

The Nicola Affair: Lewis Nicola, George Washington, and American Military Discontent during the Revolutionary War

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FOLLOWING Lord Cornwallis's surrender at Yorktown, Virginia, in October 1781, General George Washington and the bulk of the Continental army returned north to face the remaining British forces in and around New York City. For the remainder of the Revolutionary War, Washington's main task was to hold his army together while the tortuous peace negotiations at Paris moved slowly toward completion. This was, unfortunately, much more difficult than it sounds. As the British military threat receded, the former colonies became increasingly reluctant to provide the Continental Congress with the means to supply and pay the army properly and in a timely fashion. Furthermore, because of the weakness of the central government enshrined in the Articles of Confederation, Congress found it difficult to enforce its will upon the states. Not surprisingly, during the final years of the conflict Washington on several occasions received petitions from his officers complaining of the Continental Congress's inability to meet the army's needs. One petition in particular, written by a sixty-five-year-old colonel named Lewis Nicola on 22 May 1782, along with Washington's response of that same date, has captured the attention of historians of the American Revolution.

THE NICOLA AFFAIR AND THE HISTORIANS

The first author to mention the exchange between Nicola and Washington in print was James Thacher in his *Military Journal during the American Revolutionary War*, which was published in Boston in 1823. As Thacher mistakenly conflates Nicola's letter with the later "New-

burgh Addresses,”¹ his work sets the tone nicely for the historiography to follow. Thacher writes that “a letter was handed to Washington containing the demand of some for a monarchy, and himself the king . . . it excited sensations in his breast, that he declared to be more painful than he had ever before experienced. . . . He immediately called a meeting” of his officers.² Between the publication of Thacher’s work in the early 1820s and World War II, a consensus about the character and intentions of the author of this letter, much of it untrue, emerged within the scholarly community.

The author, Lewis Nicola, is most often described as having been a respectable, dignified, well-bred, and honorable soldier. Having served as a colonel in the Continental army for five years, he was, it was commonly supposed, on terms of intimate friendship with his commander in chief, George Washington. In May 1782, acting on behalf of a group of like-minded Continental army officers, Nicola supposedly proposed to Washington that he use the army to effect a coup d’état against Congress and set himself up as king of the United States. Washington’s scathing response to Nicola’s letter, however, immediately doused the flames of Bonapartism in America.³

There were a handful of dissenting voices among the first wave of authors tackling the Nicola Affair. Bradley T. Johnson in 1912 went against tradition by describing Nicola as a “fussy character” who believed that “Providence” had “sagaciously chosen him” to perform

¹The anonymously written “Newburgh Addresses,” which, among other things, express extreme displeasure with the American political situation, doubt Washington’s ability to meet the army’s needs, and call on the army to remain in being after the peace so as to be able to enforce its will upon Congress, circulated within the Continental army in early March 1783.

²James Thacher, *A Military Journal during the American Revolutionary War* (1823, reprint edition, Hartford, Conn., 1862), 509.

³See Jared Sparks, *The Life of George Washington* (Boston, 1844), 354; Washington Irving, *Life of George Washington* (New York, 1857), 4:401–02; Benson J. Lossing, *Washington and the American Republic* (New York, 1870), 3:8–9; William Stoddard, *George Washington* (New York, 1886), 1:265–66; Henry Cabot Lodge, *George Washington* (Boston, 1889), 1:337–38; Horace E. Scudder, *George Washington: An Historical Biography* (Boston, 1889), 205; Elbridge S. Brooks, *The True Story of George Washington* (Boston, 1895), 111; Elizabeth B. Johnston, *George Washington: Day by Day* (New York, 1895), 76; Woodrow Wilson, *George Washington* (New York, 1897), 219–20; Eugene Parsons, *George Washington: A Character Sketch* (Chicago, 1898), 108; Lucretia Perry Osborn, *Washington Speaks for Himself* (New York, 1927), 150; Shelby Little, *George Washington* (New York, 1929), 297–98; John Corbin, *The Unknown Washington* (New York, 1930), 227–29; Thomas Frothingham, *Washington: Commander in Chief* (Boston, 1930), 385; Bernard Fay, *George Washington: Republican Aristocrat* (Boston, 1931), 218; Thora Thorsmark, *George Washington* (Chicago, 1931), 225–26; Louis Martin Sears, *George Washington* (New York, 1932), 331–32; John C. Fitzpatrick, *George Washington Himself* (Indianapolis, 1933), 417; Nathaniel Stephenson and Waldo Dunn, *George Washington* (New York, 1940), 2:180–81.

the role of king-maker. Fortunately, according to Johnson, Washington “understood the feather-headed and irresponsible character of Nicola . . . and was aware that nothing from him merited serious attention.”⁴ Twelve years later, John C. Fitzpatrick also bucked tradition by asserting that Nicola, “a man harassed and brooding over the universal gloom and sense of injustice at the neglect which the army was experiencing,” acted on his own, not on behalf of a group of disgruntled officers.⁵

For the only serious attempt prior to World War II to understand what Nicola was up to in the spring of 1782, one has to examine Louise Dunbar’s 1923 *Study of “Monarchical” Tendencies in the United States from 1776 to 1801*. Dunbar, charitably recognizing that as Washington’s rebuke was far better known than “Nicola’s presentation of his case,” thought that “someone should speak in [his] behalf.” “He too,” Dunbar continues, “despite his errors of judgment and his personal—even selfish—interest, wished well to America.”⁶ Quoting from and discussing Nicola’s scheme at length, Dunbar shows it to be both well-reasoned and cogently argued. Beyond that, she reveals how Nicola’s ideas dovetailed with those held by others within the Continental establishment during the final year of the war and demonstrates that although he adhered to more widely held sentiments, Nicola acted on his own and was not a spokesman for his fellow army officers.⁷ Finally, Dunbar argues that Nicola’s scheme was more in the way of an intellectual discussion, not a call to action; for this reason, it was, in her opinion, quite different from the later controversy surrounding the “Newburgh Addresses.”⁸ The only real weakness in Dunbar’s argument is her easy acceptance that Nicola offered Washington a crown and that Nicola’s scheme would, if acted upon, have meant the displacement of the duly constituted government of the United States.

Historians since World War II have followed the main lines of the traditional story with a few notable exceptions, several of them foreshadowed in Dunbar’s work. First, they tend not to exaggerate the closeness of Nicola’s personal relationship with George Washington. Second, they do not often argue that Nicola was speaking for anyone

⁴ Bradley T. Johnson, *General Washington* (New York, 1912), 271–72.

⁵ John C. Fitzpatrick, *The Spirit of the Revolution* (Boston, 1924), 186, 189.

⁶ Louise Dunbar, *A Study of “Monarchical” Tendencies in the United States from 1776 to 1801* (1923; reprint ed., 1970), 46.

⁷ See Dunbar’s article on Lewis Nicola in the *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York, 1928–36), 7:510.

⁸ Dunbar, *Study of “Monarchical” Tendencies*, 51.

other than himself.⁹ Third, they have done a better job making connections between Nicola's proposals and similar sentiments swirling within the ranks of the Continental army.¹⁰ Fourth, in a few cases they have even taken the trouble to point out that Nicola was not advocating the establishment of a dictatorship in the tradition of Caesar, Cromwell, and Napoleon, but a limited, constitutional form of government.¹¹ Finally, a number of historians have introduced a new element, that of "nationality," into the Nicola Affair. James Thomas Flexner, for instance, refers to Nicola's letter as "brash interference by a semi-outsider, and a foreigner at that."¹² Richard Brookhiser argues that "[s]uch a bald suggestion could probably only have been made by a foreigner, and an ingenious one at that."¹³ Notwithstanding these differences, the hyperbole associated with the Nicola Affair has by no means waned completely. John Richard Alden has written that Washington's refusal to countenance Nicola's scheme "signifies the death of the monarchical idea in the United States and the total triumph of representative government."¹⁴ For Allen Boudreau and Alexander Bleimann, Washington's rebuke of Nicola "constituted the mightiest blow struck for the formation of our republic since the Declaration of Independence."¹⁵

The only author of the postwar era who has examined the Nicola Affair in any depth is Whitfield J. Bell of the American Philosophical Society. In a paper read before the Pennsylvania Society of the Cincinnati in 1983 entitled "Colonel Lewis Nicola: Advocate of Monarchy, 1782," Bell lays out his arguments. While agreeing with Louise Dun-

⁹ Douglas Southall Freeman, *George Washington: A Biography* (New York, 1952), 5:416; Burke Davis, *George Washington and the American Revolution* (New York, 1975), 450; Edmund S. Morgan, *The Genius of George Washington* (Washington, D.C., 1980), 13; Charles C. Wall, *George Washington: Citizen Soldier* (Charlottesville, Va., 1980), 175; John Richard Alden, *George Washington: A Biography* (Baton Rouge, La., 1984), 205; Glenn A. Phelps, *George Washington and American Constitutionalism* (Lawrence, Kans., 1993), 42–43; Harrison Clark, *All Cloudless Glory: The Life of George Washington* (Washington, D.C., 1996), 2:9–10.

¹⁰ See James Thomas Flexner, *Washington: The Indispensable Man* (Boston, 1969), 168–69; Richard Brookhiser, *Founding Father: Rediscovering George Washington* (New York, 1996), 41.

¹¹ John Richard Alden, *The American Revolution, 1775–1783* (New York, 1954), 267; W. W. Abbot et al., eds., *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 11 vols. to date (Charlottesville, Va., 1985–), 9:306.

¹² James Thomas Flexner, *George Washington in the American Revolution* (Boston, 1968), 492.

¹³ Brookhiser, *Founding Father*, 41.

¹⁴ Alden, *The American Revolution*, 267.

¹⁵ Allen Boudreau and Alexander Bleimann, *George Washington in New York* (Orel, Nebr., 1987), 15.

bar that Nicola “was no part of a movement within the army, no spokesman for an organized point of view” and that his letter was qualitatively different from the sentiments enclosed in the later “Newburgh Addresses,” he did add a few new twists.¹⁶ According to Bell, Nicola “voiced only his own momentary disgruntlement and the thoughtless opinions of impatient, lonely, ill-paid and unpaid men.”¹⁷ Finally, like Flexner and Brookhiser, Bell argues that Nicola “understood little of civil government, politics, and common life. He was moreover a foreigner, not even an Englishman, who had passed most of his life in Irish garrisons and, in his straitened circumstances for ten years before the Revolution, had seen little of America and Americans.”¹⁸ Considering the amount of thought that Nicola obviously devoted to his scheme, Bell’s first point is open to some doubt, and his last, as we shall see by examining Nicola’s background, is demonstrably false.

LEWIS NICOLA, 1717–77

Lewis Nicola was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1717, the son of a British army officer and the grandson of Huguenot refugees.¹⁹ Although little is known of his upbringing, Nicola’s family apparently provided him with a solid secondary education and bought him a commission as an ensign in the British army in January 1740. He married his first wife, Christiana Doyle, on 19 September of that same year. During the first half of the 1740s Nicola was stationed in various Irish cities, including Galway, Mannorhamilton, Londonderry, Dublin, and Cork. After a brief tour of duty in Flanders in the spring and summer of 1745, Nicola returned to Ireland, joining the garrison at Charles Fort near Kinsale, and eventually winning promotion, in early September 1755, to the rank of fort major. For the twenty-one years following his return to Ireland in 1745, Kinsale would be his home. In late December 1754, Nicola was admitted as a freeman of that city. During the following decade, he helped periodically to audit the corporation of Kinsale’s

¹⁶ Whitfield J. Bell, “Colonel Lewis Nicola: Advocate of Monarchy, 1782” (Philadelphia: A Paper read before the Pennsylvania Society of the Cincinnati, 1983), 7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ There has been some confusion about Nicola’s nationality. Although one author has described him as a “German royalist,” a much larger number mistakenly contend that he was born in France. See James A. Harrison, *George Washington: Patriot, Soldier, Statesman* (New York, 1906), 358; Ellis P. Oberholtzer, *The Literary History of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1906), 86; Howard R. Marraro, “Unpublished Letters of Colonel Nicola, Revolutionary Soldier,” *Pennsylvania History* 13 (October 1946): 274; Martin P. Snyder, *City of Independence* (New York, 1975), 105.

accounts, and, on at least one occasion, in 1766, served on the governing council. Nor were Nicola's interests limited to military and civic affairs. He joined a social club, the "Friendly Brothers," in Cork, collected sea polyps, and, on 11 March 1762, presented a paper to the Royal Society.²⁰ By the mid-1760s, according to Whitfield Bell, having been "disappointed of an expected inheritance" and "with practically no prospects for advancement" in Ireland, Nicola, his second wife, Jane Bishop, whom he had married on 18 April 1760, eight months after Christiana Nicola's death, and their family decided to immigrate to America. Shortly after their arrival in Philadelphia toward the end of August 1766, Nicola opened a dry goods store on Second Street.²¹

Nicola soon found that he would never be satisfied to live the life of a mere businessman. In September 1767 he founded a circulating library. For an annual payment of three dollars and a £3 deposit, Nicola's patrons gained access to the two to three hundred volumes of history, poetry, plays, and travel literature in his collection. Those who did not wish to make the annual payment could use Nicola's library as well, as long as they deposited the value of the book they wanted to borrow and agreed to pay six pence a week for as long as it was in their possession. In March 1768, Nicola moved his store and library to Market Street. He relocated again the following year, in December 1769, this time to Spruce Street in the more fashionable Society Hill neighborhood, renamed his establishment the "General Circulating Library," and lowered his annual fee to two dollars. Throughout this period, Nicola substantially expanded his holdings. By 1771 his library, which was open six days a week and had shifted once more, to Third Street, housed more than one thousand volumes.²²

Nicola's circulating library represented only one of his intellectual activities. Through his friendship with John Morgan, a professor of medicine at the College of Philadelphia, Nicola was admitted into the American Society for Promoting Useful Knowledge. Within a year, he had been chosen as a member of the committee called into being to negotiate a merger with the American Philosophical Society. That task successfully completed, in early November 1768 Nicola was elected

²⁰ Lewis Nicola, "The Almanack of Lewis Nicola" (typescript on file at the American Philosophical Society; original owned [1998] by Clifford Lewis of Media, Pa.); Bell, "Lewis Nicola," 2–3; Richard Caulfield, *The Council Book of the Corporation of Kinsale from 1652 to 1800* (Guildford, Surrey, 1879), 268, 271, 279.

²¹ Bell, "Lewis Nicola," 2; Nicola, "Almanack."

²² *Pennsylvania Journal* (Philadelphia), 10 Sept. 1767; *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 42:213–14; *Pennsylvania Gazette* (Philadelphia), 3 Jan. 1771; Carl and Jessica Bridenbaugh, *Rebels and Gentlemen: Philadelphia in the Age of Franklin* (New York, 1942), 91.

one of the three curators of the newly enlarged Society.²³ A few months later, in January 1769, in the belief that magazines were “the taste of the age, and found to possess many conveniences, such as gratifying the curiosity of the public, and serving as a repository for many small, tho’ valuable pieces that would otherwise be lost to the world,” Nicola decided to end his career as a dry goods merchant, and give journalism a try.²⁴ Although he continued to sell wine, rum, tea, salt, spirits, molasses, sugar, and other like items through his library, Nicola’s main interest and the majority of his energy would, for the next year, be devoted to editing his new monthly periodical, the *American Magazine, or General Repository*. This journal, which unfortunately folded after publishing only nine issues, included articles covering a variety of scientific subjects, poetry, British and foreign news, and “American Occurrences.”²⁵ Nicola also used the *American Magazine* to publicize the activities of the American Philosophical Society; during its run, between January and September 1769, many of the Society’s most important papers, including the minutes of its meetings, were published as appendices to the *American Magazine*. Alongside these interests, Nicola continued to conduct research and present papers to the Society, including one on an improved method for preserving subjects in spirits.²⁶

Although enjoying Philadelphia’s cosmopolitan culture and his position as one of the city’s luminaries, the high cost of living there induced Nicola in the early 1770s to move his growing family, first to Allentown and, later, to Easton, Pennsylvania. With the outbreak of the Revolutionary War, however, Nicola realized that with his background in education, journalism, and arms he could best provide for his family and help the American cause by quickly returning to Philadelphia.²⁷

²³ Bell, “Lewis Nicola,” 2; Charles Thomson to Benjamin Franklin, 6 Nov. 1768, William B. Willcox, Leonard W. Labaree, Whitfield J. Bell, Jr., et al., eds., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 30 vols. to date (New Haven, 1959–), 15:262. Nicola was reelected curator on a number of occasions and served in that capacity both during and after the Revolutionary War (Bell, “Lewis Nicola,” 4; Julian Boyd, Charles T. Cullen, and John Catanzariti, et al., eds., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 27 vols. to date [Princeton, N.J., 1950–], 4:545).

²⁴ *Pennsylvania Journal* (Philadelphia), 12 Jan., 18 May 1769; *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 42:215.

²⁵ *The American Magazine, or Monthly Repository* (Philadelphia), Jan.–Sept. 1769; Carl and Jessica Bridenbaugh, *Rebels and Gentlemen*, 126.

²⁶ Lewis Nicola, “Easy Method of Preserving Subjects in Spirits,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 1 (1769–71): 244–46. Papers Nicola later presented to the American Philosophical Society included “To account for the Deluge, from the Suspension of the diurnal rotation of the earth” and “Observations on petrified bones found near the Ohio; thigh-bone, tusk and grinder, brought to the city by Maj. [Isaac] Craig” (*Early Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society . . . from 1744 to 1838* [Philadelphia, 1884], 103, 123; see also Bell, “Lewis Nicola,” 2, 4).

²⁷ Bell, “Lewis Nicola,” 2; Nicola, “Almanack.”

In early July 1775 the Pennsylvania council of safety, in recognition of his many years of service in the British army, appointed Nicola to a committee to inspect the American defenses on the Delaware River below Philadelphia; he presented his report to the council on 6 July.²⁸ Even so, it was by no means certain that the fifty-nine-year-old Nicola would be allowed to return to full-fledged military service. In January 1776, indeed, Nicola opened a “Porter House” in Philadelphia to sell beer and, shortly thereafter, founded “[a] School for the instruction of youth in Reading, Writing, Arithmetic, Common, Fractional, and Extraction of the Roots, Book-keeping after the Italian method, and sundry branches of Mathematical Knowledge, particularly Fortification.”²⁹

Nicola’s stint as a schoolteacher would be short-lived, however. On 20 February 1776, in response to his own application, the Pennsylvania council of safety granted Nicola a military command, that of barrack master for the city of Philadelphia. For the next seven years Nicola would serve in the armed forces in rebellion against King George III. While barrack master, on 2 March 1776, Nicola composed and presented to the council of safety a “Plan of a Powder Magazine” and saw to the repair of the city jailhouse, for which he was, in April 1776, reimbursed \$226 by the Continental Congress.³⁰

On 2 December 1776, the Pennsylvania council of safety promoted Nicola town major of Philadelphia and instructed him to immediately “enrol all such persons as are not fit to march with the militia, in the several wards in the City, as Guards.”³¹ Two days later, Nicola wrote the council that it would be best to divide Philadelphia into three districts, with his soldiers concentrating on protecting the two powder magazines in the northern wards, the jail and state house in the city center, and the port facilities in the southern portion of the city. Two companies, each of ninety men, would be sufficient to guard each of the three districts, in Nicola’s estimation.³² In addition to defending Philadelphia’s most valuable military and political installations, Nicola’s command was assigned a number of other duties such as patrolling the

²⁸ Samuel Hazard et al., eds., *Pennsylvania Archives*, 9 ser., 138 vols. (Philadelphia and Harrisburg, Pa., 1852–1949), *First Series*, 4:635–36 (hereafter, *Pa. Archives*).

²⁹ Bell, “Lewis Nicola,” 3.

³⁰ *Pa. Archives, First Series*, 4:715–16; Worthington C. Ford et al., *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 34 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1904–37), 4:265 (hereafter, *JCC*).

³¹ *Pa. Archives, Colonial Records* 11:26.

³² See Nicola to the Pennsylvania Council of Safety, 4 Dec. 1776, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Harrisburg (hereafter, PHarH), Record Group (hereafter, RG) 27: Pennsylvania’s Revolutionary Governments, 1775–1790; *Pa. Archives, First Series*, 5:91; J. Thomas Scharf and Thompson Westcott, *History of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1884), 333–34.

city streets and safeguarding all of Philadelphia's public buildings, military hospitals, bridges, and storage depots. Furthermore, Continental army units entering Philadelphia were required to report their numbers to Nicola so that he could prepare a return for the commanding officer in the city.³³ This task, despite Nicola's best efforts, was sometimes difficult to accomplish. For example, in the enumeration of the Continental army soldiers quartered in Philadelphia that Nicola sent to Major General Thomas Mifflin on 10 June 1777, Nicola noted that half of the detachments present in the city had failed to report their numbers to him.³⁴ Nor was this the only problem arising from the large number of American soldiers crowding into the city. As early as December 1776, Nicola informed the Pennsylvania council of safety that the houses occupied by Continental army enlisted men were "generally as dirty [as] a pigsty with human ordure in the garrets, cellers, out houses yards, &c, the stench of which is intolerable & threatens a pestilence if not remedied before the warm weather."³⁵

While meeting his responsibilities as town major, Nicola somehow found the time to write a ninety-one-page *Treatise of Military Exercise, Calculated for the Use of Americans*, which was published in Philadelphia in 1776. This work, which, according to Nicola, was undertaken at the behest of and dedicated to the colonels of the five battalions of Pennsylvania militia from Philadelphia, was intended to include "every Thing that is supposed can be of Use to" the colonists and omit "such Manoevres, as are only for Shew and Parade."³⁶ Drawing upon his experiences in the British army, Nicola discussed such staples of military drill as marching, firing, changing front, forming square, passing a bridge, defile, or wood, forming into a solid column, preventing a surprise on the march, and repulsing a bayonet charge. Nicola concluded his work with a few observations on how best to maintain army discipline.

Nor was this all. Nicola also translated two French works for the use of the Continental army: Louis André de la Mamie de Clairac's *L'ingenieur de Campagne, or, Field Engineer* (Philadelphia, 1776), which he completed in seven weeks although "afflicted, during three of them, with an intermitting fever," and Thomas Auguste Le Roy de

³³ "Standing Orders for the Garrison of Philadelphia," 31 May 1777 (Broadside; Philadelphia, 1777); Bell, "Lewis Nicola," 3.

³⁴ Thomas Mifflin to GW, 11 June 1777, George Washington Papers, Library of Congress (hereafter, DLC:GW).

³⁵ Nicola to the Pennsylvania Council of Safety, December 1776, PHarH: RG 27, Pennsylvania's Revolutionary Governments, 1775–1790; *Pa. Archives, Second Series*, 1:656.

³⁶ Lewis Nicola, *A Treatise of Military Exercise, Calculated for the Use of Americans* (Philadelphia, 1776). The quote is taken from a portion of the title of this work.

Grandmaison's *Treatise on Military Service of Light Horse and Light Infantry* (Philadelphia, 1777). To the first work, which Nicola dedicated to the Continental Congress, an institution that had already earned his "unfeigned respect," he attached an appendix concerning sea batteries and an explanation of technical military terms.³⁷

Although he was undoubtedly proud of his literary contributions to the American cause, Nicola's experiences as barrack master and town major of Philadelphia had not been entirely satisfactory. The "City Guards at present," Nicola wrote Congress in the spring of 1777, "consist of inhabitants, mostly old men, unused to arms & every thing military, which renders it very difficult to govern them properly & oblige them to perform their duty regularly." In consequence, in Nicola's opinion, Congress should establish a corps of invalid Continental army veterans and appoint him to command it. To "discharge such men [from the service] without some provision would be inhuman to them & disadvantageous to the publick, as others, whose services may be wanted in camp, must be employed in certain duties these invalids could perform, for which reason all nations in Europe employ them in garrison."

Therefore, "as fast as fit military subjects offered they might be embodied & quartered in the barracks & an equal number of the officers & men of the present Guards dismissed." Moreover, Nicola requested that, as commander of the Invalid Corps, he be given a rank in the Continental army so that he would not "be considered as a person undeserving of any preferment" or be "commanded by persons unborn when I was performing the functions of a soldier."³⁸

NICOLA'S WARTIME SERVICE, 1777–82

On 20 June 1777 the Continental Congress, bowing to the logic of Nicola's arguments, established an Invalid Corps, eight companies strong and totaling close to one thousand men, "to be employed in garrisons, and for guards in cities and other places, where magazines or arsenals, or hospitals are placed; as also to serve as a military school for young gentlemen, previous to their being appointed to marching

³⁷ See the prefatory material to Nicola's translation of Clairac's *L'ingenieur de Campagne, or, Field Engineer* (Philadelphia, 1776), and Grandmaison's *Treatise on Military Service of Light Horse and Light Infantry*, translated by Lewis Nicola (Philadelphia, 1777). Clairac's work was apparently first published in Paris in 1739, Grandmaison's in Paris in 1756.

³⁸ Nicola to [Congress], March 1777, *Life in Letters (American Autograph Shop)* 2 (4) July 1939:149–51. Nicola wrote Anthony Wayne on 19 Mar. 1779 concerning "the plan I offered to Congress for forming the Invalid Regiment" (*Pa. Archives, First Series*, 7:255; see also, *ibid.*, *Fifth Series*, 4:3).

regiments.” The officers of the corps were required to attend mathematics classes, provide funds for the purchase of a library “of the most approved authors on tactics and the petite guerre,” and recruit “in the neighbourhood of the places they shall be stationed in.”³⁹ About one month later, on 16 July 1777, Congress further resolved that physicians and surgeons serving in hospitals near Philadelphia were to examine all those wishing to be discharged from the Continental army and forward those fit for garrison duty to the Invalid Corps; that officers commanding regiments should send those unfit for active duty to the Invalid Corps after having them examined by the regimental physician or surgeon; that newspaper advertisements were to inform all those on Continental half-pay residing within twenty miles of Philadelphia that they were to report to Nicola; and that those living farther afield should report to the nearest Continental army general, field officer, physician, or surgeon for his decision about whether they were to be transferred to the Invalid Corps.⁴⁰ George Washington apparently received word of Nicola’s appointment and the establishment of the Invalid Corps during the last week of June 1777.⁴¹ After receiving Congress’s second set of resolutions concerning the corps, Washington ordered, on 6 August, that those thought incapable of serving in the field be medically examined, “and if judged fit for garrison duty, they are not to be discharged, but transferred to the Invalid-Corps.”⁴²

Although Congress’s desire that the corps form the basis of “a military academy apparently never got off the paper it was written on,” Nicola and the Invalid Corps did perform a host of valuable services during the American Revolution.⁴³ For the bulk of the war the corps was stationed at Philadelphia. With the advance of William Howe’s British army on the American capital in the fall of 1777, however, Nicola was forced to relocate both his family and the Invalid Corps elsewhere. On 19 September, one day after suggesting the appointment of “a Court martial in the Goal [jail] . . . to examine every military prisoner there in order to send such as may be safely to the army, & such as cannot be trusted by land to lend to the State Navy Board for

³⁹ JCC 8:485; see also Scharf and Westcott, *History of Philadelphia*, 343.

⁴⁰ JCC 8:555–56. The physical requirements for admittance into the Invalid Corps were fairly low. Indeed, Congress expected that “[m]en having only one leg or one arm each, if otherwise capable of doing garrison duty, are to be deemed proper recruits for this corps” (ibid., 555).

⁴¹ John Hancock to GW, 24 June 1777 (DLC:GW); see also Richard Peters to GW, 23 July 1777 (DLC:GW).

⁴² General Orders, 6 Aug. 1777 (DLC:GW).

⁴³ Fred A. Berg, *Encyclopedia of Continental Army Units* (Harrisburg, Pa., 1972), 55. See also, Robert K. Wright, *The Continental Army* (Washington, D.C., 1984), 136.

the use of the Gallies that no hands that can be useful should be idle at this juncture,” Nicola marched his force to Bristol.⁴⁴ By the twenty-fifth of September he had reached Fort Mifflin, Pennsylvania. Although Washington wrote Nicola on 29 September that he “put great dependance upon you and all your Officers exerting yourselves in the defence of a post of so much consequence,” the Invalid Corps did not remain at Fort Mifflin for long. A council of war of the corps’s officers recommended that it retire to Trenton, New Jersey, because of the amount of sickness in the ranks, the lack of provisions, and the desire to keep the number of prisoners falling into British hands to a minimum. After reaching Trenton, however, Nicola saw to it that the corps took a more active role. Finding that there was “a large vessel in the river [near Bordentown] with a very valuable Cargo belonging to Congress which was in danger of falling into the enemies hands,” Nicola quickly dispatched thirty men, almost half of his total force fit for duty, to secure the prize.⁴⁵

Richard Peters of the Board of War directed Nicola on 29 October to march his unit from Trenton to Allentown, Pennsylvania, “so soon as you can consistently with the safety of any Stores which may yet remain at Trenton.”⁴⁶ This directive brought howls of protest from James Paxton, assistant commissary of issues, and Samuel H. Sullivan, among others, who recognized, as Paxton reported, “there is Salt, Soap, and other Things of Value which require a Constant Guard” at Trenton.⁴⁷ Moreover, the Invalid Corps, while situated in and around Trenton, could be usefully employed limiting the number of American civilians crossing from New Jersey into British-held Philadelphia.⁴⁸ Once both sides had settled into winter quarters, the corps redeployed not to Allentown, but to Easton and Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, to guard hospitals and military stores in those cities.⁴⁹ Like the rest of the Continental army, the Invalid Corps suffered great hardships during the winter of 1777–78. Nicola wrote the president of Pennsylvania’s supreme executive council in January 1778, for instance, that “[m]any

⁴⁴ Nicola to Thomas Wharton, 18 September 1777, PHarH: RG 27, Pennsylvania’s Revolutionary Governments, 1775–1790.

⁴⁵ GW to Nicola, 29 Sept. 1777, DLC:GW; Consultation of Officers of Invalids at Fort Mifflin, 27 Sept. 1777, Papers of the Continental Congress, National Archives (hereafter, DNA: PCC), item 163; Nicola to GW, 6 Oct. 1777, DLC:GW.

⁴⁶ Richard Peters to Nicola, 29 Oct. 1777, DLC:GW.

⁴⁷ James Paxton to Nicola, c. 7 Nov. 1777, DLC:GW; Samuel H. Sullivan to Nicola, 7 Nov. 1777, DLC:GW.

⁴⁸ Nicola to William Livingston, 7–25 Nov. 1777, Carl E. Prince et al., eds., *The Papers of William Livingston*, 5 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J., 1979–88), 2:125.

⁴⁹ GW to Richard Peters, 18 May 1778, DLC:GW.

of my people are almost naked & besides what they suffer from the severity of the weather the appearance of many of them is offensive to decency.”⁵⁰ After a brief stint at Valley Forge in the spring of 1778, the Invalid Corps returned to Philadelphia on 19 June, just after the British evacuation of that city.⁵¹

For the next three years the Invalid Corps was stationed primarily at Philadelphia and Boston. Nicola, who had during the British occupation found time to draw a “Plan of the English Lines near Philadelphia” recording the location of all of the significant British redoubts and strong points along the heights from the Delaware to the Schuylkill River, the sites of the twenty-nine houses leveled to make way for the British fortifications, and other terrain features, continued to serve the American cause in various ways.⁵² He forwarded intelligence procured from British and Hessian deserters and submitted “A Scheme for a Partisan Corps” and “Judicious remarks on a proposed Reformation in the Army” to Congress, served on a number of Continental army courts-martial, and directed the Invalid Corps’s efforts to recruit soldiers for the Pennsylvania Line in and around Philadelphia.⁵³

Although General Washington always retained the option to petition Congress for the removal of the Invalid Corps to places other than Philadelphia and Boston, he does not seem to have done so prior to the spring of 1781.⁵⁴ On 13 June 1781, in response to Washington’s request of 27 May, however, Congress authorized the concentration of the corps at West Point, New York.⁵⁵ In his letter to Nicola of 21 June, Washington tried to make the move sound as attractive as possible by stating that the corps could “be brought on by easy Marches”; that West Point provided a “pleasant & healthy situation . . . which is remarkable for the uncommon salubrity of its air”; and that “the importance of trusting its defence to a body of tried Men, all point out very forcibly the propriety of employing your Corps as a part of the Garrison.”⁵⁶

⁵⁰ Nicola to Thomas Wharton, 22 Jan. 1778, PHarH: RG 27, Pennsylvania’s Revolutionary Governments, 1775–1790.

⁵¹ Bell, “Lewis Nicola,” 4; Lewis Nicola, “Almanack.”

⁵² Nicola’s “Plan” is owned by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia; see also Snyder, *City of Independence*, 105–06.

⁵³ DNA: PCC, items 60 and 163; General Orders, 31 Dec. 1781, 24 Jan. 1782, DLC:GW; and *Pa. Archives, Fifth Series*, 4:3. Nicola dispatched the bulk of his intelligence reports to Congress between May 1779 and February 1780.

⁵⁴ GW to Jonathan Trumbull, 21 Feb. 1781, Trumbull Papers, Connecticut State Library, Hartford.

⁵⁵ GW to Samuel Huntington, 27 May 1781, deCoppet Collection, Princeton University; JCC 20:637.

⁵⁶ GW to Nicola, 21 June 1781, DLC:GW.

Getting the Invalid Corps to West Point was, as it turned out, a considerable undertaking. On 26 June, Nicola wrote Washington that the corps could not leave Philadelphia until the Pennsylvania militia units intended to replace it had arrived. Three weeks later, on 17 July, Nicola again wrote Washington, complaining that he had not been “able to procure a warrant for the pay that has been promised to the regiment.” Although the corps was owed payment for ten months’ duty, Congress had offered only the equivalent of a month and a half. The compromise settlement arrived at by Nicola and the Board of War ensured that the corps would be paid for six months’ service before leaving Philadelphia. Although a portion of the Invalid Corps was unhappy with this agreement, and some individual soldiers refused to march at first, Nicola convinced them “that West point being much nearer Boston . . . the[y] had a much better chance of being supplied there than in Philadelphia. . . . & that they would not there be exposed to the distresses they had so often felt in Philada.” In addition to these arguments, Nicola noted “that the pleasure of returning under [Washington’s] more immediate command had much weight in inducing them to comply.”⁵⁷ Even after the corps was in a mood to march, its departure was slowed by Nicola’s difficulty in obtaining shallops to transport his forces to Trenton. As the two Continental vessels Nicola had counted on had recently sailed downstream and the deputy quartermaster general had “neither money or credit to hire others,” the Invalid Corps was forced to await their return.⁵⁸ Only on 20 July was General Arthur St. Clair finally able to report to Washington that the corps was in motion.⁵⁹

Nor did Nicola’s problems end upon leaving Philadelphia. St. Clair’s letter to Washington of 20 July enclosed a copy of a letter that he had received from Captain John David Woelper of the Invalid Corps, dated nine days before, wherein Woelper complained of the “ignominious abuse and scandalous treatments” he had received at Nicola’s hands. Woelper submitted a host of allegations against his commanding officer: that Nicola had illegally deprived him of his command of a company in 1778 and, again, in 1781; that he had discharged able men from the service and accepted bribes; that he had made false returns; that he had drawn pay for deserters and others

⁵⁷ Nicola to GW, 17, 24 July 1781, DLC:GW. According to Gen. Arthur St. Clair, it was Nicola’s negotiating skills, not the prospect of again serving under Washington, that made the departure of the Invalid Corps “in tolerable Temper” a possibility (St. Clair to GW, 20 July 1781, DLC:GW).

⁵⁸ Nicola to GW, 26 June, 17 July 1781, DLC:GW.

⁵⁹ Arthur St. Clair to GW, 20 July 1781, DLC:GW.

absent from camp; that he had neglected to provide for the corps's needs; that he had kept back monies intended for the unit "and applied it to his own purpose for a considerable time"; and that "he rather gratifies the passion of Partiality than to obey orders." Not surprisingly considering the seriousness of the charges, Woelper suggested that Nicola be arrested.⁶⁰

Nicola, who had been apprized of Woelper's charges, wrote Washington on 24 July that he wanted the matter settled as soon as he reached West Point and that he was not worried about the outcome, as the "more a man of integritys character is scrutinised the brighter it appears." One week later, on 31 July, Woelper wrote Washington to lay his grievances before the commander in chief directly and to warn him that Nicola, "in his usual manner," would try "to insinuate himself by Your Excellency in order to extenuate his crimes."⁶¹ Washington, who was not accustomed to show favoritism among his officers, particularly when such serious issues were at stake, moved quickly to bring the matter to a head. He forwarded a copy of Woelper's charges to General Alexander McDougall and ordered that court martial proceedings be set in motion "as soon as the Accuseant arrives at the Point."⁶² In the end, Woelper's charges were dismissed, and Nicola's name was cleared. Nicola's accuser, interestingly enough, remained with the Invalid Corps until its dissolution in the spring of 1783.⁶³

Nor was this the only problem facing the commander of the Invalid Corps. Nicola wrote Washington on 4 August 1781 that he feared his men would have trouble procuring wood and water at West Point, "particularly in winter when, as I am informed, it is a difficult task for a man in full vigour to get down & up the declivity from the area on which the barracks are built to the water side."⁶⁴ Six weeks later, on 19 September, Nicola complained to General Horatio Gates from Fishkill, New York, that General McDougall, "who commands at the Point, has stationed us *in the outposts* in this neighborhood & called in the

⁶⁰ John David Woelper to Arthur St. Clair, 11 July 1781, DLC:GW. On 9 June 1778, GW had written Nicola to request that Capt. Woelper of the German Battalion be admitted as a captain into the Invalid Corps on account of his "good character, his age, [and] his bodily infirmity" (DLC:GW).

⁶¹ Nicola to GW, 24 July 1781, DLC:GW; Woelper to GW, 31 July 1781, DLC:GW.

⁶² GW to Nicola, 10 Aug. 1781, DLC:GW; GW to Alexander McDougall, 10 Aug. 1781, Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

⁶³ William Saffell, *Records of the Revolutionary War* (3d edition, 1894; reprint edition, Baltimore, 1969), 222.

⁶⁴ Nicola to GW, 4 Aug. 1781, DLC:GW. GW responded on 10 Aug. that "the Difficulties which you apprehend in their Duty & Subsistance at their present Station, I fancy will mostly vanish On Experience" (DLC:GW).

troops that were in them [emphasis added].”⁶⁵ Not surprisingly, by May 1782 Nicola had petitioned Washington to transfer the Invalid Corps back to Pennsylvania. For various reasons, Washington was unable to comply with Nicola’s request.⁶⁶

The challenges Nicola faced while at West Point marked the culmination of a series of disappointments and frustrations, both professional and personal, that he had suffered throughout the Revolutionary War. First, the soldiers under his command did not always behave like the distinguished veterans they were. In October 1777, for instance, Nicola ordered the arrest of Sergeant Major Jonathan Guy, who, in an attempt to desert to the British and “throw as many men as possible into their hands with his & their arms & accoutrements,” had “certainly embezzled some of the continental cloathing.”⁶⁷ In April 1778, Nicola was forced to deal with a rash of robberies committed by members of the Invalid Corps while it was stationed at Easton, Pennsylvania. “Some Invalides under the Command of Coll Nicholas,” a group of Easton residents informed Washington, “have Since behaved themselves very immodest, incivil and not like Soldiers, but Villainous & roguish; Especially of breaking open the Store houses and as the greatest Thiefes Stealing the Peoples Money & other Sundry Goods more out their Houses and breaking Several Locks of Store & Houses here.”⁶⁸

Second, Nicola was troubled by his inability to fill the ranks of the Invalid Corps. The lack of suitable officers was keenly felt. In December 1777, Nicola wrote Washington that without them he would not be able to “keep the men under proper discipline . . . which they well know.”⁶⁹ Four months later, Nicola lamented that he had “so few subjects fit to be made non commissioned officers that I am greatly distressed & obliged to do the duty of every office.” In addition, because of the “want of officers to try delinquents,” in the spring of 1778 Nicola asked Washington for the power to serve as both judge and jury when he was unable to procure enough officers to hold a regular court martial. Although Washington refused this request, he did authorize Nicola to detain officers from other units for a day or two to serve on his military tribunals.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ Howard R. Marraro, “Unpublished Letters of Colonel Nicola,” 278–79.

⁶⁶ GW replied on 11 May that he had not yet formalized his plans and that, in any case, a return to Pennsylvania “would subject the poor fellows to a very needless & tedious March” (GW to Nicola, 11 May 1782, DLC:GW).

⁶⁷ Nicola to GW, 6 Oct. 1777, DLC:GW.

⁶⁸ Nicola to GW, 12 April 1778, DLC:GW; Certificate of Easton, Pa., residents, 23 June 1778, inclosed in Michael de Kowats to GW, 26 June 1778, DLC:GW.

⁶⁹ Nicola to GW, 6 Dec. 1777, DLC:GW.

⁷⁰ Nicola to GW, 12 April 1778, DLC:GW; GW to Nicola, 14 April 1778, DLC:GW.

The shortage of enlisted men in the Invalid Corps was yet another problem facing Nicola. In late July 1778, Richard Peters relayed to Washington Nicola's complaint of "the great Inattention of the Officers commanding Regiments or Corps in Camp who repeatedly give Discharges from the Service to Men very capable of Duty in the Invalid Regiment."⁷¹ Washington had himself been somewhat culpable on this score. In March of that year, in fact, he had ordered that officers commanding brigades give those mustered out of the service "discharges either to return to their own home or to go into the Corps of Invalids *at the option of the men* [emphasis added]."⁷² After receiving Peters's message, Washington returned to his original insistence that no one be discharged from the Continental army without a certificate from a competent medical authority stating that "he is unfit to serve in the Corps of Invalids as well as in the field."⁷³ Notwithstanding such efforts, the corps continued to be woefully short of men. In May 1782, indeed, Nicola informed Washington that he had never had a sufficient number of troops under his command to bring four of his eight companies up to strength; the problem now, Nicola mused, was, ironically, an excess of officers, with twelve captains commanding four incomplete companies at Fishkill, New York, sixty men at Philadelphia, and thirty more at Boston.⁷⁴

The financial difficulties that had beset Nicola just prior to the Revolution followed him during his service in the Continental army as well. On 7 April 1779, Nicola petitioned the Pennsylvania supreme executive council for a pay raise because "by the depreciation of the paper currency & exorbitant rise of goods the pay is not sufficient to cloth him as an officer, and from the duty of his office he is obliged to reside constantly in the capital city where his expences are unavoidably greater than if he was in camp & his family in the country."⁷⁵ In August 1781, Nicola complained to Washington that because of "the badness of their pay," he and his fellow officers had trouble providing for themselves.⁷⁶ Nicola's finances were in such a precarious state that when the Pennsylvania supreme executive council resolved in early February 1782 to dismiss him "from the State service as Town Major, there being no duty at this time for such an officer," Nicola asked Rob-

⁷¹ Richard Peters to GW, 28 July 1778, DLC:GW.

⁷² General Orders, 13 Mar. 1778, DLC:GW.

⁷³ General Orders, 7 Aug. 1779, DLC:GW.

⁷⁴ Nicola to GW, 21 May 1782, DLC:GW.

⁷⁵ Nicola to the Pennsylvania Supreme Executive Council, 7 April 1779, PHarH: RG 27, Pennsylvania's Revolutionary Governments, 1775–1790; *Pa. Archives, Second Series*, 3:252.

⁷⁶ Nicola to GW, 14 Aug. 1781, DLC:GW.

ert Morris, the Continental superintendent of finance, if he would be willing to make up the monetary shortfall. Morris responded that Congress would look into the issue, but, considering the sorry state of the Continental finances, he could make no promises.⁷⁷

NICOLA AND WASHINGTON, 1782–83

With all of his experiences since joining the Continental army, both good and bad, very much in mind, on 22 May 1782, Nicola sat down to write a letter to Washington from Fishkill, New York. Before beginning, Nicola requested that Washington “suspend [his] opinion ‘till you go through the whole, & not judge of it by parts.” He wished as well, that as “some parts of what I say may not be strictly applicable to me . . . you will be pleased to omit me in idea where I cannot with propriety be introduced.” Much of what followed was quite familiar to Washington. In brief, Nicola argued that the “pecuniary rights” of the Continental army had been trampled on by a combination of ill-pay, depreciated currency, and speculation.

This gives us a dismal prospect for the time to come, & much reason to fear the future provision promised to officers [by Congress], and the settling & satisfying their & the men’s just demands will be little attended to, when our services are no longer wanted . . . we who have born the heat & labour of the day will be forgot and neglected by such as reap the benefits without suffering any of the hardships.

It should not be expected, Nicola reported, that the army would submit to such ill-treatment without a struggle.

From several conversations I have had with officers, & some I have overheard among soldiers, I believe it is generally intended not to separate after the peace ’till all grievances are redressed, engagements & promises fulfilled . . . God forbid we should ever think of involving that country we have, under your conduct & auspices, rescued from oppression, into a new scene of blood & confusion; but it cannot be expected we should forego claims on which our future subsistence & that of our families depend.

That said, Nicola moved on to his second theme. Stating forthrightly that, unlike many of his American contemporaries, he was no “violent admirer of a republican form of government,” Nicola discussed the histories of such earlier republics as Venice, Genoa, and

⁷⁷ *Pa. Archives, Colonial Records* 13:185; E. James Ferguson, John Catanzariti, et al., eds., *The Papers of Robert Morris, 1781–1784*, 9 vols. (Pittsburgh, 1973–99), 4:125–26.

Holland. The reasons why “their lustre” had “been of short duration” applied, in Nicola’s estimation, to the United States as well. None of them had been able to govern themselves efficiently. In the case of the Continental Congress, Nicola asked, has “it not evidently appeared that during the course of this war we have never been able to draw forth all the internal resources we are possessed of, and oppose or attack the enemy with our real vigour?” “It must not be concluded from this that I am a partisan for absolute monarchy,” Nicola wrote. He personally favored a system similar to that in existence in Great Britain, although even the British monarchical system had its defects. “Were elections annual, & confined to representatives for counties & a few large trading cities only . . . and had the king no command of money beyond what is requisite to the support of his family & court, suitable to the dignity of his station. . . . [and] nobility . . . limited, suppose not hereditary,” it would be much closer to Nicola’s idea of perfection.

Having laid out his political preferences in some detail, Nicola was now ready to “proceed to my scheme.” According to Nicola, Congress should compensate those Continental army veterans who had been paid in depreciated currency and pay those who had been forced by want to sell their certificates at two-thirds of their face value; the soldiers had received the other third, Nicola assumed, when the certificates had first been sold. Furthermore, Nicola argued that Congress should procure “a sufficient tract in some of the best of those fruitful & extensive countries to the west of our frontiers.” These lands were to be “formed into a distinct State under such mode of government as those military who choose to remove to it may agree on.” To ensure the success of this enterprise, Congress was to advance both one-third of the debt due to the veterans “to enable the settlers to buy tools for trades & husbandry, & some stock” and a further sum sufficient to carry the settlers through “the first harvest succeeding.”

Nicola had little doubt that “when the benefits of a mixed government are pointed out & duly considered,” it would “be readily adopted” in this new state and “that the same *abilities* which have lead us, through difficulties apparently unsurmountable by human power, to victory & glory, those *qualities* that have merited & obtained the universal esteem & veneration of an army, would be most likely to conduct & direct us in the smoother paths of peace [emphasis added].”

As “[s]ome people have so connected the ideas of tyranny & monarchy as to find it very difficult to separate them,” it might be necessary “to give the head of such a constitution as I propose, some title apparently more moderate” than king, but Nicola hoped that such would not be the case. Far from being threatened by this new monarchy, the

United States would be benefited “by having a savage & cruel enemy [the various hostile Indian tribes] seperated from their borders, by a body of veterans . . . securing the main body from danger.” Moreover, as Canada would most likely become an independent monarchy of its own at some point in the future, the settlers would be in a good position to protect the United States from a threat from the north as well. Although recognizing that “Republican bigots will certainly consider my opinions as heterodox, and the maintainer thereof as meriting fire & faggots,” Nicola was “persuaded I run no risk, & that, tho disapproved of, I need not apprehend their ever being disclosed to my prejudice.”⁷⁸

The tone of the reply Washington wrote to Nicola that same day indicates that he not only disapproved of Nicola’s “scheme,” but was deeply offended by it. After expressing his “great surprise & astonishment,” Washington remarked that “no occurrence in the course of the War, has given me more painful sensations than your information of there being such ideas existing in the Army as you have expressed.” Washington was “at a loss to conceive what part of my conduct could have given encouragement to an address which to me seems big with the greatest mischiefs that can befall my Country.” “If I am not deceived in the knowledge of myself,” Washington continued, “you could not have found a person to whom your schemes are more disagreeable.” While recognizing the problems facing the army and promising to do everything in his power “in a constitutional way” to solve them, Washington implored Nicola that if he had “any regard for your Country, concern for yourself or posterity—or respect for me, to banish these thoughts from your Mind & never communicate, as from yourself, or any one else, a sentiment of the like nature.” Finally, as an obvious, but rarely used, safety precaution, Washington had two of his aides-de-camp, David Humphreys and Jonathan Trumbull, attest that the copy of the letter that he retained for his files was an exact duplicate of that which he had sent to Nicola.⁷⁹

The receipt of this thunderbolt from his revered commander in chief caused Nicola to write an abject apology on the following day. He was “extremely unhappy that the liberty I have taken should be so highly disagreeable to your Excellency . . . nothing has ever affected me

⁷⁸ Nicola to GW, 22 May 1782, DLC:GW.

⁷⁹ GW to Nicola, 22 May 1782, DLC:GW. This act on GW’s part has been somewhat misunderstood. James Flexner, Burke Davis, Whitfield Bell, Harrison Clark, and Richard Brookhiser have all mistakenly assumed that GW did this so as to certify that his reply had been dispatched to Colonel Nicola (Flexner, *Washington in the American Revolution*, 491–92; Davis, *Washington and the American Revolution*, 450; Bell, “Lewis Nicola,” 7; Clark, *All Cloudless Glory* 2:10; Brookhiser, *Founding Father*, 41–42).

so much as your reproof.” Nicola asked Washington to attribute any errors he might have fallen into “more to weakness of judgment than corruptness of heart.” Like Washington, Nicola looked “on every person who endeavours to disturb the repose of his country as a villain,” and he insisted that “it shall be my future study to combate, as far as my abilities reach, every gleam of discontent.”⁸⁰

On 24 May, Nicola, who was still “[g]reatly oppressed in mind,” wrote Washington again in an attempt to justify his actions. In this letter he stated up front that “the idea of your thinking me capable of acting or abetting any villainy” was a mistake. Nicola emphasized that he had “neither been the broacher, or in any shape the encourager of the design not to separate at the peace ‘till all grievances are redressed, but have often heard it mentioned either directly or by hints.” That he had been

[d]eprived by misfortunes of that patrimony I was born to, and, with a numerous family, depending entirely on my military appointments . . . seeing his family often destitute of the common necessaries of life, have pierced my soul [and] . . . may have sowered my mind & warped my judgment . . . [but] the idea of occasioning any commotions in a country I lived in would be daggers in my breast.

Nicola concluded that “[h]owever wrong the sentiments I have disclosed to your Excellency may be, they cannot have done any mischief, as they have always remained locked up in my breast.”⁸¹

Four days later, on 28 May 1782, Nicola, who seems to have fully recovered his equanimity, justified his actions in even greater detail. Washington’s strong negative reaction to his original letter of 22 May had resulted, simply put, from a misunderstanding. Nicola admitted that his “inability to express [his] sentiments with sufficient perspecuity,” in essence, “so prejudiced your mind as to prevent attention to my request, that your Excellcy would judge of the whole together & not by detached parts.” Nicola remarked further that he was “neither an ediot or crazed, one or other of which must have been the case had I singled out your Excellency for the purpose of countenancing mutiny or treason.” His intention all along had been “not to promote but, as far as in me lay, prevent designs that may some time or other be carried into execution & occasion great mischief.” Because of his desire to leave his numerous children “with the fairest prospect of political felicity possible,” as soon as he had received word that Congress and some of the states were going to make land grants to the veterans of the Con-

⁸⁰ Nicola to GW, 23 May 1782, DLC:GW.

⁸¹ Nicola to GW, 24 May 1782, DLC:GW.

tinental army at the conclusion of the Revolutionary War, "I could not help forming the pleasing hopes they might be induced to allot them contiguous to each, with liberty of forming a distinct State under such form of government as those that chose to emigrate might prefer." As Nicola knew that "no person is more likely, by interest with Congress & influence with the army, to promote such a scheme, if approved of, than your Excellency, I took the liberty fully to disclose my thoughts to you & to you allone."⁸² Notwithstanding the force of Nicola's arguments in his letters of 23, 24, and 28 May 1782, no letter from Washington in reply has been found.

This is not to say that Washington shunned Nicola from this point forward, attempted to thwart his wishes, or tried to preclude him from future advancement within the Continental army. The opposite was in fact the case. Their relationship returned to what it had always been prior to 22 May 1782: professional, if not overly familiar. Nicola, for his part, quickly got over whatever nervousness he might have had about bringing his ideas to Washington's attention. Although apprehensively asking for explicit directions about the filling in of muster rolls on 3 June 1782 so as to "avoid future censure," Nicola, within two weeks, was happily "proposing some alterations & amendments in the Establishment" of the Invalid Corps to Washington.⁸³ In November 1782, Nicola, inflamed by a rumor that Benjamin Lincoln, the secretary at war, had proposed to dismiss the Invalid Corps from the Continental service because of the "miserable state in which the Regiment now is the very great expence which attends its being kept up and the very little services received from it," wrote Washington a strong letter of protest.⁸⁴ After discussing the financial benefits to the American cause of continuing to utilize those invalids who were still in a position to serve, Nicola contended that "Genl Lincoln's long continuance to the southward . . . have deprived him of opportunity to know personally what services the invalid regiment has rendered." "I can, with great propriety, assert," Nicola continued, "that, fighting & long marches excepted, no regiment has done more duty." Officers commanding "marching regiments" often declared to him "that their men, from seeing the duties & fatigues of the Invalids, dread being transferred" to it. Finally, Nicola asked Washington that if he decided that the corps should be disbanded, he would defer doing so until the fol-

⁸² Nicola to GW, 28 May 1782, DLC:GW.

⁸³ Nicola to GW, 3 June 1782, DLC:GW; GW to Benjamin Lincoln, 19 June 1782, DLC:GW.

⁸⁴ The quote is from Lincoln to John Hanson, 29 Oct. (DLC:GW), which Nicola forwarded to GW on 2 Dec. 1782.

lowing spring.⁸⁵ It was this final point, indeed, that Washington particularly emphasized in his letter to Lincoln passing along Nicola's objections.⁸⁶

This last crisis surmounted, the Invalid Corps settled down for the final winter of the Revolutionary War at West Point, Newburgh, Constitution Island, and Fishkill, New York. Although Washington argued in May 1783 that the Invalid Corps should be retained and that "[m]otives of humanity, Policy and justice will all combine to prevent their being disbanded," Congress ordered the corps dismissed in early May, a task that had been completed by the middle of June.⁸⁷ Between late June and the end of August 1783, Nicola slowly made his way back to Philadelphia. Once there, he joined other Continental army officers "in hopes of receiving the Commutation & other emoluments which they intend asking of Congress."⁸⁸ For several of these "emoluments," Nicola did not have to wait very long. On 4 November 1783 he "was employed as an agent in adjusting, and settling the accounts of his Corps."⁸⁹ After relinquishing that post on 1 June 1784, Nicola was hired by Congress for four and a half months to distribute certificates to the troops formerly under his command. Finally, pursuant to an act of Congress passed the previous September, Nicola was breveted to the rank of brigadier general on 27 November 1783.⁹⁰

NICOLA, CONTINENTAL DISCONTENT, AND THE "CONSPIRACY" AT NEWBURGH

As a postscript to our examination of the Nicola Affair, it is instructive to connect Nicola's letters with the wider issue of discontent within the Continental army during the final year of the war, culminating in the infamous "Newburgh Addresses" of March 1783. By doing so, we will be in a better position to gauge both the extent to which Nicola reflected the fears, frustrations, and aspirations of the officer corps as a

⁸⁵ Nicola to GW, 20 Nov. 1782, DLC:GW; see also, Nicola to GW, 2 Dec. 1782, DLC:GW.

⁸⁶ GW to Lincoln, 22 Nov. 1782, DLC:GW; Lincoln responded five days later that Nicola "quite misapprehends the design, and supposes a want of humanity" in his propositions to Congress (Lincoln to GW, 27 Nov. 1782, DLC:GW).

⁸⁷ GW's Sentiments on the Peace Establishment, 1 May 1783, DLC:GW; JCC 24:322–23. When the Invalid Corps was disbanded in the spring of 1783, a total of 22 officers and 272 privates were discharged (Saffell, *Records of the Revolutionary War*, 222–25).

⁸⁸ Baron von Steuben to GW, 29 Oct. 1783, DLC:GW. See also, Nicola, "Almanack."

⁸⁹ JCC 29:855.

⁹⁰ According to an act of 30 September 1783, all officers under the rank of major general who had served in the Continental army since 1777 were to be breveted one rank (JCC 25:632–33).

whole, and the ways in which his ideas diverged from those of his comrades-in-arms.

Just over a month after receiving Nicola's letter of 22 May, Washington received a letter from Major General James Mitchell Varnum of the Rhode Island militia. In it, Varnum complained of Congress's ineffectiveness under the Articles of Confederation and hypothesized that the situation would not improve

'till that baseless Fabric shall yield to some kind of Government, the principles of which may be correspondent to the Tone of the Passions. The Citizens at large are totally destitute of that Love of Equality which is absolutely requisite to support a democratic Republick: Avarice, Jealousy & Luxury controul their Feelings, & consequently, absolute Monarchy, or a military State, can alone rescue them from all the Horrors of Subjugation.⁹¹

Washington's response to Varnum, considering the pique he had recently displayed toward Nicola, was surprisingly mild. After commenting that "some Credit is due" to Congress and the states "for what they have done" and agreeing that "the conduct of the people at large is truly alarming," Washington informed Varnum that he could not "consent to view our situation in that distrest light in which you seem to do" and hoped that the "destructive passions, which I confess too generally pervade all Ranks, shall give place to that love of Freedom which first animated us in this Contest."⁹²

However placid he might have seemed on the surface, Washington was evidently greatly troubled by the information conveyed to him by Nicola, Varnum, and, presumably, others within the Continental establishment. On 2 October 1782, he wrote Secretary at War Benjamin Lincoln of "the dark side of our affairs . . . the discontents which, at this moment, prevail universally throughout the Army." Both officers and men decried "the total want of Money," the "heavy debts" they had incurred while fighting in the Continental army, "the distress of their Families," and "the prospect of Poverty & Misery before them." In addition, the officers denounced the stoppage of promotions and the withholding of commissions, among other things. "It is vain," Washington wrote, "to suppose that Military Men will acquiesce *contentedly* with bare Rations, when those in the Civil walk of life (unacquainted with half the hardships they endure) are regularly paid the emoluments of Office." Washington worried, furthermore, about the large number of men

⁹¹ James Mitchell Varnum to GW, 23 June 1782, DLC:GW.

⁹² GW to James Mitchell Varnum, 10 July 1782, DLC:GW.

about to be turned into the World, soured by penury & what they call the ingratitude of the Public, involved in debts, without one farthing of Money to carry them home, after having spent the flower of their days & many of them their patrimonies in establishing the freedom & Independence of their Country . . . without one thing to sooth their feelings, or brighten the gloomy prospects, I cannot avoid apprehending that a train of Evils will follow, of a very serious & distressing Nature.

Indeed, “you may rely upon it, the patience & long sufferance of this Army are almost exhausted, and . . . there never was so great a spirit of Discontent as at this instant.” While on active campaign, Washington did not fear “Acts of Outrage,” but he was less certain of what would happen once the troops entered winter quarters at Newburgh, New York.⁹³

At first, Continental discontent followed purely legal channels. In late December 1782, Major General Alexander McDougall and Colonels John Brooks and Matthias Ogden arrived in Philadelphia armed with a petition drafted by one of Washington’s closest confidants, Henry Knox. Through a combination of moral admonitions and scarcely veiled threats that if Congress did not act the army might mutiny, they attempted to secure both back pay and the half-pay pensions that Congress had promised the army in 1780. If the latter proved politically impossible, the officers were willing to accept a commutation of the pensions into an equivalent lump-sum payment. Although Congress agreed in late January 1783 to leave two of the army’s primary claims—pay and the settlement of unpaid salaries—to the discretion of the superintendent of finance, Robert Morris, the officers were unable to effect the passage of either pensions or commutation at this time. As news of their failure filtered back to the army at Newburgh, discontent within the officer corps rose to a fever pitch.

In mid-February, Alexander Hamilton, one of Washington’s former aides-de-camp and presently a member of the Continental Congress, wrote from Philadelphia to report, like Nicola before him, that “[i]f the war continues it would seem that the army must in June subsist itself *to defend the country*; if peace should take place it *will* subsist itself *to procure justice to itself*.” Recognizing that a realization was growing among the soldiers of the Continental army that were they to “lay down their arms, they will part with the means of obtaining justice,” Hamilton contended that Washington must use his influence “to keep a *complaining and suffering army* within the bounds of modera-

⁹³ GW to Benjamin Lincoln, 2 Oct. 1782, DLC:GW.

tion” and to “guide the torrent, and bring order perhaps even good, out of confusion.” The real danger, Hamilton continued, was that Washington’s ability to control events might be undercut by the idea “propagated in the army that delicacy carried to an extreme prevents your espousing its interests with sufficient warmth.”⁹⁴

Washington’s response to Hamilton of 4 March 1783, like his earlier reply to Varnum, reveals an equanimity of temper noticeably missing from his letter of 22 May 1782 to Nicola. Although agreeing with Hamilton that “a political dissolution” of the army “would at this day be productive of Civil commotions & end in blood,” Washington believed that the “States cannot, surely, be so devoid of common sense—common honesty—& common policy—as to refuse their aid on a full, clear, & candid representation of facts from Congress.” He disagreed with Hamilton, however, that the Continental army would exceed “the bounds of reason & moderation” whatever happened, and he hotly denied that he had not done enough to press the army’s case before Congress.⁹⁵

Washington’s confidence that the army would continue to follow a moderate path was severely shaken by the dissemination and immediate popularity of an anonymous address to his officers on 10 March 1783. Written by Major John Armstrong and copied by Captain Christopher Richmond, both aides to Major General Horatio Gates, the address called on the officers to meet so as to write an even more strongly worded ultimatum to Congress, to “suspect the man who would advise to more moderation and longer forbearance,”⁹⁶ and, if their demands remained unanswered, that the army “has its alternative—if peace, that nothing shall separate you from your Arms but Death—If War—that courting the Auspices, and inviting the direction of your Illustrious Leader, you will retire to some unsettled Country, Smile in your Turn, and ‘mock when their [Congress’s] fear cometh on.’”⁹⁷

Faced with the prospect of the military slipping out of his control, Washington reacted quickly. After expressing his “disapprobation of such disorderly proceedings” in his general orders of 11 March, Washington called a meeting for Saturday, 15 March 1783, “to hear the report of the Committee of the Army to Congress” and deliberate on “what further measures ought to be adopted as most rational and best calculated to attain the just and important object in view.”⁹⁸ Washing-

⁹⁴ Alexander Hamilton to GW, 13 Feb. 1783, DLC:GW.

⁹⁵ GW to Alexander Hamilton, 4 Mar. 1783, DLC: Alexander Hamilton Papers.

⁹⁶ This phrase is commonly thought to refer to Washington.

⁹⁷ DNA: PCC, item 152.

⁹⁸ General Orders, 11 Mar. 1783, DLC:GW.

ton's surprise appearance at this meeting, his public condemnation of the alternative "of either deserting your country, in the extremest hour of distress, or turning our arms against it," and his castigation of the author of the inflammatory address as "an insidious foe," perhaps "an emissary . . . from New-York, plotting the ruin of [the Revolution] . . . by sowing the seeds of discord and separation between the civil and military powers of the continent"⁹⁹ swung the officer corps over to his side. As he had earlier written to Hamilton, Washington stated his firm belief that Congress would do right by the army and promised that he would continue to do everything in his power to bring the army's case before that body. In conclusion, Washington exhorted his officers,

as you value your own sacred honor, as you respect the rights of humanity, and as you regard the military and national character of America, to express your utmost horror and detestation of the man, who wishes under any specious pretences, to overturn the liberties of our country, and who wickedly attempts to open the flood-gates of civil discord, and deluge our rising empire in blood.¹⁰⁰

Immediately after Washington's departure from the hall, the assembled officers resolved that they would not choose the path of dishonor; that they had confidence in Congress and in the United States; that Washington should write to Congress on their behalf; and that they had only disdain for the "infamous propositions contained in the late anonymous address to the officers of the army."¹⁰¹

Whether one believes, like Professor Richard H. Kohn, that a group of congressional nationalists fomented and then ensured the failure of a real mutiny, even a nascent coup d'état, at Newburgh as a way to pressure Congress to strengthen the central government¹⁰² or, alternatively, that Horatio Gates and his clique of officers sought through the use of, admittedly, extreme rhetoric merely to ensure that the army would be fairly compensated for its past services,¹⁰³ the differences

⁹⁹ Report of the Convention of Officers, 15 Mar. 1783, printed in *A Collection of Papers, Relative to Half-Pay and Commutation of Half-Pay Granted by Congress to the Officers of the Army* (Fishkill, N.Y., 1783), 25–26.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁰² See Richard H. Kohn's "Inside History of the Newburgh Conspiracy: America and the Coup D'Etat," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 27 (April 1970): 187–220; and chapter 2 of *Eagle and Sword: The Federalists and the Creation of the Military Establishment in America, 1783–1802* (New York, 1975).

¹⁰³ See, for instance, Paul David Nelson, "Horatio Gates at Newburgh, 1783: A Misunderstood Role," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 29 (January 1972): 143–58; and C. Edward Skeen, "The Newburgh Conspiracy Reconsidered," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 31 (April 1974): 273–98.

between the Nicola Affair and the events at Newburgh of March 1783 are striking. Nicola advocated neither a mutiny, passive or otherwise, nor a coup d'état, nor even the use of the Continental army as a pressure group to frighten Congress into redressing its grievances. He did not publish his "scheme" or, apparently, attempt to convince other members of the Continental establishment to support it. When Washington told him that he would do well to keep his political ideas to himself, Nicola took his commander's admonition very much to heart. Nor has Nicola ever been associated, in any capacity, with the events at Newburgh of March 1783. For these reasons, it is understandable that when the Reverend William Gordon asked Washington six and a half years after the fact for permission to publish Washington's letter to Nicola of 22 May 1782, suppressing only Nicola's name, Washington intimated that he

had quite forgot the *private transaction*, to which you allude: nor could I recall it to mind without much difficulty. If I now recollect rightly (and I believe I do, though there were several applications made to me) I am conscious of only having done my duty. As no particular credit is due for that, and as no good, but some harm might result from the publication—the letter, in my Judgment, had better remain in concealment [emphasis added].¹⁰⁴

NICOLA'S LATER CAREER, 1783–1807

Following the Revolutionary War, Nicola by no means drifted off into retirement. He spent much of 1784, as we have seen, settling the accounts of the Invalid Corps. Nicola joined the Pennsylvania Society of the Cincinnati and was, in 1784, elected to its standing committee. In the mid-1780s he attempted to start a stage line connecting Philadelphia and Reading, Pennsylvania, and, after the legislature refused to grant him "an exclusive right for the term of ten years, under certain regulations," thought briefly of opening an inn.¹⁰⁵ By December 1788, Nicola had been appointed commandant of the Pennsylvania Invalid Corps and had accepted, largely for financial reasons, responsibility for running the Philadelphia workhouse.¹⁰⁶ This last appointment was by no means entirely to Nicola's taste. In January 1789 he wrote Nicholas Biddle that "the propensity of the prisoners, the women particularly, to dirt is so great [the rooms] generally have been littered & dirty in an

¹⁰⁴ GW to William Gordon, 23 Dec. 1788, DLC:GW; see also William Gordon to GW, 24 Sept. 1788, DLC:GW.

¹⁰⁵ See *Pennsylvania Gazette* (Philadelphia), 30 Nov. 1785; Bell, "Lewis Nicola," 8.

¹⁰⁶ *Pa. Archives, Colonial Records* 15:633.

hour or two after” being cleaned.¹⁰⁷ In October of that same year, Nicola wrote President George Washington that having been “obliged to sell my certificates at three fourths loss” and “miscarrying” in his other business schemes, “I was reduced to the necessity of accepting an employment degrading to that I had the honour to fill under the United States, and more immediately under your command.” Having served as keeper of the Philadelphia workhouse for nearly a year, Nicola had determined “that the income is inadequate to providing a maintenance & enabling me to discharge some pecuniary obligations I am under.” In consequence, he petitioned Washington to appoint him to the federal post concerned with the “inspecting & paying the Pensioners” in the state of Pennsylvania.¹⁰⁸ Although unable, or, perhaps, unwilling, to find a place for Nicola within the federal establishment, Washington did appoint Nicola’s son James an ensign in the U.S. Army in May 1794.¹⁰⁹ In 1793, Nicola was appointed inspector of the Philadelphia city militia brigade, a position he held until August 1798. Finally, during the Whiskey Rebellion of 1794, Nicola resumed his position as Philadelphia’s barrack master and town major.¹¹⁰

All the while, Nicola remained active in the American Philosophical Society, where he served several more terms as curator, and he continued to research and write on a host of different subjects.¹¹¹ In 1791, Nicola published in Philadelphia a controversial pamphlet entitled *The Divinity of Jesus Christ Considered, From Scripture evidences*. Having studied the writings of Dr. Joseph Priestley, carefully read both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, and listened to the sermons of various religious authorities, Nicola had come to the conclusion that there was no solid basis in Scripture for Christ’s divinity. Realizing the unpopularity of such views, Nicola first thought to print a few copies for distribution to local religious leaders for their comments. Unfortunately, Nicola determined this course to be prohibitively expensive. He also considered publishing his pamphlet anonymously, but ultimately decided to put it out under his own name. Finally, in September 1794, Nicola, having “Casually” gone into a shop where there were “some

¹⁰⁷ *Pa. Archives, First Series*, 11:536.

¹⁰⁸ Nicola to GW, 10 Oct. 1789, DLC:GW. Nicola served as keeper of the Philadelphia workhouse until at least 1794 (James Hardie, *The Philadelphia Directory and Register* [Philadelphia, 1794]).

¹⁰⁹ See GW to U.S. Senate, 9 May 1794, DNA: RG 46, Third Congress, 1793–1795, Records of Executive Proceedings, President’s Messages—Executive Nominations; Nicola to GW, 10 May 1794, DNA: RG 59, Miscellaneous Letters.

¹¹⁰ *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 46:262–63, 47:265–66, 269–70; Bell, “Lewis Nicola,” 8.

¹¹¹ *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 46:269–70.

Tent Poles which I was told were for your Excels use,” submitted to the president his proposal for a new type of tent.¹¹²

Nicola retired from public service in 1798 at the age of eighty-one. His second wife having passed away the previous year, he moved to Alexandria, Virginia, so as to be near one of his daughters. Financial difficulties continued to pursue him, and upon his death on 9 August 1807 Nicola’s personal estate, apart from his watch and seal and his bed and bedclothes, was valued at a mere fifty-four dollars. Worried, with some reason, that he would be unable to provide himself with a decent burial, Nicola added a codicil to his will on 26 January 1807 that “any deficiency I presume the Cincinnati society will make good.”¹¹³

CONCLUSIONS

Several useful conclusions may be drawn from a historical examination of the Nicola Affair. First, historians have often been far too respectful of tales of long and distinguished lineage. Misinterpretations, misleading statements, and corrupted texts have a tendency to live on through their careless repetition by successive generations of writers. Turning a critical eye toward the work of one’s predecessors can weed many mistakes out of the historical record (without, it is hoped, injecting too many new ones). Second, historians have not always been wary enough of stories that appear tailor-made for their subjects, particularly when the source of that story is another secondary account. The thought of George Washington selflessly refusing the offer of a “crown” at the close of the Revolutionary War is so appealing, both to readers and writers of history, that its exclusion from the record would seem almost criminal. Third, biographers have not always treated fairly figures of secondary importance to the life of their primary subject. This task is, of course, often a difficult one, especially when the object of one’s study is a man of great stature, manifold talents, and unimpeachable integrity like George Washington. Although biographers of our first president should not be expected to provide an extensive treatment of Lewis Nicola’s life and career, if they are going to tar him as a monarchist willing to overthrow the democratically elected government of the United States, they should at least take the trouble to understand his side of the story and give an unbiased account of his motivations and actions.

¹¹² Nicola to GW, 20 Sept. 1794, Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union.

¹¹³ Bell, “Lewis Nicola,” 8.

That historians have not done so is attributable to one simple fact: they have not read the letters that Nicola wrote to Washington on 22, 23, 24, and 28 May 1782. If they had, they would have known that Nicola was only speaking for himself; that he was not advocating the overthrow of the government of the United States, but the establishment of a new state on its western border; and that he did not offer Washington a crown directly. Part of the reason for their unwillingness to examine the pertinent documents has been indicated above. They already “knew” what was in the letters from what other historians had written about them. Besides, it was the powerful image of Washington’s refusal to be crowned George I that was important in their estimation, not Nicola’s “offer.” Unfortunately, the documentary editing community has seen little reason to differ from this interpretation. Washington’s brief response to Nicola of 22 May 1782 has been published numerous times since the 1830s. Nicola’s long letter of that same date has, on the other hand, long languished in manuscript form in the George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. That historians often choose, or are forced, to rely upon printed editions of manuscript sources when they are available made the prospect even more remote that the Nicola Affair would receive the sort of balanced treatment it deserves. This situation is in the process of being remedied. The modern edition of the *Papers of George Washington* published by the University Press of Virginia will, when complete, present every extant letter written by and to our first president. It is to be hoped that by presenting both sides of Washington’s correspondence in an easily accessible format, the *Papers of George Washington* will help to perfect our understanding of Washington, his times, and, as in the case of Lewis Nicola, his lesser known contemporaries.