

The Advice Jefferson Never Received: Health Counsel Delivered to Jefferson From His Italian Friend Filippo Mazzei, Two Hundred Years Too Late



✘ The interior of the rare manuscript room of the library in Florence, Sala Manoscritti e Rari, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze. Courtesy of their [website](#).

Two years had passed since my discovery of a mystery letter in a Florence archive, and as I studied the correspondence on the *Founders Online* website run by the National Archives and the University of Virginia Press, I finally began to comprehend the significance of my accidental find. The letter, dated 1812, written in Italian and, according to the archival reference sheet, directed to “?”, did indeed have a recipient, and a notable one at that. I realized that I had inadvertently stumbled upon a missing link in the extensive chain of correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and his friend Filippo Mazzei (1730-1816), Italian patriot of the American Revolution, who first arrived in Virginia as an agriculturalist in 1773. It struck me that over the course of 200 years, no one had read Mazzei’s letter of 1812 and Jefferson’s letter of the previous year side by side except for Mazzei himself. And now, me. With this realization, I found myself in the throes of my own “archive fever,” consumed by my letter and the mystery that surrounded it. I

wondered if this 1812 letter had ever left Italy, and why no one had found it before I did. The clues were there, and I couldn't resist diving headfirst into a bit of historical detective work.

I stumbled, unknowingly, upon this hidden treasure as a result of a chain of events that can only be described as serendipitous. In June 2015, after co-directing the Bucknell University Engineering in a Global/Societal Context course in Italy, I reserved a day in Florence to conduct archival research on Carlo Bellini, father of Italian Studies in the United States. Friend to both Jefferson and Mazzei, Bellini, originally from Florence, was appointed by Jefferson in 1779 to teach Italian, French, Spanish, and possibly German at the College of William and Mary, a position which he held until his death in 1804. It was at William and Mary that I began studying Italian in the fall of 1991 as a first-year student, and when I heard the story of Bellini at a language conference in 2014, I decided that I owed it to his ghost to find out more about him and his life in the early years of our republic. So, on a cloudy day in June 2015, I set out for the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze in search of an original Bellini document.



Frontispiece portrait of Filippo (Philip) Mazzei, from *Philip Mazzei: Virginia's Agent in Europe* (New York, 1935). Courtesy of Dr. Richard Cecil Garlick Jr., from *Philip Mazzei, Friend of Jefferson: His Life and Letters* (Baltimore, 1933). This copy courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

A quiet space with a long oak table running down the middle, the rare manuscript room of the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze is lined with drawers full of hand-written index cards, some dating to the early days of the library, which first opened to the public in 1747. I was drawn to the card catalogue on my right, which housed the recent acquisitions collection. A quick perusal of the catalogue confirmed that the collection held nothing filed under Carlo Bellini's name. Purely out of curiosity, and not wanting to leave the library after so short and futile a search, I took a moment to look up Filippo Mazzei, whose name appeared in much of the correspondence between Jefferson and Bellini. Mazzei came to Virginia in 1773 under the patronage of Grand Duke Leopold of Tuscany, one of the earliest supporters of free trade in Europe. Leopold sent Mazzei to the colonies with the charge of shipping grain back to Tuscany, and once in Virginia Mazzei planned to cultivate a vineyard and produce wine. Perhaps not surprisingly, Mazzei bonded quickly with Jefferson over their shared interest in horticulture and Jefferson's passion for the Italian culture and language. Mazzei recalled in his memoir that when he met Jefferson in 1773, the Virginian "knew the Italian language very well, but had never heard it spoken."



Archival reference page accompanying Mazzei's letter of September 27, 1812. According to this page, the letter is directed to "?" and, as per the comment in the "observations" column, unsigned (*non firmata*). The word *minuta* refers to an original archived draft. Courtesy of the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze, Sala Manoscritti e Rari, C.V., Cassetta 539, Numero 133.

I found one card filed under Mazzei's name. I signed for the document, and was handed a folder containing an original letter written in Italian and accompanied by an archival reference page. Mazzei at the time was living in Pisa and had addressed his letter simply to "*Stimatissimo signore, e amico carissimo*" (Most esteemed sir, and dearest friend) on September 27, 1812. In the first few lines Mazzei mentions that his letter will be sent with a friend through Paris, though no final destination is cited. There are references to both Monticello and Bellini within the text. Archived in the library as "not signed" and directed to "?" according to the reference sheet, the letter piqued my interest, so I transcribed it in Italian on my laptop. When I returned home from Florence later that summer, the mysterious Mazzei letter remained in a folder labeled "Bellini" on my computer, and quite honestly, I forgot about it. I had no idea to whom it was written, and I figured it was an unsigned draft that had probably never left Italy.

Two years later, with the 240th anniversary of Bellini's hiring at my alma mater quickly approaching, his ghost continued to haunt me, as did the mystery letter sitting on my laptop. In search of answers, I began studying the extensive republic of letters exchanged between Mazzei and Jefferson archived on the *Founders Online* website. Right away, I noticed a gap in correspondence between the years 1811 and 1813. At the bottom of Jefferson's July 9, 1811, letter to Mazzei, a footnote states that Mazzei had endorsed a response as written on September 27, 1812, but that the letter was not recorded in Jefferson's Summary Journal of Letters and had not been found.

At that moment I knew that I had made an important discovery on that cloudy June day two years earlier in Florence. Mazzei's detailed response to Jefferson's 1811 letter had finally made it across the Atlantic and was sitting right there on my laptop in Pennsylvania. But its identification raised more questions than it answered. Had the 1812 letter even made it as far as Paris? If so, how and when did it find its way back to Florence, and why had no other scholars discovered it? Had I unearthed any state secrets? And why wasn't the letter signed?

I contacted the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze, requested a digital copy of the letter, and began the work of tracing the letter from its inception in 1812 to my discovery of it in 2015. As Mazzei had intended, a copy of the 1812 letter was indeed sent from Pisa to Paris amidst the economic and political turmoil that marked the end of Napoleonic rule in Italy, where it eventually landed in the hands of Consul David Bailie Warden, though for some reason was

not included in the envelope that Warden later sent to Monticello. The copy that I found in the library is most probably a draft that remained in Pisa. According to their records, the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze acquired this copy of the letter from Lim Antiqua, a manuscript dealer in Lucca, Italy, in 2009. The owner of Lim Antiqua surmises that the letter was likely part of the private archive of Count Luigi Cibrario of Torino, Italian statesman and historian. Lim Antiqua purchased the Cibrario collection in the late 1990s. Interestingly, Count Cibrario was stationed in Paris as the minister of foreign affairs of the Kingdom of Sardinia from 1855-1856 (prior to Italian unification in 1861, the Kingdom of Sardinia included Piedmont, the governing region of much of the peninsula). If this letter was indeed part of the Cibrario collection, he might have acquired it directly from Mazzei's daughter Elisabetta Mazzei Tozzi Pini, who sold many of her father's documents following his death. Stashed in a private archive, unsigned and addressed to no one, the letter remained in deep slumber until Bellini's ghost led me to it in June of 2015. To read the letter in its entirety, click [here](#).



Mazzei's letter of September 27, 1812 (page one). The letter is addressed to "*Stimatissimo signore, e amico carissimo*" (Most esteemed sir, and dearest friend). Courtesy of the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze, Sala Manoscritti e Rari, C.V., Cassetta 539, Numero 133.



Mazzei's letter of September 27, 1812 (page two). Mazzei spilled the ink before he started writing the letter. The writing flows around the ink blot, not underneath it. Courtesy of the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze, Sala Manoscritti e Rari, C.V., Cassetta 539, Numero 133.

Much of the import of this particular letter lies in its humanity. Alas, I did not exhume a letter full of state secrets or hidden agendas; instead, and perhaps more significantly, I exhumed a contemplative letter devoted to the value of friendship and the poignancy of human existence. Mazzei lived a life rooted in Enlightenment ideals, and one way to interpret his letter is as a reflection of those ideals. While Mazzei does touch on issues of national importance (primarily as a consideration of events that had happened 30 years earlier), most of the letter is a testament to the strong bond he felt with his American friend. It is a shame that Jefferson never had a chance to read it.

✘
Engraved portrait of Thomas Jefferson by Bass Otis, painted at Monticello; both Otis and publisher Joseph Delaplaine arrived at Monticello during the first week of June 1816. This portrait was engraved by John Neagle and faces page 125 in Delaplaine's *Repository of the Lives and Portraits of Distinguished American Characters* (Philadelphia, 1817). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Jefferson, who was nearing seventy at the time, states in his July 9, 1811, letter to Mazzei that he is "much enfeebled, little able to walk about," and that most of his exercise is done on horseback. Here, finally, is Mazzei's missing response, health counsel delivered to Jefferson from his Italian friend 200 years too late: "since you have the courage to go riding, I am convinced that you could with your own legs walk at least one mile before lunch, and one before evening, in the flat countryside you have made around Monticello, which you might find more useful than six, or eight, done by horse." Mazzei, who himself was nearing eighty-two, admits that he wouldn't have the courage to ride a horse, but noted walking four or five miles a day. Expressed in these lines is the comfort and ease of an enduring and honest friendship between two men who, by 1812, had not seen each other in twenty-four years.

✘
"Monticello, the home of Jefferson, Near Charlottesville, Virginia," wood engraving from a sketch by Theodore R. Davis, from *Harper's Weekly* June 2, 1866, page 345. Mazzei states in an 1811 letter to Jefferson that he is "panting for the tranquility of Monticello." Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Mazzei continues to explore the theme of friendship as he considers mutual acquaintances who have died. In his 1811 letter, Jefferson comments that his only wish is a "quiet descent to that asylum which has received some more of your acquaintances since my last," mentioning the names John Page and George Wythe. Mazzei responds, "the news of these deaths moved me considerably, no longer for them, but for their good friends, since I regard the loss of friends as one of the greatest and saddest disgraces." He does not fear death for himself, but for those he will leave behind, namely his young wife and daughter. Exchanges such as this one open a window onto the private emotions of two very public figures and remind us of their humanity.

One aspect of this letter that I find particularly poignant is Mazzei's tender description of his young daughter Elisabetta. He recounts, "my daughter is doing wonderfully. She turned 14 on 22 July; she is tall for her age; her personality is pleasing to all; she learns languages easily; she embroiders passably well; her music teacher is happy with the progress that she is making

in her study of the piano." Beyond providing early nineteenth-century education guidelines for young women of a certain class, this paragraph speaks volumes about his relationship with Jefferson, who by this time had nine grandchildren by his daughter Martha Jefferson Randolph and four surviving children by Sally Hemmings. The Virginian was surrounded by children in the year 1812, so it seems fitting that his friend would dedicate an entire paragraph to his own young daughter. In stark contrast to his preceding comments addressing the inevitability of his own death, here Mazzei focuses on the promise of future generations, while simultaneously expressing his concern about Elisabetta's well-being in Tuscany, a region that he characterizes as "afflicted by evils" in 1812. In his February 15, 1811, letter to Jefferson, Mazzei is quite direct about his desire to bring his daughter to the United States, and he alludes to this again in his 1812 letter, stating that he can die in peace if he knows his daughter will be left in a "free country." Perhaps Mazzei imagines his daughter Elisabetta someday taking part in the affectionate family life that surrounded Jefferson during his retirement years, though in his letter of July 9, 1811, Jefferson expresses his doubts about "whether a person brought up in European society & habits can themselves be as happy here as there."

Historians less sentimentally inclined might read parts of Mazzei's letter as an analysis of the economic and intellectual impact of the Napoleonic years on Italy, especially on the port city of Leghorn. As a result of its status as a free port, Leghorn flourished in the latter part of the eighteenth century both economically and intellectually, becoming a key place of publication for Enlightenment texts. In an 1805 letter to Jefferson, Mazzei extols the city as a place where "Americans are carrying on excellent and profitable business [...] Leghorn is an emporium from which their merchandise is shipped to all Italy and to various parts of Germany." Yet Mazzei's letter just seven years later offers a more dismal vision of the city. Whereas over 700 ships entered Leghorn in 1800, in 1812, under blockade, only one ship entered port. The city's economic and intellectual decline went hand in hand:



At first glance, Mazzei's letter appears unsigned. Upon closer study, the original valediction is apparent (highlighted in this view). Mazzei signed his letter, "*Suo devotissimo servo, e amico*" (Your most devoted servant, and friend). Courtesy of the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze, Sala Manoscritti e Rari, Carte Varie, Cassetta 539, Numero 133.

Leghorn, where I have most of my movable and immovable wealth, is decreasing in population more each day, and if a swift and unexpected solution does not come about, it will soon be a place of fishermen. A property that used to earn me 180 silver pieces [*pezze*], no longer earns me 80; as far as cash is concerned, I am no longer collecting interest and every day I relinquish failed properties.

Despite all that I had uncovered about Mazzei's letter, the mystery of its missing signature continued to haunt me. At first glance, it appears that Mazzei concluded his thoughts abruptly at the bottom of the back of the page, leaving no room for his signature (in fact, in order to finish his final sentence, he squeezed his last four words in the upper-right corner of the page). Once I had a digital copy of the letter and had enlarged it on my screen, I was able to focus clearly on the crowded script and noticed something that I had missed while at the library: something that, in fact, no one had noticed before. The "+" mark two-thirds of the way down the second page of the letter indicates a type of postscript meant to substitute lines of canceled text above, and toward the right, the phrase "*Suo devotissimo servo, e amico*" (Your most devoted servant, and friend), although difficult to spot since it is almost obscured by the postscript text, designates the original valediction. Just below this phrase, and partially concealed by the first sentence of the postscript paragraph, there is a faint and nearly illegible "FM." The partially hidden initials on my letter are replicas of those on other letters signed by Filippo Mazzei, and their presence merits an update to the archival sheet accompanying this letter in the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze, for it is indeed signed by Mazzei.



Compare the faint "FM" (hidden beneath the postscript text) of the 1812 letter at left to the "FM" of the 1811 letter from Mazzei to Jefferson at right. 1812 letter courtesy of the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze, Sala Manoscritti e Rari, C.V., Cassetta 539, Numero 133. 1811 letter courtesy of Columbia University Libraries, General Manuscripts Collections, Box 37.



What my story reminds us of, I believe, is the value of archival work as an experience in and of itself, consisting of give-and-take between document and searcher. The archivist brings emotion, passion, and self to the search, and conversely, the process of archival sleuthing and discovery can help mold the searcher's very identity. Beyond the process itself, we cannot overlook the importance of due diligence on the part of the searcher, coupled with a healthy dose of curiosity. I entered the archive in Florence in June 2015 looking for one item, and I walked out with something completely unexpected, yet to which I was deeply and personally connected. As I have now learned firsthand, the thrill of breathing life into slumbering words on parchment is unparalleled. I, for one, am already planning my next trip to the archives in Italy. Who knows what I might find?

September 24, 2017. At age ninety-five, Sister Margherita Marchione, leading Mazzei scholar and author, signs a 1975 copy of her book *Philip Mazzei: Jefferson's "Zealous Whig."* This particular copy belongs to Bucknell University and was first signed by Marchione in 1977. Courtesy of Lisa Ferrante Perrone.

Front free endpaper of Bucknell University's copy of *Philip Mazzei: Jefferson's "Zealous Whig"* showing Sister Margherita Marchione's two signatures, one from 1977 and one from 2017. Courtesy of Lisa Ferrante Perrone.

Acknowledgements

This project is dedicated to Michael Lettieri—my professor, my colleague, and my friend—whose mention of Carlo Bellini at the NeMLA conference in March 2014 prompted my visit to the archive in Florence in 2015 and my discovery of Mazzei's 1812 letter to Thomas Jefferson. Also, I would like to give special thanks to the many people who helped me with this project throughout its various stages. Thank you to my supportive colleagues at Bucknell University: Bernhard Kuhn, Anna Papparcone, Marta Senigagliesi, Helen Morris-Keitel, Anneliese Pollock Renck, Ann Tlusty, Claire Campbell, Karline McClain, Michael Drexler, and John Penniman. Special thanks to Massimo Fino at Lim Antiqua in Lucca, Italy; to Hannah Spahn of the University of Potsdam, whose advice from afar has been invaluable; to Dr. Wendy Woloson of Rutgers University-Camden, my editor for this essay; and to Sister Margherita Marchione, for her wisdom and friendship. Lastly, I am especially grateful to the librarians at the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze (*un caloroso ringraziamento alle dottoresse Carla Pinzauti, Susanna Pelle e Anna Maria Russo*), who patiently helped me decipher Filippo Mazzei's handwriting in June of 2015, almost 203 years after he wrote his letter. Without their assistance, his letter might very well still be slumbering in its dusty bed.

Further reading:

Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Philip Mazzei, *Founders Online*, National Archives.

Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and David Bailie Warden, *Founders Online*, National Archives.

Margherita Marchione, *Philip Mazzei: Jefferson's "Zealous Whig"* (New York, 1975).

Margherita Marchione, *Philip Mazzei: My Life and Wanderings* (Morristown, 1980).

Howard R. Marraro, "Unpublished Mazzei Letters to Jefferson," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 2:1 (1945): 80.

J. Worth Banner, "Genesis in Modern Languages," *South Atlantic Bulletin* 17:1 (1951): 6.

Dino Carpanetto and Giuseppe Ricuperati, *Italy in the Age of Reason, 1685-1789* (New York, 1987).

Desmond Gregory, *Napoleon's Italy* (New Jersey, 2001).

E. Joe Johnson, *Once There Were Two True Friends: Idealized Male Friendship in French Narrative from the Middle Ages to through the Enlightenment* (Birmingham, 2003).

Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (New Brunswick, 2002).

Translator's note: Omitted closing brackets have been editorially supplied for clarity. Copies of the other documents which Mazzei references as included with this letter were not found.

Pisa, 27 September 1812

Most esteemed sir, and dearest friend,

Much time has passed since I received your much appreciated letter of 9 July 1811; but the disgraceful circumstances of the times have not yet offered me a true occasion, when I could hope that my response could arrive to you. A friend of mine, who will leave in a few days for Paris, promises me that he will deliver this letter right into the hands of our Minister, and Mr. Appleton is encouraging about the possibility that you will surely receive this letter [~~cancel text: but nevertheless, I am sending a duplicate copy~~]. [I am sorry to hear that you are not happy with your physical strength; but since you have the courage to go riding, I am convinced that you could with your own legs walk at least one mile before lunch, and one before evening, in the flat countryside you have made around Monticello, which you might find more useful than six, or eight, done by horse. I will turn 82 this next 25 December; I wouldn't have the courage to ride a horse; but I walk four, or five miles a day, and when I cannot go outside, because of bad weather,

I walk at home on a terrace about 50 feet long, or in a hallway of the same length.] You had already informed me of the death of Mr. Wythe and of John Page, but I was ignoring the deaths of Mr. and Mrs. Eppes, and of Walker, and of Mr. Hilton; news of these deaths moved me considerably, no longer for them, but for their good friends, since I regard the loss of friends as one of the greatest and saddest disgraces. I regard death with maximum indifference, and I would even desire it at this decrepit age, if I were to leave my widow and my child in a free country; but the current situation of things in this part of the world frightens me for them. [The news of the evils that afflict us must have arrived to you, and I am amongst those who suffer the most.] Leghorn, where I have most of my movable and immovable wealth, is decreasing in population more each day, and if a swift and unexpected solution does not come about, it will soon be a place of fishermen. A property that used to earn me 180 silver pieces, no longer earns me 80; as far as cash is concerned, I am no longer collecting interest and every day I relinquish failed properties. Although my lot in Richmond is not worth much, I ask that you sell it as soon as you can, and that you remit me the funds. I would ask that you do the same for the poor sisters of Bellini.

As for my little family, my wife (following the painful consequences of childbirth, for which she suffered at great length) is now considerably well, and my daughter is doing wonderfully. She turned 14 on 22 July; she is tall for her age; her personality is pleasing to all; she learns languages easily; she embroiders passably well; her music teacher is happy with the progress that she is making in her study of the piano, as is her drawing teacher, who is very pleased, since she makes portraits and copies that look like them perfectly, and with surprising speed.

Upon my return to Virginia, while you were in Boston getting ready to come to Europe, I proposed a Constitutional Society for the use that I hoped that you will see in the included copy of a letter that I wrote from Mansfield to Mr. Blair. They wanted to make me president, but I excused myself, and proposed Mr. Blair. I would love to know if something worthwhile came of it, or if it went up in smoke. I am also including the copy of another document that I made regarding boat navigation of the rivers of Virginia, of which I would also love to know what happened. + *[Canceled text: and in the meantime I will tell you that the aforementioned document produced a note from Attorney Carmignani (and of this document I will also include a copy, because it inspired me to write my memoir). The aforementioned document on the navigation of our rivers was certainly translated (as far as I can tell) by Edmund Randolph]*. I would like to know if it appeared in the papers, and also if this resulted in anything. But what is of even greater importance to me is to receive your good news, wishing you all possible happiness, confirming that I am

Your most devoted servant, and friend

FM

+ The person I left it with, who was Edmund Randolph, or Dr. [illegible] promised to have it translated, to examine it, correct it if needed, and publish it in the paper. I would love to know if this resulted in anything. In the meantime I will tell you that the Attorney G.C. [*Giovanni Carmignani*] a middle-aged man, lawyer of highest regard, extremely well-learned, and perfect philosopher, (having read my document) wrote me a note (of which you will find an included copy) and after (he pleaded with me so much, and he had others plead with me seriously (with whom it wasn't befitting that I contradict)) that finally he inspired me to write my memoir, the story which ends with the narration of my trip to Rome in 1805, and of the shipment of the two sculptors that I sent to Mr. Latrobe. Thus I say: "After having obtained the happiness of those two wonderful families [which will be even greater for their descendants] and having been now and then able to see my friends in F. [*Firenze*], Prato, Pistoia, Lucca and Leghorn, it seems that I have been nothing more than a gardener, but if you think that something is missing, add it yourselves. I, however, believe that you will find much to take out.

This article originally appeared in issue 18.2 (Spring, 2018).

Lisa Ferrante Perrone is assistant professor of Italian Studies at Bucknell University in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, where she teaches Italian language courses and a first-year seminar on the Italian American experience. Her research interests focus on second language pedagogy and Italian American Studies. She was recently awarded a short-term fellowship from the Robert H. Smith International Center for Jefferson Studies in Monticello to continue her study of the friendship between Filippo Mazzei and Thomas Jefferson. At the time this article went to press, she had recently returned from the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze. The archival reference sheet is now updated and cites Thomas Jefferson as the recipient of Mazzei's 1812 letter.