
Arthur Young and the President

In January of 1791, President George Washington received a letter from an Englishman named Arthur Young. Arthur Young had many questions about America.

“How much does it cost to buy land in America?” Arthur wrote.

“What kinds of crops grow there? How much does the land produce?”

“What kinds of animals do you raise on your farms? When you sell them, how much do you get paid?”

President Washington didn't know the answers to all of these questions, but he wanted to help. He thought as president of the new country he needed to know the answers to those questions.

But how could he find out what he needed to know?

He thought and thought and finally got an idea. He decided to send letters to all the farmers in the land and ask them the questions Arthur Young had asked him. This was our country's first agricultural survey.

At that time, nine of every ten citizens in our country were farmers. Most lived and farmed in what is today Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia.

Washington sent the letters out and waited. The mail was much slower in 1791 than it is today. There were no airplanes or even trucks to deliver the mail across the country. There were barely roads. And certainly there were no telephones, e-mail or fax machines.

Finally, after several months had passed, President Washington started getting letters back from the farmers. When he got all the information back, he put it together.

Between September 24 and November 18, 1791, President Washington sent three letters to Arthur Young. These were our country's first crop reports.
