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Washington letter reveals founding father with passion for farming

He is revered by many as a military genius and master politician ... now a letter from US President George Washington has shed light on his life away from the public gaze.

Fresh analysis of the handwritten text – sent to a Scottish nobleman to encourage recruitment of skilled workers to Washington's estate – underlines how seriously he took his duties as a landowner and farmer.

Close inspection reveals that the letter was written by Washington himself, rather than his Private Secretary. It is an indication of the President's desire to recruit wisely, and a sign of his commitment to his business concerns.

The document, written on 20 February 1796, is in the archives of the University of Edinburgh. The three-page letter can be accessed by anyone who wishes to see the text close up.

Experts at Edinburgh will now re-assess further examples of 18th century transatlantic discourse held in the archive. The documents will help researchers build a clearer picture of British-US relations at the time.

The letter to Buchan discloses a lot about Washington as a landowner. In 1796, he was seeking to diversify his holdings, focus on growing wheat – rather than tobacco, which he had abandoned in the 1760s – and move from enslaved labour to tenant farmers.

It shows a hard-headed businessman, planning for life after his presidency which he would leave the following year. Its phrasing suggests that he still feels a close cultural connection to at least some people in Britain, and to British agriculture.

Washington is careful in his letter not to upset fragile relations between Britain and America, who would go to war for a second time in 1812 when the US found itself caught between Britain and revolutionary France.

He adopts a softly, softly approach with Buchan, gently inquiring if the Scot knows of any farmers who might be thinking of emigrating to America, rather than blatantly advertising any vacancies. His tone is unfailingly polite, almost deferential.

The President was aware of the emerging discipline of agricultural science in Scotland – a by-product of Scottish Enlightenment thinking – and he read deeply on the subject.

He contrasts 'slovenly' American agricultural practices with those used in Scotland – not so much a criticism of his compatriots as a reflection of the relative abundance of arable land in the US. Scots could not afford to be as wasteful as their American counterparts – farmers in the US could simply move on to new land when theirs were exhausted.

The text helps us understand British-American relations at a time of great tension as the two nations had nearly gone to war just two years previously. An accord known as the Jay Treaty averted that outcome,



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but it proved controversial in the US, and engendered considerable criticism of Washington – for the first time in his political career.

The letter is one of many that was donated to the University of Edinburgh's collections by the great Scottish polymath and antiquarian Sir David Lang in the 1870s.

Analysis has been carried out by historians and archivists at the University of Edinburgh and staff based at the Washington Estate at Mount Vernon, Virginia.

David Erskine, 11th Earl of Buchan was a Scottish lord, literary patron, and writer. A prominent antiquarian and tireless letter writer, he retired in 1787 to Dryburgh Abbey in the Scottish Borders, which he sought to make a centre of Scottish culture.

He corresponded with members of the British royal family, the man of letters Horace Walpole and many others and exchanged at least 18 letters with Washington, who was a distant relative, on matters relating mainly to agriculture.

Frank Cogliano, Professor of American History at the University of Edinburgh, said: "The Enlightenment is often referred to as a 'Republic of Letters' and exchanges such as those between Washington and Buchan were the social networks of their day – not only swapping ideas but advertising opportunities. How familiar it seems to us today."

Rachel Hosker, Archives Manager at the University of Edinburgh, said: "There is something quite compelling about the tangible nature of the original, created two days prior to Washington's 64th birthday before making its way to Scotland. It enables us to imagine him writing it, and allows us to consider the private individual in context."

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