



Washington to Sultan: “Great and Magnanimous Friend”

Updated version of TALIM’s 2012 blog article by Gerald Loftus. Original at: <https://legation.org/washington-to-sultan-great-and-magnanimous-friend/>

In 2012, an organization called the Amity Series marked the 225th anniversary of one of America's oldest treaties, the 1787 Treaty of Marrakesh – "The Treaty of Friendship & Amity" – between Morocco and the United States.

The Amity Series, an interfaith dialogue initiative between Muslims and Christians, organized a commemorative event at George Washington University.

Mount Vernon historian Mary V. Thompson's remarks at the symposium described the context:

On December 1, 1789, George Washington sat down to write a letter to an old friend of his country, someone he had never met. Just over seven months before, Washington had been inaugurated the first president of the United States and had set up his office in the country’s temporary capital of New York City.

In the intervening months, he had begun putting together his cabinet; gotten Mrs. Washington and the two grandchildren they were raising settled in their new house; organized a scheme for his official entertaining; survived a near-fatal illness; and taken a one-month tour of the New England states.

Now, as he started the letter, he began with the salutation, “Great and Magnanimous Friend.” Many Americans today would probably be surprised to learn that the recipient of the letter he wrote that day was Mohammed Ibn Abdullah, the Emperor of Morocco (also known as the

Sultan), and that Washington might have written more accurately, “Great and Magnanimous and Patient Friend.”

Thompson's stress on the Sultan's patience refers to the opportunity almost missed – the failure of the fledgling country, which had just declared its independence a year before, to respond to the Sultan's overture in 1777. At the time, General George Washington was settling down to a harsh winter at Valley Forge, and the American Revolution's course was by no means assured.

So Morocco waited for years for the American Revolution to come to a successful conclusion, and continued to wait for an American response. Finally, the capture of The Betsey, an American brigantine seized by Moroccan corsairs (pirates) off the coast of Cadiz, succeeded in getting the attention of the United States.



Portion of a letter from the Sultan to George Washington.

Note: the Islamic hegira date equates to 1788 in the Roman calendar

Diplomat Thomas Barclay was dispatched to Morocco, and the fruit of his negotiations is what was celebrated 225 years later. (A fascinating and detailed account of Barclay's time in Morocco, and his negotiation of a comprehensive treaty between the U.S. and Morocco, can be found in this 1998 article: <https://archive.aramcoworld.com/issue/199805/emissary.to.barbary.htm>)

The letter from President Washington includes these moving words of hope and optimism for his fledgling nation:

“Within our Territories there are no Mines, either of Gold, or Silver, and this young Nation, just recovering from the Waste and Desolation of a long War, have not, as yet, had Time to acquire Riches by Agriculture and Commerce. But our Soil is bountiful, and our People industrious; and we have Reason to flatter ourselves, that we shall gradually become useful to our Friends.”

The full text of George Washington's 1789 letter to Sultan Mohammed of Morocco can be found here: <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-04-02-0251>