."[17] Such amusements were to lead him back to public service as speaker of the New York Assembly, attorney general of New York, and mayor of New York City.

Washington, after receiving the volumes at Mount Vernon early in 1784, wrote to Varick, saying in part that Varick had earned his "entire approbation" and that he felt great satisfaction in having his papers "properly arranged and so correctly recorded." He continued, ". . . neither the present age or posterity will consider the time and labor which have been employed in accomplishing it, unprofitably spent."[18]

One hundred and fifty years later, John C. Fitzpatrick wrote that, after careful comparison of document and transcript, the statement " 'correctly recorded' is a just one."[19]

[17] Varick to Washington, Nov. 18, 1783, in Washington papers, LC.
[18] Washington to Varick, Jan. 1, 1784, in Washington papers, LC.
[19] John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington*, 27:289 (Washington, 1932).

Dilemma

Archivists in preserving documentary information for posterity are in a dilemma. All of you know, I am sure, of the boy who asked a librarian for a book about turtles. After looking over the very heavy tome she had given to him he returned it saying it would not do—it had more about turtles than he wanted to know. The archivists feel just like that boy; there are more records designated as permanent than anyone is ever going to want to use and these records too often tell a lot of things no one wants to know and fail to tell what needs to be known. The data we are preserving for posterity should be significant, useful, accurate and accessible. . . .

—Lewis J. Darter, Jr., in a talk given on Nov. 30, 1962, at a meeting of the Interagency Records Administration Conference, as recorded in *Data for Posterity*, p. 1 (Washington, IRAC, 1963).