

## SELECTED LETTERS FROM DELEGATES\*

### Questions to Consider:

1. To what extent, if any, do these letters confirm or contradict your understanding of the Philadelphia Convention?
  2. In your opinion, does Washington's cover letter reveal more or less than the other letters about the Philadelphia Convention?
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### Elbridge Gerry to Ann Gerry, 30 May 1787 (excerpts)

The heavy, inelastic air of this city has given me a Head-Ache at Times, accompanied with a Loss of appetite but I am otherwise very well. Indeed I am sometimes restless, but impute this to the Use of Tea which I propose to omit. I have not Occasion for the Care of any Females, except of my dearest love, to preserve Health; but if I had, every attention would be paid me here which I could wish or require. . .

Indeed my love there is and always has been as much difference between the Hospitality of this City and that of New York, as between the Sociability of a quaker and of a military Society. The Members of the first are like Monks and Nuns cloistered in a monastery, and the others are like Citizens of the World who have neither Attachments nor prejudices from professions or local Circumstances. Whenever you arrive then, You much not expect the attention of New York, and whether you receive many or none, it will not to me be a Matter of Consequence: to be independent, is my Determination. . . .

### Elbridge Gerry to Ann Gerry, 26 August 1787 (excerpts)

You mistook my meaning with respect to my Lodgings: I meant my situation as a delegate was uneasy: I am exceedingly distrest at the proceedings of the Convention being apprehensive, and almost sure they will if not altered materially lay the foundation of a civil War. This entre nous. . . . On Monday & Tuesday I was fatigued and rather unwell, but am recruited since. I never was more sick of any thing than I am on conventioning: had I known what would have happened, nothing would have introduced me to come here. I am and must be patient a little longer. . . .

### Elbridge Gerry to Ann Gerry, 29 August 1787 (excerpts)

What is the Cause my Dearest Love that you are of late so liable to fainting? I am quite distressed about it. If you do not find relief soon, I shall quite the convention, and let their proceedings take their chance. Indeed I have been a spectator for some time; for I am very different in political principles from my colleagues. I am well but sick of being here; indeed I ardently long my dear nancy. I think we shall not be here longer than a fortnight, and if it were possible I would leave this place immediately. . . .

### Elbridge Gerry to Ann Gerry, 1 September 1787 (excerpts)

I am distressed my dearest Girl exceedingly . . . and shall prepare myself to leave this city on the arrival of your next post unless you are better: indeed I would not remain here two hours was I not under a necessity that I broke up the representation, and that they were averse to an arbitrary System of Government, for such it is at present, and such they must give their voice to unless it meets with considerable alterations. . . .

**Elbridge Gerry to Ann Gerry, 9 September 1787 (excerpts)**

I am myself of opinion that Thursday will finish the Business to which I have every prospect at present of giving my negative. I am very happy indeed that you are better and hope you will not be troubled with a return of your complaints, which have very much distressed me. . . .

**Oliver Ellsworth to Abigail Ellsworth, 26 June 1787 (excerpts)**

I am sure I wish for the time for this city has no charms for me. I mix with company without enjoying it and am perfectly tired with flattery and forms. To be very fashionable we must be very trifling and make and receive a thousand professions which everybody knows there is no truth in. Give me a little domestick circle where affection is natural and friendship sincere and I do not care who takes the rest. . . .

**Oliver Ellsworth to Abigail Ellsworth, 21 July 1787 (excerpts)**

My health holds better than I feared. To preserve I walk a good deal in the cool of the afternoons and frequently stop in and take a little chat and tea sipping with good Connecticut women who are dispersed about in different parts of the city. . . .

**John Dickinson to Polly Dickinson, 15 June 1787 (excerpts)**

The Convention is very busy—of an excellent temper—and for Abilities exceeds, I believe any Assembly that ever met upon this Continent, except the first Congress. Give my Compliments to Dr. Wharton and let him know my sentiments concerning this Body. Nothing further said at present. . . .

**James McHenry to Peggy McHenry, 28 August 1787 (excerpts)**

It is extremely distressing to me to be under the necessity to remain a day longer in the is place, where I find no enjoyments whatever and am even without the satisfaction of knowing that what I am assisting in will meet the approbation of those who sent me thither. The only consolation which arises to me is from a hope that my stay will be of shorter duration than I have suggested, when I look to home to repay me the sacrifice I am making of my happiness. . . .

**William Paterson to Euphemia Paterson, 17 July 1787 (excerpts)**

I expect to be with you on or about the first of next month and hope that I shall not be under the necessity of returning. . . .

**Robert Yates to Abraham Yates, 1 June 1787 (excerpts)**

Alas sir! My foreboding there are too much realized, and to prevent any member from communicating the future proceedings of Convention additional Rules have since been entered into, one of which strictly prohibits the communications of its business until the final close of it. While I remain a sitting member these rules must be obligatory. How long I shall remain future events must determined. I keep in the meanwhile an exact journal of all its proceedings. This communication is in the most perfect confidence, in which only one other Person beside yourself can participate. . . .

**Nathaniel Gorham to Nathan Dane, 3 June 1787 (excerpts)**

We have now eleaven States and have been every day last week in a Committee of the whole in which to sound the sentiments of each other several propositions relative to a

general Government have been submitted the business was opened by Govr. Randolph of Virginia in an able manner . . . I do not know that I am at liberty to mention in any manner what the Convention has done—but to you in confidence I can say that they have agreed I believe unanimously that there ought to be a National Legislative Executive & Judiciary. . . .

**James Madison to James Monroe, 10 June 1787 (excerpts)**

One of the earliest rules established by the Convention restrained the members from any disclosure whatever of its proceedings, a restraint which will not probably be removed for some time. I think the rule was a prudent one not only as it will effectually secure the requisite freedom of discussion, but as it will save both the Convention and the Community from a thousand erroneous and perhaps mischievous reports. I feel notwithstanding great mortification in the disappointment it obliges me to throw on the curiosity of my friends. The Convention is now as full as we expect it to be unless a report should be true that Rh. Island has it in contemplation to make one of the party. If her deputies should bring with them the complexion of the State, their company will not add much to our pleasure, or to the progress of the business. Eleven States are on the floor. . . .

**Nathaniel Gorham to Theophilus Parsons, 18 June 1787 (excerpts)**

In short, the present Federal Government seems near its exit; and whether we shall in the Convention be able to agree upon mending it, or forming and recommending a new one, is not certain. All agree, however, that much greater powers are necessary to be given, under some form or other. But the large States think the representation ought to be more in proportion to the magnitude of the States, and consequently more like a national government, while the smaller ones are for adhering to the present mode. We have hitherto considered the subject with great calmness and temper; and there are numbers of very able men in this body who all appear thoroughly alarmed with the present prospect. I do not know that I am at liberty to write anything on this subject. I shall therefore only observe further, that all agree the legislative and executive ought to be separate, and that there should be a national judiciary.

I beg you not to mention having heard anything from me on the subject, except to your brother, to whom I should have written, but I am quite overcome with the heat of the weather. . . .

**Nathan Dane to Rufus King, 5 July 1787 (excerpts)**

You know the general opinion is, that our Federal Constitution must be mended; and if the Convention do not agree at least in some amendments, a universal despair of our keeping together, will take place. It seems to be agreed here that the Virginia plan was admitted to come upon the floor of investigation by way of experiment and with a few yieldings on this point & that it keeps its ground at present. The contents of this plan was known to some, I believe, before the Convention met. Perhaps the public mind will be prepared in a few years to receive this new system. However I leave the whole to the wisdom of the Convention. . . .

**Abraham Baldwin to Joel Barlow, 6 July 1787 (excerpts)**

The conjectures of people on the great political subjects now before the convention are very various and not a little amusing. So many forms of government I believe never were

contrived before. They are floating about here in all directions like Spectators worlds some half-finished some a quarter the great part but just begun—meer political tadpoles.

I am now sitting in the big room. Your old acquaintance Gouverneur Morris is now speaking. They call off my attention so often I know not what I have written. Anything to the purpose I am not permitted to tell you, and therefore it is I have been talking so long to no purpose. The connection is of not so much importance when one is talking nonsense, as you probably know by experience. I send you enclosed the newspaper of the day to let you see that every body has as barren a paper today as yourself. Lean fare we have had for some time. Some of our cooks are for making rich sauces and I think if they had their way we should have a plenty of red goose. . . .

**William Blount to John Gray Blount, 19 July 1787 (excerpts)**

My Colleagues were very unanimous, H. W. are there Head, and were in Sentiment with Virginia who seemed to take the lead, Madison at their Head, tho Randolph and Mason are also great. The general outlines were to have a National Assembly composed of three Branches, the first to be elected by the People at large and to consist of about 70 Members, the second Branch of a less Number to be chosen by the respective Legislatures for a longer duration and the third an Executive of a single Man for a still longer Time. I must confess notwithstanding all I heard in favour of this System I am not in sentiment with my Colleagues for as I have before said I still think We shall ultimately and not many Years first be seperate and distinct Governments perfectly independent of each other. The little States were much opposed to the Politics of the larger they insisted that each State ought to have an equal Vote as in the present Confederation. . . .

**John Langdon to Joshua Bracket, 1 August 1787 (excerpts)**

If it was not for the Importance of the Errand which I came upon, should most heartily wish myself at home; notwithstanding the Riches and Splendor of this City the fatiguing sameness makes me sick.

The Convention, well now see the Convention; Figure to yourself the Great Washington, with a Dignity peculiar to himself, taking the Chair. The Notables are seated, in a Moment and after a short Silence the Business of the day is open'd with great Solemnity and good Order. The Importance of the Business, the Dignified Character of Many, who Compose the Convention, the Eloquence of Some and the Regularity of the whole gives a Ton to the proceedings which is extreamly pleasing. Your old Friend takes his Seat. Conscious of his upright Intentions, and as far as his poor Abilities will go keep his eye single to what is righteous and of good Report. The Convention has adjourned for a few days, to give time to a Committee to detail the Business. . . .

**Thomas McKean to William Atlee, 16 August 1787 (excerpts)**

The Convention is still sitting; nothing transpires. I am tired feasting with them. Some say, they will continue together about two more weeks, others say two months. . . .

**William Paterson to Oliver Ellsworth, 23 August 1787 (excerpts)**

What are the Convention about? When will they rise? Will they agree upon a System energetick and effectual, or will they break up without doing any Thing to the Purpose? Full

of Disputation and noisy as the Wind, it is said, that you are afraid of the very Windows, and have a Man planted under them to prevent the Secrets and Doings from flying out. The Business, however, is detailed, I hope you will not have as much Altercation upon the Detail, as there was in getting the Principles of the System . . . I wish you much Speed, and that you may be full of good Works, the first mainly for my own Sake, for I dread going down again to Philada. . . .

**Abraham Lansing to Abraham Yates, 26 August 1787 (excerpts)**

Early in the Commencement of the Business at Philadelphia, my Brother (John Lansing) informed me that he was in sentiment with a respectable Minority of that Body, but that they had no prospect of succeeding in the Measures proposed and that he was at a stand whether it would not be proper for him to leave them. This Circumstance convinces me the more that they will not again attend. Mr. Hamilton will consequently be disappointed and chagrined. . . .

**William Livingston to John Jay, 11 September 1787 (excerpts)**

But my hopes of returning by the time expected are a little clouded by reason of there being certain creatures in this world that are more pleased with their own speeches than they can prevail upon any body else to be. . . .

**Thomas Fitzsimons to Noah Webster, 15 September 1787 (excerpts)**

I shall make you no apology, for addressing myself to you upon the present occasion, because you must be especially interested with me in the event, and having contributed my mite to the service of our common country . . . The business of the convention is nearly at an end and a few days will bring before the people of America the constitution prepared for their future government. That it is the best which human wisdom could devise, I mean not to assert; but I trust it will be found consistent with the principles of liberty and calculated to unite and bind together the members of a great country. It is already too evident that there are people prepared to oppose it, even before they are acquainted with the outline, and it is easy to see that if unreasonable jealousies are disseminated, its Adoption may be at least protracted. In my mind, to delay is to destroy. There are so many interests, foreign and domestic, opposed to order and good government in America, as to warrant an apprehension of their interfering, if time is given for cabal and intrigue.

\*Source: Farrand's *Supplements of The Records of the Federal Convention*, James H. Hutson, ed., 1987.



**George Washington to the President of Congress, 17 September 1787\***

We have now the Honor to submit to the Consideration of the United States in Congress assembled that Constitution which has appeared to us the most advisable.

The Friends of our Country have long seen and desired that the Power of making War Peace and Treaties, that of levying Money & regulating Commerce and the correspondent executive and judicial Authorities should be fully and effectually vested in the general Government of the Union. But the Impropriety of delegating such extensive Trust to one Body of Men is evident—Hence results the Necessity of a different Organization.

It is obviously impracticable in the fœderal Government Of these States to secure all Rights of independent Sovereignty to each and yet provide for the Interest and Safety of

all—Individuals entering into Society must give up a Share of Liberty to preserve the Rest. The Magnitude of the Sacrifice must depend as well on Situations and Circumstances as on the Object to be obtained. It is at all Times difficult to draw with Precision the Lines between those Rights which must be surrendered and those which may be reserved(.) And on the present Occasion this Difficulty was increased by a Difference among the several States as to their Situation Extent Habits and particular Interests.

In all our Deliberations on this Subject we kept steadily in our View that which appears to us the greatest Interest of every true american the Consolidation of our Union in which is involved our Prosperity Felicity Safety perhaps our national Existence. this important Consideration seriously and deeply impressed on our Minds led each State in the Convention to be less rigid on Points of inferior Magnitude than might have been otherwise expected. And thus the Constitution which we now present is the Result of a Spirit of Amity and of that mutual Deference & Concession which the Peculiarity of our political Situation rendered indispensable.

That it will meet the full and entire Approbation of every State is not perhaps to be expected. But each will doubtless consider that had her Interests been alone consulted the Consequences might have been particularly disagreeable or injurious to others. That it is liable to as few Exceptions as could reasonably have been expected we hope and believe That it may promote the lasting Welfare of that Country so dear to us all and secure her Freedom and Happiness is our most ardent wish.

\*Source: James Madison's Notes in Farrand, *Records of the Federal Convention*, Vol. 2, 1911