

Thomas Jefferson to William Waller Hening, January 14, 1807, from The Works of Thomas Jefferson in Twelve Volumes. Federal Edition. Collected and Edited by Paul Leicester Ford.

TO WILLIAM WALLER HENING¹ J. MSS.

¹ Hening was just undertaking his well known Statutes at large of Virginia. On Feb. 28, Jefferson further wrote him:

“ Sir,—It has not been in my power sooner to acknowledge your letter of Feb. 4. After repeating that my printed collection of laws which are in strong bound volumes, are at your service, I must observe as to the manuscript volumes, that several of them run into one another in point of time, so that the same act will be found in several volumes, and will require a good deal of collating. But what presents a greater difficulty is, that some of these volumes seem to have been records of the council, and to contain interspersed copies of some laws. These volumes are in a black letter, illegible absolutely but to those habituated to it and far beyond the competence of an ordinary scribe. I have never myself searched up the acts which these volumes contain. I have always expected they would fill up some of the lacunae in the list I sent to Mr. Wythe. As this compilation can be made but once, because in doing it the originals will fall to pieces, my anxiety that justice shall be done obliges me to say that it cannot be done till I become resident at Monticello. There I will superintend it myself, freely giving my own labour to whoever undertakes to copy & publish, whether on public or private account. The copyist must probably live with me during the work, & of course, I must take some part in his choice. Seeing no inconvenience in publishing first the edited & secondly the inedited laws, I am in hopes that you may

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think the former may at once be entered on. Accept my salutations & assurances of great esteem & respect.”

Washington, January 14, 1807.

Sir, —Your letter of Dec. 26th, was received in due time. The only object I had in making my collection of the laws of Virginia, was to save all those for the public which were not then already lost, in the hope that at some future day they might be republished. Whether this be by public or private enterprise, my end will be equally answered. The work divides itself into two very distinct parts; to wit, the printed and the unprinted laws. The former begin in 1682, (Purvis' collection.) My collection of these is in strong volumes, well bound, and therefore may safely be transported anywhere. Any of these volumes which you do not possess, are at your service for the purpose of republication, but the unprinted laws are dispersed through many MS.volumes, several of them so decayed that the leaf can never be opened but once without falling into powder. These can never bear removal further than from their shelf to a table. They are, as well as I recollect, from 1622 downwards. I formerly made such a digest of their order, and the volumes where they are to be found, that, under my own superintendence, they could be copied with once handling. More they would not bear. Hence the impracticability of their being copied but at Monticello. But independent of them, the printed laws, beginning in 1682, with all our former printed collections, will be a most valuable publication, & sufficiently distinct. I shall have no doubt of the exactness of your part of the work, but I hope you will take measures for having the typography & paper worthy of the work. I am lead to this caution by the scandalous volume of our laws printed by Pleasants in 1803, & those by Davis, in 1796 were little better; both unworthy the history of Tom Thumb. You can have them better & cheaper printed anywhere north of Richmond. Accept my salutations & assurances of respect.