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A Letter from Alexander von Humboldt to Joseph Albert Wright – Archival Traces

ABSTRACT

A few months before his death, A. v. Humboldt attended the celebration in honor of the 127th birthday of George Washington at the US legation in Berlin. A letter to the American Envoy, Joseph A. Wright (1810–1867), underlines Humboldt's admiration for the first president of the United States. At the same time Humboldt asked the diplomat to mail a letter to the German-American Bernard Moses (1832–1897) in Clinton, Louisiana, who had named his son Alexander Humboldt Moses (grave on the Hebrew Rest Cemetery #2 in New Orleans, burial plot A, 12, 5). It appears to be possible that the Moses family still owns Humboldt's letter.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Wenige Monate vor seinem Tod besuchte A. v. Humboldt die Feier zu Ehren des 127. Geburtstages von George Washington an der Gesandtschaft der Vereinigten Staaten in Berlin. Ein Brief an den Gesandten, Joseph A. Wright (1810–1867), betonte Humboldts Bewunderung für den ersten Präsidenten der Vereinten Staaten. Gleichzeitig bat Humboldt den Diplomaten um die Beförderung eines Briefes an den Deutschamerikaner Bernard Moses (1832–1897) in Clinton, Louisiana, der seinen Sohn Alexander Humboldt Moses (Grab auf dem Hebrew Rest Cemetery #2 in New Orleans, Grabstelle A, 12, 5) genannt hat.

RESUMEN

Unos meses antes de su muerte, A. v. Humboldt asistió a la celebración en honor al 127^º cumpleaños de George Washington en la legación estadounidense en Berlín. Una carta al delegado estadounidense, Joseph A. Wright (1810–1867), subraya la admiración de Humboldt por el primer presidente de los Estados Unidos. Al mismo tiempo, Humboldt le pidió al diplomático que enviara una carta al germano-estadounidense Bernard Moses (1832–1897) en Clinton, Louisiana, quien había puesto a su hijo, el nombre de Alexander Humboldt Moses (tumba en el cementerio Hebrew Rest número 2 en Nueva Orleans, lugar de enteramiento: A, 12, 5).



In February 1859, the nearly 90-year-old Alexander von Humboldt sent a diplomatic letter to Joseph Albert Wright, the United States Envoy to Prussia in Berlin.¹ Born in 1810, the American jurist had already enjoyed a successful political career when President James Buchanan appointed him to this diplomatic position in 1857. Wright had spent several years as a U.S. Congressman and as a member of the Indiana House of Representatives as well as the Indiana State Senate. In 1849, he was elected the 10th Governor of his home state, which had been founded in 1816.

Here is the full text of Humboldt's letter in the French original and in English translation (figure 1):

[Added in pencil in different handwriting:] ALS.² to the American Minister at Berlin

Mon cher et respectable Ministre,

Je ne saurais exprimer à Votre Excellence assez vivement la reconnaissance que je Lui dois de l'honneur d'avoir pu assister à la fête splendide disposée avec autant de goût que d'intelligence à l'honneur de la fête de Général Washington. J'ai été heureux d'avoir pu boire à la santé du seul grand homme des tems modernes et « loin d'être admiré seulement comme un météore d'une admiration transitoire a été le fondateur de généreuses, nobles et libres institutions. » Le souvenir de cette journée restera d'autant plus longtems gravé dans ma mémoire, qu'ami intime du Général Lafayette³ j'ai pu recueillir tant de particularités sur cet homme illustre et modeste que Vous regardez comme le Père de la Patrie.

Agréez je Vous supplie, Monsieur le Ministre, l'hommage de l'affectionné dévouement avec lequel j'ai l'honneur d'être

De V[otre] E[xcellence]

le t[rès] h[umble] et t[rès] ob[éissant] serviteur

AlHumboldt

mercredi

Daignez faire jeter à la poste la lettre ci jointe. Un juif de Bavière M[onsieur] Moses à Clinton a nommé son fils Alexander Humboldt Moses et demande une ligne de ma main qui dit-il fera son bonheur!

[Added in pencil in different handwriting:] Feby 15. 1859 (Nearly 90 years old)

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- 1 Autograph letter signed: Hamburg, Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Carl von Ossietzky, Handschriftenabt., LA: Humboldt, Friedrich Wilhelm Heinrich Alexander von: 7–8. Publication with the kind permission of the library.
 - 2 Autograph letter signed.
 - 3 In: Paris, Humboldt met the Marquis de Lafayette who had participated in the American War of Independence, <https://edition-humboldt.de/chronologie/index.xql?searchTerms=Lafayette&jahr=> [last visit: June 17, 2021].

Translation:

[Added in pencil in different handwriting:] ALS. to the

American Minister at Berlin

My dear and esteemed Mr. Envoy,

I cannot express to your Excellency vigorously enough the gratitude I owe Him for the honor to have been able to participate in the splendid festivity arranged in honor of General Washington with just as much taste and as good sense. I was happy to have been able to drink to the health of the singular great man of modern times, someone who, "far indeed from being admired just in passing like a meteor, was the founder of generous, noble, and free institutions." The memory of this day will remain imprinted upon my mind all the longer because, as a close friend of General Lafayette's, I have been able to collect so many particularities about this famous and humble man whom you regard as the father of your country.

Accept, I beg you, Mr. Envoy, the expression of my respectful fondness, which allows me the honor to be

Your Excellency's

most humble and most obedient servant

AlHumboldt

Wednesday

Please be so kind as to drop the enclosed letter in the mail. A Jew from Bavaria, Mr. Moses from Clinton, has named his son Alexander Humboldt Moses and asks for a line in my handwriting that, as he puts it, will bring him luck!

[In different handwriting:] 15 February 1859 (Nearly 90 years old)

Humboldt had apparently attended a celebration in honor of George Washington's 127th birthday on February 22, 1859, a Tuesday. It is fair to assume that the commemorative event at the Berlin legation took place on that very day.⁴ Humboldt dated his letter to the Envoy Wednesday, most likely the day after the celebration. The date of February 15 (also a Tuesday) written on the letter in pencil, probably refers to the day when Humboldt had received the invitation.

The birthday celebration for George Washington at the U.S. legation in Berlin was most likely one of the last larger social events that Humboldt attended; he died on May 6, 1859. In his dispatch to Lewis Cass, the Foreign Secretary of the United States, Wright wrote the following day:

4 Humboldt had jotted down the address of the Legation below the name of J. A. Wright in his address book: Dorotheenstrasse 54 (see page 44r). The Berlin Directory for 1858 included this as the address of the U.S. Legation (p. 513).

The great, good and venerated Humboldt is no more! He retained his wonderful mental faculties to the last; yesterday afternoon at half past two o'clock, without a struggle, his spirit passed from the earth. The kindness of Baron von Humboldt to the numerous American citizens who have called upon him, and to the undersigned, has been unbounded; which I have ever regarded as a tribute to our Country.⁵

On the same day, Wright also spoke at a meeting of the Berlin Geographic Society:

From his [Humboldt's] uniform kindness to all Americans, his association with our Institutions in their infancy, and the deep interest he ever manifested in our success, we almost feel he was one of us. Two months ago, mingling with seventy of our countrymen on the anniversary of the Father of our common country, with the folds of our lovely flag of our united Republic, the stars and stripes encircling his manly brow, he said: "I am half an American."⁶

At the end of his expedition to the Americas, Humboldt had traveled to Philadelphia and Washington in May and June 1804, and he had also visited Mount Vernon, Washington's erstwhile home. Since then, Humboldt had cultivated personal and written contacts with numerous U.S. Americans. While Humboldt's correspondence with Thomas Jefferson is often mentioned and has been edited and widely interpreted, Humboldt's closest American interlocutor was in fact Albert Gallatin, who represented his country as envoy in Paris from 1816 to 1823. Yet another source of current information about the United States, one that has almost been forgotten today, was the Irish-American diplomat and author David Bailie Warden.

Humboldt admired the United States as a polity that had freed itself from the yoke of colonial rule. Once the diplomatic relations between the United States and Prussia had been restored in 1835⁷, he sought and found personal contact to American diplomats.⁸ In his private address book, we encounter the names of Daniel Dewey Barnard, Andrew Jackson Donelson, Theodore Sedgwick Fay, Peter Dumont Vroom, and of course Joseph Albert Wright. Humboldt used these personal contacts primarily to cultivate and promote transatlantic scientific and scholarly exchanges. For the American diplomats, the gregarious Prussian intellectual was a fountain of information. Although Humboldt could not and did not wish to leak any state secrets, he was able to communicate impressions of the political atmosphere at the Prussian court. But for critical comments about the spread of slavery in the U.S., which, as he feared, would eventually

5 *Alexander von Humboldt und die Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika. Briefwechsel.* Ed. Ingo Schwarz. Berlin 2004, p. 574.

6 Wright, Joseph Albert: [Address on the occasion of the death of Alexander von Humboldt at the meeting of the Geographical Society in Berlin on May 7, 1859]. In: *Zeitschrift für Allgemeine Erdkunde*, Vol. 6, new series, Berlin 1859, p. 415.

7 From 1797 to 1801 John Quincy Adams served as U.S. Minister Resident to Prussia. Only in 1835 Henry Wheaton came to Berlin as Chargé d'Affaires.

8 See Schwarz, Ingo: "Alexander von Humboldt und die Gesandtschaft der Vereinigten Staaten in Berlin." In: *Alexander von Humboldt in Berlin. Sein Einfluß auf die Entwicklung der Wissenschaften. Beiträge zu einem Symposium.* Ed. Jürgen Hamel, Eberhard Knobloch, and Herbert Pieper. Augsburg 2003, pp. 237–251.

tear apart the union,⁹ Humboldt seemed to have preferred different channels, such as personal letters. At least this is the impression his correspondence creates.

For many American immigrants of German origin, Alexander von Humboldt was an icon, a man with whom to identify. Even today, memorials in New York City, Philadelphia, St. Louis¹⁰ as well as place names in Iowa, Nebraska, Minnesota, Arizona¹¹ and elsewhere testify to the popularity of the Prussian traveler and scholar in the United States. It is therefore not surprising that a German-American would call his son Alexander Humboldt, as we see in the postscript to the above letter to Wright. But who is this “juif de Bavière” by the name of Moses? An internet search brought quick answers. The Hebrew Rest Cemetery #2 in New Orleans (burial plot A, 12, 5), is the place of the grave of an Alexander Humboldt Moses, born on January 16, 1860 in Clinton, Louisiana. He died on February 11, 1948.¹² His father is buried in the Hebrew Rest Cemetery (burial plot 4, 4, 12) in New Orleans: Bernard Moses, born on February 7, 1832 in Neuleiningen, district Bad Dürkheim in Rhenish Palatinate, a region that had been part of the Kingdom of Bavaria since 1816. Bernard Moses died on December 20, 1897 in New Orleans.¹³ These clues support the guess that Bernard Moses was the one who had asked Humboldt for “a few handwritten words” from the man after whom he had named his son. What is puzzling, however, is the birth year on Alexander Humboldt Moses’s gravestone, since the letter Bernard Moses addressed to Humboldt from Clinton must have been written at the beginning of 1859. Is it possible, then, that the birth year 1860 on the gravestone is an error, or was there perhaps another Alexander Humboldt Moses who was born in 1859 in Clinton, Louisiana? The answer to this question will require further research. An equally open question is whether the letter in which Humboldt replied to Mr. Moses might still be among papers owned by the latter’s family. An inquiry sent to the Jewish Community in New Orleans has thus far not yielded any results.

The story of Humboldt’s letter to Wright from February 1859 does, however, continue, because there is a cover letter in the archive of the State and University Library in Hamburg.¹⁴ The letter reads as follows (figure 2):

9 Compare Schwarz, Ingo: “‘Shelter for a Reasonable Freedom’ or ‘Cartesian Vortex.’ Aspects of Alexander von Humboldt’s relations to the United States of America.” In: *Debate y Perspectivas*, Madrid, no 1 (2000), pp. 169–182, <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=1410866> [last visit: June 17, 2021].

10 See Daum, Andreas W.: “Nation, Naturforschung und Monument. Humboldt-Denkmäler in Deutschland und den USA.” In: *Die Kunst der Geschichte. Historiographie, Ästhetik, Erzählung*. Ed. Martin Baumeister, Moritz Föllmer and Philipp Müller. Göttingen 2009, pp. 99–124.

11 In 2004, the town of Humboldt, Arizona, together with the adjacent town of Dewey, was incorporated as Dewey-Humboldt.

12 <https://de.findagrave.com/memorial/140351469/alexander-humboldt-moses> [last visit: June 17, 2021].

13 <https://de.findagrave.com/memorial/138312078/bernard-moses> [last visit: June 17, 2021].

14 Autograph letter signed: Hamburg, Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Carl von Ossietzky, Handschriftenabt., LA: Humboldt, Friedrich Wilhelm Heinrich Alexander von: 8a. Publication with the kind permission of the library.

Indianapolis Dec 18 1863

Lang & Anderson Esq
Cincinnati

Dear Sir

Enclosed I have

you (for the benefit of the Sanitary Fair) a letter,
written by the late Baron von Humboldt
to my father Joseph A. Wright.

The letter was prompted by having been
present at a dinner given at the U. S. Legation
in celebration of Washington's birth-day.

The letter was written but a few months before
his death.

May I ask you to have the letter to the Committee
on autographs.

Yours Truly
John C. Wright

Fig. 2. Letter from John C. Wright concerning Humboldt's letter to Joseph A. Wright.

Larz Anderson Esquire
Cincinnati

Dear Sir

Enclosed I hand you (for the benefit of the Sanitary Fair) a letter, written by the late Baron Von Humboldt to my father Joseph A[lbert] Wright.

The letter was prompted by having been present at a dinner given at the U.S. Legation in celebration of Washington's birth-day.

The letter was written but a few months before his death.

May I ask you to hand the letter to the Committee on autographs.

Yours truly

John C Wright

John C. Wright, born in 1833¹⁵, indicates in his note to a citizen of Cincinnati that Humboldt's letter was to be auctioned "for the benefit of the Sanitary Fair," i. e., the Great Western Sanitary Fair that the Cincinnati Branch of the U.S. Sanitary Commission held between December 21, 1863 and January 4, 1864 to raise funds for the care of sick and wounded Union veterans of the Civil War. A total of 824 coins, medals, and autographs had been donated and were auctioned off on March 15, 1864. The *Catalogue of a large collection of autographs, coins, medals, etc., donated to the Great Western Sanitary Fair*¹⁶ includes Humboldt's letter to Joseph Albert Wright on page 14 as number 279. Here, the letter is erroneously dated February 7, 1859. We do not know who acquired the letter at the auction and how it ended up in the collection of the State and University Library in Hamburg.

The story of an inconspicuous, hard-to-decipher letter from the aged Prussian explorer and scientist to an American statesman teaches us that even letters can have their own lives and destinies. Some of the questions that such documents raise are comparatively easily solved, as we have seen, while others remain shrouded in the darker recesses of history, possibly forever. Either way, letters such as this one keep alive the memory of people – one compelling reason for researching Alexander von Humboldt's correspondence.

15 See: <https://de.findagrave.com/memorial/91997610/john-c.-wright>, [last visit: June 17, 2021].

16 See: <https://archive.org/details/catalogueoflarge00grea/mode/1up>, [last visit: June 17, 2021].