

Mystery of George Washington's missing (and recovered) letter to Catholics



Part of a 1790 letter to Catholics written by President George Washington is shown in this photograph. The letter is housed in the archives of the Archdiocese of Baltimore. (Courtesy Archdiocese of Baltimore)

In honor of President's Day, tomorrow's issue of The Catholic Review will feature an article on a very valuable letter housed in the archives of the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

Written to Catholics of the United States by President George Washington, the March 12, 1790 note was in response to an earlier message sent to the new president by Baltimore Bishop John Carroll on behalf of American Catholics. The bishop had congratulated the new leader on his election and asked him to promote religious freedom.

"I hope ever to see America among the foremost Nations in examples of Justice and Liberty," Washington wrote in reply.

In researching the historic letter, I was surprised to learn that the precious artifact had gone missing for an unknown period of time early in the 20th century. Neither the current archivist nor her predecessor knew the circumstances of the departure. Not even Father Michael Roach, an esteemed professor of Church history at Mount St. Mary's University Seminary in Emmitsburg, knew of the mystery.

According to a 1922 biography of Carroll, written by Peter Guilday, the letter had been housed until 1865 in the archives of what then was the Cathedral of the Assumption in Baltimore. It was loaned to John Gilmary Shea, a layman, that same year before it was returned Sept. 7, 1866.

Guilday wrote that the letter went missing in 1908. It's not clear how long it was gone or when it was returned.

According to a 1916 article in the New York Times, the letter had last been kept in a "fireproof vault beneath the sanctuary of the cathedral." Archdiocesan leaders realized it had vanished as they were indexing the many thousands of historic documents at the time.

"The envelope which contained it, marked 'Original Letter of G. Washington to Catholics U. States,'" is in its usual place," the New York Times reported. "But it is empty. A thorough search is being made, for the loss is a matter of great concern."

If anyone knows more about the history of the missing and recovered letter, let me know. I'd love to be able to unravel the mystery.