

# WOMEN WHO MADE HISTORY



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# Mary Katherine Goddard Petitions the President

by Martha J. King

On December 23, 1789, just four days after Maryland ratified the Bill of Rights, Mary Katherine Goddard (1738–1816) took quill in hand to petition George Washington. This fifty-one-year-old unmarried woman sought redress from the President for “what is conceived to be an extraordinary Act of oppression towards her.” She had been postmistress of Baltimore for more than fourteen years, but was losing her job to a politically connected man with no postal experience.<sup>1</sup>

What prompted this articulate public servant, loyal sister, and experienced editor and publisher to advocate so powerfully on her own behalf against oppression? She was no stranger to hard work and decrying injustice. Twelve years earlier she had produced a broadside of a now famous pronouncement against oppression, namely, the Declaration of Independence. This was an especially noteworthy publication for her not only because she displayed her name in full at the bottom as the printer of record, but because in January 1777 she included, for the first time ever, the names of the signers who had pledged their lives, liberties, and sacred honor to support this treasonous document.<sup>2</sup> As a woman, Goddard was not eligible to hold elected office or participate in the Continental Congress that approved the declaration. Yet she closely followed the proceedings of the Congress, meeting then briefly

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1. Mary Katherine Goddard to George Washington, December 23, 1789, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC09756.02. See a transcript beginning on page 31.

2. Joseph Towne Wheeler, *The Maryland Press, 1777–1790* (Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 1938), 11–18; Leona M. Hudak, *Early American Women Printers and Publishers, 1639–1820* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1978), 318–339; Martha J. King, “Making an Impression: Women Printers in the Southern Colonies in the Revolutionary Era” (PhD diss., College of William and Mary, 1992), chapter 8; Christopher J. Young, “Mary K. Goddard: A Classical Republican in the Age of Revolution,” *Maryland Historical Magazine* 96 (Spring 2001): 5–27. For more on Mary Katherine Goddard’s broadside of the Declaration of Independence, see the Declaration Resources Project at Harvard University, <https://declaration.fas.harvard.edu/blog/march-goddard>.

in Baltimore in the winter of 1776–1777, and also published news of the battles fought to free the colonies from British control.

A native of New London, Connecticut, born in 1738, Mary Katherine Goddard was raised by her father Giles Goddard, the town's postmaster, and her mother Sarah Updike Goddard in a household that two years later welcomed her brother William. After Giles's death and William's apprenticeship in the printing trade, Sarah and Mary Katherine assisted William in his printing endeavors, including the *Providence Gazette* and the *Pennsylvania Chronicle*, which he published in Philadelphia beginning in 1767. When her brother moved to Baltimore in 1773 to start a third printing venture, the *Maryland Journal and Baltimore Advertiser*, Mary Katherine continued the press in Philadelphia before following William to Maryland the next year. She was not alone among women engaged in the colonial printing business. Several printers' widows, including Anne Catharine Green in Annapolis, Maryland, and Clementina Rind in Williamsburg, Virginia, had carried on their husbands' newspapers and government printing contracts and continued publishing in their own right. So it was not without precedent that Goddard took responsibility for the Baltimore newspaper when her brother left town in 1775. William set out to pursue new opportunities, including the establishment of a "Constitutional" post office to supplant the British colonial post. In his absence, Mary Katherine printed the newspaper as sole proprietor until William returned and resumed its publication in his own name in 1784.<sup>3</sup>

Difficult as it likely was for Mary Katherine to relinquish editorial control of the newspaper upon her brother's return, harder still was being stripped of her position as postmistress of Baltimore in 1789. Goddard had received her commission in August 1775. The Second Continental Congress established a postmaster general's office headed by Benjamin Franklin, who named his son-in-law Richard Bache as secretary and comptroller and William Goddard as the post's surveyor of roads. Franklin also controlled contracts and the appointment of deputy postmasters. By 1788 there were sixty-nine postmasters in the new United States. Mary Katherine Goddard in Baltimore was the only woman serving in this role. Postal duties included gathering the outgoing mail, collecting postage and keeping careful accounts, sorting and securing the incoming mail, and advertising in the newspaper when any mail had not yet been picked up by local residents. As a postmaster, she had first access to news from other colonies as printers exchanged their newspapers with each other in the mail. She could then use the news gleaned

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3. For William Goddard's role in the establishment of the post office, see Joseph M. Adelman, "A Constitutional Conveyance of Intelligence, Public and Private: The Post Office, the Business of Printing, and the American Revolution," *Enterprise & Society* 11 (2010), esp. 722–752; "Editorial Note on the Founding of the Post Office, July 26, 1775," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov>, and Ward L. Miner, *William Goddard, Newspaperman* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1962), *passim*.

from other towns in her own newspaper. She also benefited from the perk of being able to send and receive mail without having to pay postage (the franking privilege afforded to postmasters).

Goddard frequently paid hard cash out of her own pocket to the post riders and considered it a public good that the mail get through. She conducted the business of the Baltimore post office “with punctuality and satisfaction” even at a time when the continental currency was depreciated.<sup>4</sup> She, like her fellow postmasters, had to settle her accounts quarterly with the postmaster general and could retain a 20 percent commission on collected postage.<sup>5</sup> When Goddard first took on the task, it was not profitable. But it became more lucrative in 1789, and she relied on the extra income, resenting it being taken away so abruptly in the autumn of 1789.

This sudden change “excited the surprise & Indignation of the whole community.” More than 230 merchants and inhabitants of Baltimore, including Maryland’s governor, John Eager Howard, signed a petition to Samuel Osgood, the postmaster general, on Goddard’s behalf on November 12, 1789. Testifying to the “propriety & rectitude of that Lady’s conduct for many years past,” they stressed the regularity of her accounts. Upon learning one stated reason for her dismissal was that “more travelling might be necessary than a Woman could undertake,” they challenged Osgood to reconsider the matter, review her merits, and restore Goddard to her former appointment where she “could continue in it as long as her conduct was consistent with the Duties and Interests of the Establishment.”<sup>6</sup>

Discharged from her position without the “least fault or any previous official notice,” she became outraged that she had not been accorded common civility and common justice. She resented that Assistant Postmaster General Jonathan Burrall, on his three-day visit in town, avoided meeting with her in person to discuss the change. Instead, he met with her replacement, Colonel John White, a former commissary of accounts of Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Maryland, whose military commission had expired at the end of September 1788. White seemed “insidiously to step in & take this Lady’s living from her” even when he knew he did not have much popular local support. White had previously written to President Washington in May 1789 and repeatedly throughout the summer requesting a government job, specifically marshal of Maryland. He needed to support his family, and although he was an acquaintance who knew of Goddard’s situation, he

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4. “Extract of a Letter from Baltimore to a Gent[leman] in Philad[elphia],” November 13, 1789, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC09756.01.

5. *Documentary History of the First Federal Congress 1789–1791*, vol. 8, *Petition Histories and Non-Legislative Official Documents*, eds. Kenneth R. Bowling et al. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 228 (hereafter cited as *FFC*).

6. Petition to Samuel Osgood, Postmaster General, for the reinstatement of Mary Katherine Goddard as postmaster of Baltimore, November 12, 1789, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC09756.04.



readily assumed the commission Burrall had offered without consultation with the office's incumbent. To add further insult to injury, Burrall left town on the day he was to give an answer on the situation.<sup>7</sup>

Rather than the result of gender bias or dereliction of duty, perhaps Goddard's removal was more politically motivated. By couching the reason for her dismissal in terms of a woman's role and sphere of influence, the party in power was able to obscure the partisan nature of government patronage. Osgood's predecessor, Ebenezer Hazard, who had praised Goddard's conduct in business, was not reappointed by Washington as postmaster general under the newly formed government. And Goddard may have been considered an anti-federalist because of the political leanings of her brother and his former business partner Eleazer Oswald. Anti-federalists claimed that the Federalists were tampering with the mail and preventing the anti-federalists' views on the Constitution from receiving wide circulation and that the post office played a role in this scheme.<sup>8</sup>

When Osgood did not respond to Mary Katherine's petition or the Baltimore merchants who vouched for her, she took her case to a higher level, writing directly to the president in late December 1789, appealing to his philanthropy and humanity to restore her to her office. To her dismay, Washington curtly responded on January 6, 1790, that he "uniformly avoided interfering with appointments which do not require my official agency" and instead directed her memorial to the postmaster general who had the authority to appoint his own deputies and make them accountable.<sup>9</sup> The very next day, January 7, Osgood responded to Richard Curson, a Baltimore merchant and ship owner who had signed the Baltimore petition. After mature consideration, he wrote, he was convinced that he would benefit from the services of Mr. White more than he could from Miss Goddard.<sup>10</sup>

Exercising her constitutional right to petition the government, a freedom ultimately guaranteed to all in the First Amendment in the Bill of Rights, Mary Katherine Goddard presented her case to Congress next. Unlike her Baltimore neighbors and business associates who petitioned the government on her behalf

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7. For John White, see *FFC*, vol. 8, 123–126; *The Papers of George Washington, Presidential Series*, vol. 2, 1 April 1789–15 June 1789, ed. Dorothy Twohig (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1987), 404–406; John White to George Washington, May 28, 1789, *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov>, and see also "Extract of a Letter from Baltimore," November 13, 1789.

8. George Washington to John Jay, July 18, 1788, *The Selected Papers of John Jay*, vol. 5, ed. Elizabeth M. Nuxoll (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2017), 47–49; Young, "Mary K. Goddard," 18–19; *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*, vol. 16: *Commentaries on the Constitution, No. 4*, eds. John P. Kaminski et al. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 540–542.

9. George Washington to Mary Katherine Goddard, January 6, 1790, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC01747.

10. Samuel Osgood to Richard Curson, January 7, 1790, in *FFC*, vol. 8, 237–238. Goddard's endorsement indicates she did not receive this until January 20, 1790.

using deferential and gendered language, Goddard presented her own case in righteous self-confidence as a worthy citizen and public servant who had faithfully executed her duties and should not have been removed from office. She kept a schedule of the receipts at the Baltimore office, which were not adequate to cover the cost of the rent, yet she had “persevered with unremitting attention, in hopes of being compensated in better times.” Her petition of January 29, 1790, which may have been sent to recover some of these lost expenses, was presented to the Senate and read on February 18, 1790, although never considered.<sup>11</sup>

Goddard was irritated that it took Osgood eight weeks to respond to the Baltimoreans’ petition and in her undated written observations noted that the postmaster general had dismissed one who had fourteen years’ experience and a proven track record and was replacing her with “a Man who never had a Day’s previous knowledge of the duties he undertakes.” While she acknowledged that some respectable individuals from Annapolis had written in favor of White, none recommended that her job should be taken away to be given to him.<sup>12</sup>

Not satisfied by her pleas to the postmaster general, the Senate, and the President, Goddard turned next to the House of Representatives. Her petition of May 18, 1790, requesting payment for her claim against the United States, was presented and read. This claim was referred to the Treasury Department but ultimately never considered and went unreimbursed.<sup>13</sup>

Mary Katherine Goddard was never reinstated in her position as postmistress despite her valiant efforts. She continued to be active in her community, publishing almanacs and running a bookbinding business and stationery and dry goods store until 1809. She remained in Baltimore until her death there in 1816. She is not alone among memorable women of conviction in history who have written presidents or petitioned legislatures to have their voices heard as they speak truth to power.

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11. Petition of Mary Katherine Goddard to the US Senate, Thursday, February 18, 1790, in *FFC*, vol. 1, *Senate Legislative Journal*, eds. Linda Grant DePauw et al. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 243–244.

12. Mary Katherine Goddard’s Observations, in *FCC*, vol. 8, 238–240.

13. Petition of Mary Katherine Goddard to the US House of Representatives, Tuesday, May 18, 1790, in *FFC*, vol. 3, *Senate Legislative Journal* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 415–417; National Archives and Records Administration: Record Group 46, Records of the United States Senate, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/17364173>.

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To his Excellency George Washington Esq<sup>r</sup> President of the United States.

The Representation of M<sup>rs</sup> K. G. "Mary Katherine Goddard"

Humbly Sheweth . . . . . That she hath kept the Post Office at Baltimore for upwards of 14 years; but with what degree of Satisfaction to all those concerned, she begs leave to refer to the number & respectability of the persons who have publickly . . . . . addressed the Postmaster Gen<sup>l</sup> & his Assistant, on the subject of her late removal from Office: And as M<sup>r</sup> Osgood has not yet favoured between two & three hundred of the principal Merchants & Inhabitants of Baltimore with an Answer to their last application, transmitted on the 10<sup>th</sup> day of Nov<sup>r</sup>. ultimo, nor with any Answer to sundry private letters, accompanying the transcript of a like application, made to M<sup>r</sup> Burrell, when at Baltimore:

She therefore, at the instance of the Gentlemen thus pleased to Interest themselves on her behalf, lays before your Excellency, Superintendent of that Department, as high as possible, the nature & circumstances, of what is conceived to be an extraordinary Act of Oppression towards her.

That upon the dissolution of the old Government, when from the non-impairment agreement & other causes incident to the Revolution, the Revenue of the Post Office was inadequate to its disbursements, she accepted of the same, and at her own risque advanced hard money to discharge & defray the charges of Post riders for many years, when they were not to be procured on any other terms; and that during this period, the whole of her labor and industry in establishing the Office was necessarily unrewarded; the Emoluments of which being by no means equal to the thin high Rent of an Office, or to the attention required both to receive & forward the letters, as well as evidently appear by the Schedule herunto annexed, and therefore, whoever thus established and continued the Office, at the gloomy period when it was worth no persons acceptance, ought surely to be thought worthy of it when it became more valuable. And as it had been universally <sup>understood</sup> that no person would be removed from Office, under the present Government, unless manifest misconduct appeared, and as no such charge could possibly be made against her, with the least colour of Justice, She was happy in the Idea of being secured both in her Office, and the protection of all those who wished well to the <sup>to the Institution</sup> Prosperity of the Post Office & the new Government in general.

That she has sustained many heavy losses, well known to the Gentlemen of Baltimore, which swallowed up the fruits of her industry, without even extricating her from embarrassment, to this day, altho' her accounts with the Post Office were always considered, as amongst the most punctual & regular of any upon the Continent; notwithstanding which, she has been discharged from her Office, without any imputation of the least fault, and without any previous official notice: The first intimation on that head being an order from M<sup>r</sup> Burrell, whilst at Baltimore, to deliver up the Office to the Deacn of his Note; And Altho' he had been there several days, yet he did not think proper to indulge her with a personal interview, thus far treating her in the style of an unfriendly delinquent, unworthy of common Civility as well as common Justice. And Altho' M<sup>r</sup> White, who succeeded her, might doubtless have been mysterious in the different Offices he sustained, yet, she humbly conceives he was not more worthy of public notice & protection, than she has uniformly been in hers: Sh

A petition from Mary Katherine Goddard to George Washington, December 23, 1789.  
(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC09756.02, p. 1)



To his Excellency George Washington Esq<sup>r</sup> President of the  
United States

The Representation of M:K:G:

Humbly Sheweth..... That she hath kept the Post-office at Baltimore for upwards of 14 years; but with what degree of satisfaction to all those concerned, she begs leave to refer to the number & respectability of the persons who have publickly — addressed the Post master Gen<sup>l</sup> this assistant, on the Subject of her late removal from office: And as M<sup>r</sup>. Osgood has not yet favored between two & three hundred of the principal Merchants & Inhabitants of Baltimore with an Answer to their last application, transmitted on the 19<sup>th</sup> day of Nov<sup>r</sup> Ultimo, nor with any Answer to Sundry private Letters, accompanying the transcript of a like application, made to M<sup>r</sup>. Burrell, when at Baltimore: She therefore, at the instance of the Gentlemen thus pleased to Interest themselves on her behalf, lays before your Excellency, Superintendent of that Department, as briefly as possible, the nature & circumstances, of what is conceived to be an extraordinary Act of oppression towards her.

That upon the dissolution of the old Government, when from the non-importation agreement & other causes incident to the Revolution, the Revenue of the Post-Office was inadequate to its disbursements, she accepted of the same, and at her own risque advanced hard money to ~~discharge~~ defray the charges of Post-riders for many years, when they were not to be procured on any other terms; and that during this period, the whole of her labor and industry in establishing the Office was necessarily unrewarded; the Emoluments of which being by no means equal to the then high rent of an Office, or to the attention required both to receive & forward the Mails, as will evidently appear by the Schedule hereunto annexed, and therefore, whoever thus established and continued the office, at the gloomy period when it was worth no persons acceptance, ought surely to be thought worthy of it when it became more valuable. And as it had

been universally understood that no person would be removed from Office, under the present Government, unless manifest misconduct appeared, and as no such charge could possibly be made against her, with the least colour of Justice, She was happy in the Idea of being secured both in her Office, and the protection of all those who wished ~~well to the~~ Prosperity to the Institution ~~of the Post-office~~ & the new Governm<sup>t</sup> in general.

That She has sustained many heavy losses, well known to the Gentlemen of Baltimore, which swallowed up the fruits of her industry, without even extricating her from embarrassment, to this day, altho' her accounts with the Post-office were always considered, as amongst the most punctual & regular of any upon the Continent; notwithstanding which, she has been discharged from her office, without any imputation of the least fault, and without any previous official notice: The first intimation on that Head being an order from M<sup>r</sup>. Burrell, whilst at Baltimore, to deliver up the Office to the Bearer of his note; And Altho' he had been there several days, yet he did not think proper to indulge her with a personal interview, thus far treating her in the Stile of an unfriendly delinquent, unworthy of common Civility, as well as common Justice. ~~And altho'~~ M<sup>r</sup>. White who succeeded her, might doubtless have been meritorious in the different offices he sustained, yet, she humbly conceives, he was not more worthy of public notice & protection, than she has uniformly been in hers: It must therefore become a matter of serious importance & of peculiar distress to her, if Government can find no means of rewarding this Gentlemans Services, but at the expence of all that She had to rely on, for her future ~~dependence~~ & subsistence.

That it has been alleged as a Plea<sup>x</sup> for her removal, that the Deputy Post-master of Baltimore will hereafter be obliged to ride & regulate the Offices to the Southward, but that she conceives, with great deference to the Postmaster General, is wholly impracticable, & morally impossible; because the business of the Baltimore Office will require his constant attendance, and he alone could give Satisfaction to the people; if therefore the duties of the Assistant M<sup>r</sup>. Burrell's Office are to be performed by any other than himself, surely it cannot well be attempted by

those who are fully occupied with their own; And as two persons must be employed, according to this new plan, She apprehends, that She is more adequate to give Instructions to the Riding Post-Master, here to Act, than any other person possibly could, heretofore unexperienced in such Business

She therefore most humbly hopes from your Excellency's Philantropy and wonted humanity, You will take her Situation into consideration; And as the grievance complained of, has happened whilst the Post-Office Departm<sup>t</sup> was put under your Auspicious protection, by a Resolve of Congress, that your Excellency will be graciously pleased to order that She may be restored to her former office, and as in duty bound, She will ever pray &c

Baltimore December 23<sup>d</sup>, 1789.

x – this plea is now known to be absolutely false – It must be a ~~poor~~ & wretched system, indeed, which stands in need of so despicable a ~~Species of~~ *[illegible]* an Auxiliary, as a palpable lie, invented by Men high in office ~~in~~ passing themselves for Gentlemen of Property & Independence –