

From George Washington to Brigadier General Thomas Nelson, Jr., 20 August 1778

To Brigadier General Thomas Nelson, Jr.

Camp at the White-plains Augt 20th 1778

My dear Sir,

In what terms can I sufficiently thank you for your polite attention to me, and agreeable present? and, which is still more to the purpose, with what propriety can I deprive you of a valuable, and favourite Horse? You have pressed me once, nay twice, to accept him as a gift;¹ as a proof of my sincere attachment to, and friendship for you, I obey, with this assurance, that from none but a Gentn for whom I have the highest regard, would I do this, notwithstanding the distressed situation I have been in for want of one.

I am heartily disappointed at a late resolution of Congress for the discontinuance of your Corps,² because I pleased my self with the prospect of seeing you, and many other Gentn of my acquaintance from Virginia, in Camp—As you had got to Philadelphia, I do not think the saving, or difference of expence (taking up the matter even upon that ground, which under present circumstances I think a very erroneous one) was by any means an object suited to the occasion.

The arrival of the French Fleet upon the Coast of America is a great, & striking event; but the operations of it have been injured by a number of unforeseen & unfavourable circumstances—which, tho they ought not to detract from the merit, and good intention of our great Ally, has nevertheless lessened the importance of their Services in a great degree—The length of the passage in the first instance was a capitol misfortune, for had even one of common length taken place, Lord Howe with the British Ships of War and all the Transports in the River Delaware must, inevitably, have fallen; and Sir Harry must have had better luck than is commonly dispensed to Men of his profession, under such circumstances, if he and his Troops had not shared (at least) the fate of Burgoyne—The long passage of Count D’Estaign was succeeded by an unfavourable discovery at the hook, which hurt us in two respects; first in a defeat of the enterprize upon New York—the Shipping—& Troops at that place; and next, in the delay that was used in ascertaining the depth of Water over the Bar; which was essential to their entrance into the Harbour of New York—And lastly after the enterprize upon Rhode Island had been planned, and was in the moment of execution, that Lord Howe with the British Ships should interpose, merely to create a diversion, and draw the French fleet from the Island was again unlucky, as the Count had not return’d on the 17th to the Island tho drawn off from it the 10th; by which means the Land operations were retarded, and the whole subject to a miscarriage in case of the arrival of Byrons Squadron.

I do not know what to make of the enemy at New York; whether their stay at that place is the result of choice, or the effect of necessity, proceeding from an inferiority in their Fleet—want of Provisions—or other causes, I know not, but certain it is that if it is not an act of necessity it is profoundly misterious unless they look for considerable reinforcements and are waiting the arrival of them to commence their operations. time will shew.

It is not a little pleasing, nor less wonderful to contemplate, that after two years Manœuvering and undergoing the strangest vicissitudes that perhaps ever attended any one contest since the creation both Armies are brought back to the very point they set out from and, that that, which was the offending party in the beginning is now reduced to the use of the spade and pick axe for defence. The hand of Providence has been so conspicuous in all this, that he must be worse than an infidel that lacks faith, and more than wicked, that has not gratitude enough to acknowledge his obligations—but—it will be time enough for me to turn preacher, when my present appointment ceases; and therefore, I shall add no more on the Doctrine of Providence; but make a tender of my best respects to your good Lady—the Secretary³ & other friends and assure you that with the most perfect regard I am Dr Sir Yr Most Affecte & Obliged Hble Ser.

Go: Washington

P.S. Since writing the foregoing, I have been favoured with your Letter of the 25th Ulto from Baltimore, and 9th Instt from Philadelphia⁴—The method you propose to take with the Public Horses in your volunteer Corps will be very proper & agreeable to me.

G. W——n