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## A Short Letter by Humboldt to Jefferson

Reinhard Andress

*Loyola University Chicago*, [randress@luc.edu](mailto:randress@luc.edu)

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# A Short Letter by Humboldt to Jefferson

REINHARD ADDRESS

*Loyola University, Chicago*

**ABSTRACT** At the tail end of his monumental trip of exploration and scientific discovery through Latin America from 1799 to 1804, the German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt visited President Thomas Jefferson in Washington. United by their common interests in the Enlightenment, they began a correspondence that endured until 1825. This contribution discusses a letter of 1811 by Humboldt to the former president, hitherto unpublished in English. Aside from closing a gap in their correspondence, the letter, although short, offers an illuminating insight into Humboldt's personal, political, and scientific networks, which included such figures as Abbé José Correia da Serra and Joel Barlow, who were involved in his simple request for tobacco and seeds.

The 1911 endowment of the American business magnate Edward Ayer (1841–1927) to the Newberry Library in Chicago contains a short letter written by Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859). A comparison of the handwriting makes the document readily attributable to the German explorer and naturalist, especially the characteristically slightly slanted lines that were a consequence of his writing on his knee, a habit Humboldt had acquired during his Latin American trip. Lacking an addressee, the letter consists of the following text (see figure 1):

Pour ne pas ouvrir une longue lettre que j'ai eu l'honneur de Vous adresser par l'entremise de Mr Correa, j'ose Vous écrire une seconde fois, pour Vous incommoder d'une prière. Auriez-Vous la grâce, Monsieur, de m'envoyer pour Monsieur Barlow dix livres de graines de tabac de Virginie et 4 livres de tabac de Maryland. C'est un cadeau de la plus haute importance pour moi. Daignez agréer l'assurance réitérée de mon attachement respectueux et de ma vénération profonde.

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Humboldt.

Paris  
à l'Observatoire  
Rue St Jacques  
ce 26 Dec  
1811<sup>1</sup>

It can now be established that the letter was formulated as a kind of postscript to a longer missive Humboldt had penned to Thomas Jefferson six days earlier. Jefferson's response, written in English on December 6, 1813, acknowledges receipt of both letters and includes a promise to send the tobacco and seeds, thus conclusively identifying the addressee of the short communication that for over one hundred years has been buried in the Newberry Library's archives.<sup>2</sup> My recent piece for a German-language publication dedicated to Humboldt studies explains in greater detail the historical context and significance of the letter, a primary source that also merits consideration by readers of *Early American Studies*.<sup>3</sup>

Near the end of his voyage to the Americas (1799–1804), Humboldt visited President Jefferson in Washington, where they engaged in a lively exchange about a host of matters connected with their mutual scientific, social, and political interests, as would have befitted two such luminaries of the Enlightenment. More specifically, and in light of his recent purchase of the Louisiana Territory and its disputed border with Mexico, Jefferson was

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1. In order not to open a long letter I had the honor of addressing you through the intervention of Mr Correa, I dare write to you a second time to bother you with a request. Would you be so kind, Monsieur, as to send me through Monsieur Barlow ten pounds of tobacco seeds from Virginia and 4 pounds of tobacco from Maryland. It is a gift of the utmost importance to me. Please accept the repeated assurance of my respectful devotion and of my profound veneration. Humboldt.

Paris  
The Observatory  
Rue St Jacques  
this 26th of December  
1811

2. Ingo Schwarz, ed., *Alexander von Humboldt und die Vereinigten Staaten. Briefwechsel. Beiträge zu Alexander-von-Humboldt-Forschung*, vol. 19 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2004), 130.

3. Reinhard Andress, "Eine Bitte an Thomas Jefferson um Tabaksamen und Tabak: Ein unveröffentlichter Brief Alexander von Humboldts," *International Review for Humboldtian Studies* 17, no. 32 (2016), [www.hin-online.de/index.php/hin/article/view/229/433](http://www.hin-online.de/index.php/hin/article/view/229/433).

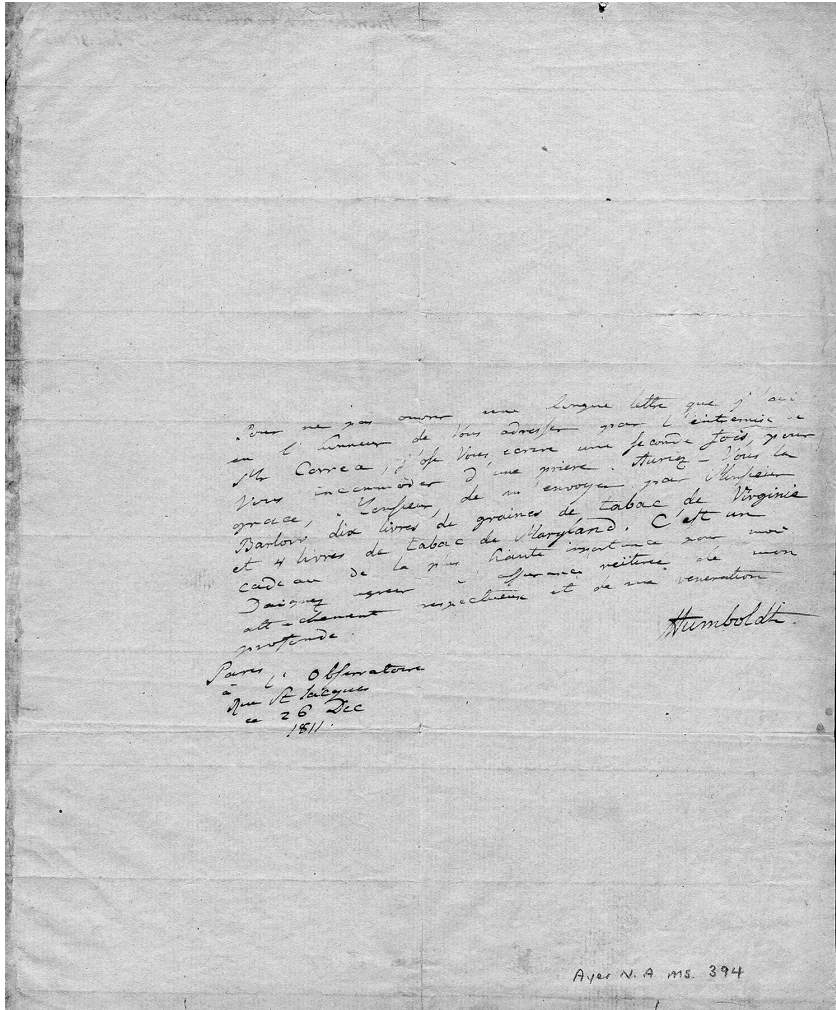


Figure 1. Letter from Alexander von Humboldt to Thomas Jefferson, December 26, 1811.

very keen to find out what Humboldt knew about the Spanish colony, information the German willingly shared, while Humboldt in turn was fascinated by the experiment of freedom in the newly established republic of the United States. The two men greatly respected and admired each other, and after Humboldt returned to Europe, a correspondence ensued that lasted from 1808 to 1825. In her recent study of their friendship, Sandra Rebok

concludes that the extended exchange between Jefferson and Humboldt “offers insight into the development of political thought and the progress of science” and “also serves as an early demonstration of the importance of transatlantic communication and scientific cooperation.”<sup>4</sup> The short note Humboldt sent on Boxing Day 1811 offers a glimpse into aspects of that communication and scientific cooperation across the Atlantic.

It is not clear if Humboldt ever received the tobacco and seeds he requested, especially given the disruptive effect of the Napoleonic Wars on shipping, but he probably wanted them for the extensive botanical research he was conducting in connection with his *Relation historique du voyage aux régions équinoxiales du nouveau continent* (1814–25). This multivolume work, wherein Humboldt processed the plethora of scientific information he had gathered during his American travels, includes several references to the history, culture, and growth of tobacco that reflected his abiding interest in that specific plant.<sup>5</sup>

The letter is also noteworthy because the “Mr Correa” who was to transport the request for tobacco and seeds refers to another important figure, Abbé José Correia da Serra (1751–1823),<sup>6</sup> a well-known Portuguese philosopher, diplomat, politician, and scientist, who was making his mark in the arena of the natural classification of plants that was analogous to a concurrent development in comparative anatomy.<sup>7</sup> At the time of the letter, the abbé was on his way to the United States, where, thanks to a letter of recommendation given him by Humboldt, he gained access to the high scientific circles of the American Philosophical Society, and he later became Portugal’s envoy to the young nation. A friendship would ensue with Jefferson, whom Correia visited annually in Monticello before he eventually returned to Portugal.

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4. Sandra Rebok, *Humboldt and Jefferson: A Transatlantic Friendship of the Enlightenment* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014), 141.

5. See Alexander von Humboldt, *Relation historique du voyage aux régions équinoxiales du nouveau continent* (1814–25; repr., Stuttgart: F. A. Brockhaus, 1970), 2:622–23.

6. Correa was the Spanish version of the abbé’s name.

7. See Richard Beale Davis, “The Abbé Correa in America, 1812–1820: The Contributions of the Diplomat and Natural Philosopher to the Foundations of Our National Life. Correspondence with Jefferson and Other Members of the American Philosophical Society and with Other Prominent Americans,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, n.s., 45, no. 2 (1955): 87–197; Maria Paula Diogo, Ana Carneiro, and Ana Simões, “The Portuguese Naturalist Correia da Serra (1751–1823) and His Impact on Early Nineteenth-century Botany,” *Journal of the*

The “Monsieur Barlow” of the letter, through whom Humboldt requested the tobacco and seeds be sent to Paris, is the familiar personage of Joel Barlow (1754–1812), an American patriot, diplomat, and poet, whose scientific interests included the areas of mineralogy and agriculture.<sup>8</sup> Barlow is probably best known as the author of an epic poem praising the young United States, *Vision of Columbus* (1787), which he reworked as *The Columbiad* (1807). By 1811, when Humboldt sent his note, Barlow was in Paris as the American envoy charged with negotiating a trade agreement with Napoleon.<sup>9</sup>

Clarifying the identity of the addressee and intended recipient of Humboldt’s short epistle provides a hitherto missing piece of the correspondence between the two. Moreover, the inclusion of Correia and Barlow as actors in the circumstances that it documents both confirms and delineates the existing networks that could be called on in the name of science. That Humboldt could enjoy and employ contacts of such note and repute in his simple request for tobacco and seeds is indeed striking.

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*History of Biology* 34 (2001): 353–93; Edgardo Medeiros Silva, “The Powerless Diplomacy of the Abbé Correia da Serra,” *Anglo Saxonica* 3, no. 1 (2010): 343–60.

8. See Samuel Bernstein, *Joel Barlow: A Connecticut Yankee in an Age of Revolution* (Cliff Island, Maine: Ultima Thule Press, 1985); Richard Buel, *Joel Barlow: American Citizen in a Revolutionary World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011); Peter P. Hill, *Joel Barlow: American Diplomat and Nation Builder* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2012).

9. In the attempt to catch up with the emperor during his invasion of Russia, Barlow was swept back with Napoleon’s retreat and caught pneumonia. He died in Zarnowic, close to Cracow, before he was able to complete his task.

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