George Washington

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George Washington (February 22, 1732 – December 14, 1799)[1] led America’s Continental Army to victory over Britain in the American Revolutionary War (1775–1783), and in 1789 was elected the first President of the United States of America.[2] He served two four-year terms from 1789 to 1797, winning reelection in 1792. Because of his central and critical role in the founding of the United States, Washington is referred to as father of the nation. His devotion to republicanism and civic virtue made him an exemplary figure among early American politicians.

In his youth, Washington worked as a surveyor of rural lands and acquired what would become invaluable knowledge of the terrain around his native state of Virginia which at the time included West Virginia and the upper Ohio Valley area present day Pittsburgh. In the early 1750’s Washington was actually sent as an ambassador to the French traders and Indians as far north as present day Erie, Pennsylvania. Virginia was very interested in this area as the gateway to western expansion via the Ohio River and onward. Pennsylvania and Virginia both competed for this area around what would become Pittsburgh, but the French saw it as even more valuable; a way to unite Quebec and Louisiana via river while pinning the English to the East Coast. Washington gained command experience during the resulting French and Indian War (1754–1763). First as a colonel under General Edward Braddock to take Fort Duquesne in Pittsburgh, then as a commander when at Braddocks Field, Braddock was fatally injured. It is curious to note that Washington suffered his only military defeat in the woods outside present day Pittsburgh at Fort Necessity, mistakes that he witnessed first hand at the brash leadership of European Braddock losing battles on a new “American” frontier. Due to this experience, his military bearing, his enormous charisma, his leadership of the patriot cause in Virginia, and his political base in the largest colony, the Second Continental Congress chose him, in 1775, as their commander-in-chief of the American army.

In 1776, he victoriously forced the British out of Boston, but, later that same year, was badly defeated, and nearly captured, when he lost New York City. However, in the bitter-cold dead of night, he revived the patriot cause, by crossing the Delaware River in New Jersey and defeating the surprised enemy units. As a result of his strategic oversight, Revolutionary forces captured the two main British combat armies, first at Saratoga in 1777 and then at Yorktown in 1781. He handled relations with the states and their militias, dealt with disputing generals and colonels, and worked with Congress to supply and recruit the Continental army. Negotiating with Congress, the colonial states, and French allies, he held together a tenuous army and a fragile, nascent nation amid the constant threats of disintegration and failure. He was also the country’s first spymaster.[3]

Following the end of the war in 1783, Washington emulated the Roman general Cincinnatus, and retired to his plantation on Mount Vernon, an exemplar of the republican ideal of citizen leadership who rejected power. Alarmed in the late 1760s at the many weaknesses of the new nation under the Articles of Confederation, he presided over the Constitutional Convention that drafted the United States Constitution in 1787.

In 1789, Washington became President of the United States and promptly established many of
In 1755, British General Edward Braddock headed a major effort to retake the Ohio Country.

As the symbol of republicanism in practice, Washington embodied American values and across the world was seen as the symbol of the new nation. Scholars perennially rank him among the three greatest U.S. Presidents. During Washington’s funeral oration, Henry Lee said that of among all Americans, he was “first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen.” (See Legacy, below.)

Early life

George Washington was born on February 22, 1732 (February 11, 1731, O.S.), the first son of Augustine Washington and his second wife, Mary Ball Washington, on the family estate (later known as Wakefield) in Westmoreland County, Virginia. Washington embarked upon a career as a planter and in 1748 was invited to help survey Baron Fairfax's lands west of the Blue Ridge. In 1749 he was appointed to his first public office, surveyor of newly created Culpeper County.[4] and through his half-brother Lawrence Washington he became interested in the Ohio Company, which aimed to exploit Western lands. After Lawrence's death (1752), George inherited part of his estate and took over some of Lawrence's duties as adjutant of the colony. [5] As district adjutant, which made him Major Washington at the age of 20 (December 1752), he was charged with training the militia in the quarter assigned him.[6] Also at 20, in Fredricksburg, Washington joined the Freemasons, a fraternal organization that became a lifelong influence.[7]

French and Indian War

At 22 years of age Washington fired some of the first shots of the French and Indian War, soon to become part of the worldwide Seven Years' War. Troubles began in 1753, when France began building a series of forts in the Ohio Country, a region also claimed by Virginia. Governor Dinwiddie sent young Major Washington to the Ohio Country to assess French military strength and intentions, and ask the French to leave. When the French refused, Washington's published report was widely read in both Virginia and Britain. In 1754, Dinwiddie sent Washington, now commissioned a Lieutenant Colonel in the newly created Virginia Regiment, to drive away the French. Along with his American Indian allies, Washington and his troops ambushed a French scouting party of some 30 men, led by Joseph Coulon de Villiers de Jumonville and sent from Fort Duquesne to discover if Washington had in fact invaded French-claimed territory. Were this to be the case he was to send word back to the fort, then deliver a formal summons to Washington calling on him to withdraw. His small force was an embassy, resembling Washington's to Jacques Legardeur de Saint-Pierre the preceding year, and he neglected to post sentries around his encampment. At daybreak on the 28th, Washington with 40 men stole up on the French camp near present Jumonville, Pa. Some were still asleep, others preparing breakfast. Without warning, Washington gave the order to fire. The Canadians who escaped the volley scrambled for their weapons, but were swiftly overwhelmed. Jumonville, the French later claimed, was struck down while trying to proclaim his official summons. Ten of the Canadians were killed, one wounded, all but one of the rest taken prisoner. Washington and his men then retired, leaving the bodies of their victims for the wolves. Washington then built Fort Necessity, which soon proved inadequate, as he was soon compelled to surrender to a larger French and Indian force. The surrender terms that Washington signed included an admission that he had assassinated Jumonville. Because the French claimed that Jumonville's party had been on a diplomatic (rather than military) mission, the "Jumonville affair" became an international incident and helped to ignite a wider war. Washington was released by the French with his promise not to return to the Ohio Country for one year. Back in Virginia, Governor Dinwiddie broke up the Virginia Regiment into independent companies; Washington resigned from active military service rather than accept a demotion to captain.

In 1755, British General Edward Braddock headed a major effort to retake the Ohio Country.
Washington eagerly volunteered to serve as one of Braddock’s aides, although the British officers held the colonials in contempt.[8] Though the expedition ended in disaster at the Battle of the Monongahela, Washington distinguished himself in the debacle. He had two horses shot out from under him, and four bullets pierced his coat, yet he sustained no injuries and maintained composure under fire. While Washington’s role during the battle has been debated, biographer Joseph Ellis asserts that Washington rode back and forth across the battlefield, rallying the remnant of the British and Virginian forces to a retreat. Washington became a hero in Virginia.

In fall 1755, Governor Dinwiddie appointed Washington commander in chief of all Virginia forces, with rank of colonel and responsibility for defending 300 miles (480 km) of mountainous frontier with about 300 men. Washington supervised savage, frontier warfare that averaged two engagements a month. His letters show he was moved by the plight of the frontiersmen he was protecting. With too few troops, inadequate supplies, and insufficient authority for discipline, and hampered by an antagonistic governor, he had a severe challenge. In 1758, he took part in the Forbes Expedition, which successfully drove the French from Fort Duquesne.

Washington’s goal at the outset of his military career had been to secure a commission as a British officer, which had more prestige than serving in the provincial military. However, the British officers had disdain for the amateurish, non-aristocratic Americans. Washington’s commission never came; in 1758, Washington resigned from active military service and spent the next sixteen years as a Virginia planter and politician.[9]

Between the wars

On January 6, 1759, Washington married Martha Dandridge Custis, a widow who was living at White House Plantation on the south shore of the Pamunkey River in New Kent County, Virginia. The newlyweds moved to Mount Vernon, where he took up the life of a genteel planter and political figure. They had a good marriage, and together, they raised her two children, John Parke Custis and Martha Parke Custis, affectionately called “Jackie” and “Patsy”. Later the Washingtons raised two of Mrs. Washington’s grandchildren, Eleanor Parke Custis and George Washington Parke Custis after their father died in 1781. George and Martha never had any children together—his earlier bout with smallpox followed, possibly, by tuberculosis may have made him sterile. [10]

Washington’s marriage to a wealthy widow greatly increased his property holdings and social standing. He acquired one-third of the 18,000-acre (73 km²) Custis estate upon his marriage, and managed the remainder on behalf of Martha’s children. He frequently purchased additional acreage in his own name, and was granted land in what is now West Virginia as a bounty for his service in the French and Indian War. By 1775, Washington had doubled the size of Mount Vernon to 6,500 acres (26 km²), with over 100 slaves. As a respected military hero and large landowner, he held local office and was elected to the Virginia provincial legislature, the House of Burgesses, beginning in 1758.[11]

Washington first took a leading role in the growing colonial resistance in 1769, when he introduced a proposal drafted by his friend George Mason which called for Virginia to boycott imported English goods until the Townshend Acts were repealed. Parliament repealed the Acts in 1770. Washington also took an active interest in helping his fellow citizens even ones he did not know personally. On September 21, 1771 Washington wrote a letter to Neil Jameson on behalf of Jonathan Plowman Jr., a merchant from Baltimore whose ship had been seized for exporting non-permitted items by the Boston Frigate, and requested his help toward recovery of Plowman’s ship,[12] Washington regarded the passage of the Intolerable Acts in 1774 as “an Invasion of our Rights and Privileges”. In July 1774, he chaired the meeting at which the Fairfax Resolves were adopted, which called for, among other things, the convening of a Continental Congress. In August, he attended the First Virginia Convention, where he was selected as a delegate to the First Continental Congress.[13]
After fighting broke out in April 1775, Washington appeared at the Second Continental Congress in military uniform, signaling that he was prepared for war. Washington had the prestige, the military experience, the charisma and military bearing, the reputation of being a strong patriot, and he was supported by the South, especially Virginia. There was no serious competition. Congress created the Continental Army on June 14; the next day on the nomination of John Adams of Massachusetts it selected Washington as commander-in-chief. Washington assumed command of the American forces in Massachusetts in July 1775, during the ongoing siege of Boston. Realizing his army’s desperate shortage of gunpowder, Washington asked for new sources. British arsenals were raided (including some in the West Indies) and some manufacturing was attempted; a barely adequate supply (about 2.5 million pounds) was obtained by the end of 1776, mostly from France.[14]

Washington reorganized the army during the long standoff, and forced the British to withdraw by putting artillery on Dorchester Heights overlooking the city. The British evacuated Boston and Washington moved his army to New York City.

As Bickham (2002) shows, Washington was widely admired in Britain, where the press was virtually unanimous in portraying him in a positive light. Although negative toward the patriots in the Continental Congress, British newspapers routinely praised Washington's personal character and qualities as a military commander. Moreover, both sides of the aisle in Parliament found the American general's courage, endurance, and attentiveness to the welfare of his troops worthy of approbation and examples of the virtues they and most other Britons found wanting in their own commanders. Washington's refusal to become involved in politics buttressed his reputation as a man fully committed to the military mission at hand and above the factional fray.

In August 1776, British General William Howe launched a massive naval and land campaign to capture New York, designed to seize New York City and offer a negotiated settlement. The Continental Army under Washington engaged the enemy for the first time as an army of the newly-declared independent United States at the Battle of Long Island, the largest battle of the entire war. This and several other defeats against Howe (despite some bright spots at the Battle of Harlem Heights and elsewhere) sent Washington scrambling out of New York and across New Jersey, leaving the future of the Continental Army in doubt. On the night of December 25, 1776, Washington staged a counterattack, leading the American forces across the Delaware River to capture nearly 1,000 Hessians in Trenton, New Jersey.

Washington was defeated at the Battle of Brandywine on September 11, 1777. On September 26, Howe outmaneuvered Washington and marched into Philadelphia unopposed. Washington’s army unsuccessfully attacked the British garrison at Germantown in early October. Meanwhile Burgoyne, out of reach from help from Howe, was trapped and forced to surrender his entire army at Saratoga. As a result of this victory, France entered the war as an open ally, turning the Revolution into a major world-wide war. Washington’s loss of Philadelphia prompted some members of Congress to discuss removing Washington from command. This episode failed after Washington’s supporters rallied behind him.[15]

Washington’s army encamped at Valley Forge in December 1777, where it stayed for the next six months. Over the winter, 2,500 men (out of 10,000) died from disease and exposure. The next spring, however, the army emerged from Valley Forge in good order, thanks in part to a full-scale training program supervised by Baron von Steuben, a veteran of the Prussian general staff. The British evacuated Philadelphia in 1778 and returned to New York City. Meanwhile, Washington remained with his army outside New York. He delivered the final blow in 1781, after a French naval victory allowed American and French forces to trap a British army in Virginia. The surrender at Yorktown on October 17, 1781 marked the end of fighting.

Though known for his successes in the war and of his life that followed, as Robert Wuhl states in his HBO special Assume the Position, Washington only won three of the nine battles that he fought.
In March 1783, Washington used his influence to disperse a group of Army officers who had threatened to confront Congress regarding their back pay. The Treaty of Paris (1783) (signed in September) recognized the independence of the United States. Washington disbanded his army and, on November 2, gave an eloquent farewell address to his soldiers.[16] On November 25, the British evacuated New York City, and Washington and the governor took possession of the city. At Fraunces Tavern in the city on December 4, Washington formally bade his officers farewell and on December 23, 1783, he resigned his commission as commander-in-chief to the Congress of the Confederation.

Washington’s retirement to Mount Vernon was short-lived. He was persuaded to attend the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in the summer of 1787, and he was unanimously elected president of the Convention. For the most part, he did not participate in the debates involved (though he did participate in voting for or against the various articles), but his prestige was great enough to maintain collegiality and to keep the delegates at their labors. The delegates designed the presidency with Washington in mind, and allowed him to define the office once elected. After the Convention, his support convinced many, including the Virginia legislature, to vote for ratification; all 13 states did ratify the new Constitution.

Presidency: 1789–1797

Washington was elected unanimously by the Electoral College in 1789, and he remains the only person ever to be elected president unanimously (a feat which he duplicated in the 1792 election). As runner-up with 34 votes (each elector cast two votes), John Adams became vice president. Washington took the oath of office as the first President on April 30, 1789 at Federal Hall in New York City although he never wanted the position in the beginning.[17] The First U.S. Congress voted to pay Washington a salary of $25,000 a year—a large sum in 1789. Washington, already wealthy, declined the salary, since he valued his image as a selfless public servant. At the urging of Congress, however, he ultimately accepted the payment. A dangerous precedent could have been set otherwise, as the founding fathers wanted future presidents to come from a large pool of potential candidates—not just those citizens that could afford to do the work for free.

Washington attended carefully to the pomp and ceremony of office, making sure that the titles and trappings were suitably republican and never emulated European royal courts. To that end, he preferred the title “Mr. President” to the more majestic names suggested.

Washington proved an able administrator. An excellent delegator and judge of talent and character, he held regular cabinet meetings, which debated issues; he then made the final decision and moved on. In handling routine tasks, he was “systematic, orderly, energetic, solicitous of the opinion of others but decisive, intent upon general goals and the consistency of particular actions with them.”[18]

Washington only reluctantly agreed to serve a second term of office as president. He refused to run for a third, establishing the precedent of a maximum of two terms for a president.[19]

Domestic issues

Washington was not a member of any political party, and hoped that they would not be formed. His closest advisors, however, became divided into two factions, setting the framework for political parties. Secretary of Treasury Alexander Hamilton, who had bold plans to establish the national credit and build a financially powerful nation, formed the basis of the Federalist Party. Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson, founder of the Jeffersonian Republicans, strenuously opposed Hamilton’s agenda, but Hamilton had Washington’s ear, not Jefferson.

In 1791, Congress imposed an excise tax on distilled spirits, which led to protests in frontier districts, especially Pennsylvania. By 1794, after Washington ordered the protesters to appear in U.S. district court, the protests turned into full-scale riots known as the Whiskey Rebellion. The federal army was too small to be used, so Washington invoked the Militia Law of 1792 to summon the militias of Pennsylvania, Virginia and several other states. The governors sent the troops and Washington took command, marching into the rebellious districts. There was no fighting, but Washington’s forceful action proved the new government could protect itself. It also was one of only two times that a sitting President would personally command the military
in the field: the other was after President James Madison fled the burning White House in the War of 1812. These events marked the first time under the new constitution that the federal government used strong military force to exert authority over the states and citizens.

Foreign affairs

In 1793, the revolutionary government of France sent diplomat Edmond-Charles Genêt, called “Citizen Genêt,” to America. Genêt issued letters of marque and reprisal to American ships so they could capture British merchant ships. He attempted to turn popular sentiment towards American involvement in the French war against Britain by creating a network of Democratic-Republican Societies in major cities. Washington rejected this interference in domestic affairs, demanded the French government recall Genêt, and denounced his societies.

To normalize trade relations with Britain, remove them from western forts, and resolve financial debts left over from the Revolution, Hamilton and Washington designed the Jay Treaty. It was negotiated by John Jay, and signed on November 19, 1794. The Jeffersonians supported France and strongly attacked the treaty. Washington and Hamilton, however, mobilized public opinion and won ratification by the Senate by emphasizing Washington’s support. The British agreed to depart their forts around the Great Lakes, the Canadian-U.S. boundary was adjusted, numerous pre-Revolutionary debts were liquidated, and the British opened their West Indies colonies to the American trade. Most important, the treaty avoided war with Britain and instead brought a decade of prosperous trade with Britain. It angered the French and became a central issue in the political debates of the emerging First Party System.

Farewell Address

Washington’s Farewell Address (issued as a public letter in 1796) was one of the most influential statements of American political values.[20] Drafted primarily by Washington himself, with help from Hamilton, it gives advice on the necessity and importance of national union, the value of the Constitution and the rule of law, the evils of political parties, and the proper virtues of a republican people. In the address, he called morality “a necessary spring of popular government.” He suggests that “reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.” Washington thus makes the point that the value of religion is for the benefit of society as a whole.[21]

Washington’s address warned against foreign influence in domestic affairs and American meddling in European affairs. He warned against bitter partisanship in domestic politics and called for men to move beyond partisanship and serve the common good. He called for an America wholly free of foreign attachments, saying the United States must concentrate only on American interests. He counseled friendship and commerce with all nations, but warned against involvement in European wars and entering into long-term alliances. The address quickly set American values regarding religion and foreign affairs.

States admitted to Union

North Carolina – November 21, 1789 12th state
Rhode Island – May 29, 1790 13th state
Vermont – May 4, 1791 14th state
Kentucky – June 1, 1792 15th state
Tennessee – June 1, 1796 16th state

Retirement and death

After retiring from the presidency in March 1797, Washington returned to Mount Vernon with a profound sense of relief. He devoted much time to farming and, in that year, constructed a 2,250 square foot (75-by-30 feet, 200 m²) distillery, which was one of the largest in the new republic, housing five copper stills, a boiler and 50 mash tubs, at the site of one of his unprofitable farms. At its peak, two years later, the distillery produced 11,000 gallons of corn and rye whiskey worth $7,500, and fruit brandy.[22][23] George Washington's distillery is a part of the American Whiskey Trail. On March 30, 2007, Washington's Mount Vernon estate officially opened a reconstruction of Washington's distillery. This fully functional reproduction, which will produce up to 5,000 gallons of whiskey annually, for sale only at the Mount Vernon gift shop, cost $2.1 M and is located on the exact site as Washington’s original distillery, a short distance from his mansion on the Potomac River.[24]

In 1798, Washington was appointed Lieutenant General in the United States Army (then the highest possible rank) by President John Adams. Washington's appointment was to serve as a warning to France, with which war seemed imminent.

On December 12, 1799, Washington spent several hours inspecting his farms on horseback,
in snow and later hail and freezing rain. He sat down to dine that evening without changing his wet clothes. The next morning, he awoke with a bad cold, fever and a throat infection called quinsy that turned into acute laryngitis and pneumonia. Washington died on the evening of December 14, 1799, at his home, while attended by Dr. James Craik, one of his closest friends, and Tobias Lear, Washington's personal secretary. Lear would record the account in his journal. From Lear's account, we receive Washington's last words: Tis well.

Modern doctors believe that Washington died from either epiglottitis or, since he was bled as part of the treatment, a combination of shock from the loss of five pints of blood, as well as asphyxia and dehydration. Washington’s remains were buried at Mount Vernon. In order to protect their privacy, Martha Washington burned the correspondence between her husband and herself following his death. Only three letters between the couple have survived.

After Washington’s death, Mount Vernon was inherited by his nephew, Bushrod Washington, a justice of the U.S. Supreme Court.

During the United States Bicentennial year George Washington was appointed posthumously to the grade of General of the Armies of the United States by the congressional joint resolution Public Law 94-479 on January 19, 1976, approved by President Gerald R. Ford on October 11, 1976, with an effective appointment date of July 4, 1776.

Legacy

Congressman Henry “Light Horse Harry” Lee, a Revolutionary War comrade and father of the Civil War general Robert E. Lee, famously eulogized Washington as:

First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen, he was second to none in humble and enduring scenes of private life. Pious, just, humane, temperate, and sincere; uniform, dignified, and commanding; his example was as edifying to all around him as were the effects of that example lasting. . . . Correct throughout, vice shuddered in his presence and virtue always felt his fostering hand. The purity of his private character gave effulgence to his public virtues. . . . Such was the man for whom our nation mourns.

Lee’s words set the standard by which Washington’s overwhelming reputation was impressed upon the American memory. Washington set many precedents for the national government and the presidency in particular. His decision to relinquish the presidency after serving two terms in office would be formalized in the 22nd Amendment to the Constitution over 150 years later.

As early as 1778, Washington was lauded as the “Father of His Country.”

He was upheld as a shining example in schoolbooks and lessons: as courageous and farsighted, holding the Continental Army together through eight hard years of war and numerous privations, sometimes by sheer force of will; and as restrained: at war’s end taking affront at the notion he should be King; and after two terms as President, stepping aside.

Washington became the exemplar of republican virtue in America. More than any American he was extolled for his great personal integrity, and a deeply held sense of duty, honor and patriotism. He is seen more as a character model than war hero or founding father. One of Washington’s greatest achievements, in terms of republican values, was refraining from taking more power than was due. He was conscientious of maintaining a good reputation by avoiding political intrigue. He rejected nepotism or cronyism. Jefferson observed, “The moderation and virtue of a single character probably prevented this Revolution from being closed, as most others have been, by a subversion of that liberty it was intended to establish.”

Monuments and memorials

Today, Washington’s face and image are often used as national symbols of the United States, along with the icons such as the flag and great seal. Perhaps the most pervasive commemoration of his legacy is the use of his image on the one-dollar bill and the quarter-dollar coin. Washington, together with Theodore Roosevelt, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln, is depicted in stone at the Mount Rushmore Memorial. The Washington Monument, one of the most well-known American landmarks, was built in his honor. The George Washington Masonic National Memorial in Alexandria, Virginia, constructed entirely with voluntary contributions from members of the Masonic Fraternity, was also built in his honor.

Many things have been named in honor of Washington. Washington’s name became that of
the nation's capital, Washington, DC, and the State of Washington, the only state to be named after an American (Maryland, the Virginiasthe, the Carolinas and Georgia are named in honor of British monarchs). The George Washington University and Washington University in St. Louis were named for him.

Washington and slavery
For most of his life, Washington operated his plantations as a typical Virginia slave owner. In the 1760s, he dropped tobacco (which was prestigious but unprofitable) and shifted to wheat growing and diversified into milling flour, weaving cloth, and distilling brandy. By the time of his death, there were 317 slaves at Mount Vernon.

Before the American Revolution, Washington expressed no moral reservations about slavery, but, by 1778, he had stopped selling slaves without their consent because he did not want to break up slave families.

In 1778, while Washington was at war, he wrote to his manager at Mount Vernon that he wished to sell his slaves and “to get quit of negroes”, since maintaining a large (and increasingly elderly) slave population was no longer economically efficient. Washington could not legally sell the “dower slaves”, however, and because these slaves had long intermarried with his own slaves, he could not sell his slaves without breaking up families.[28]

After the war, Washington often privately expressed a dislike of the institution of slavery. Despite these privately expressed misgivings, Washington never criticized slavery in public. In fact, as President, Washington brought nine household slaves to the Executive Mansion in Philadelphia. By Pennsylvania law, slaves who resided in the state became legally free after six months. Washington rotated his household slaves between Mount Vernon and Philadelphia so that they did not earn their freedom, a scheme he attempted to keep hidden from his slaves and the public and one which was, in fact, against the law.[29]

Washington was the only prominent, slaveholding Founding Father to emancipate his slaves. He did not free his slaves in his lifetime, however, but instead included a provision in his will to free his slaves upon the death of his wife. It is important to understand that not all the slaves at his estate at Mt. Vernon were owned by him. His wife Martha owned a large number of slaves and Washington did not feel that he could unilaterally free slaves that came to Mt. Vernon from his wife’s estate. His actions were influenced by his close relationship with the Marquis de LaFayette. Martha Washington would free slaves to which she had title late in her own life. He did not speak out publicly against slavery, argues historian Dorothy Twogig, because he did not wish to risk splitting apart the young republic over what was already a sensitive and divisive issue.[30]

Religious beliefs
Washington was baptized as an infant into the Church of England.[31][32] In 1765, when the Church of England was still the state religion,[33] he served on the vestry (lay council) for his local church. Throughout his life, he spoke of the value of righteousness, and of seeking and offering thanks for the “blessings of Heaven.” He endorsed religion rhetorically and in his 1796 Farewell Address remarked on its importance in building moral character in American citizenry, believing morality undergirded all public order and successful popular government. In a letter to George Mason in 1785, he wrote that he was not among those alarmed by a bill “making people pay towards the support of that [religion] which they profess,” but felt that it was “impolitic” to pass such a measure, and wished it had never been proposed, believing that it would disturb public tranquility.[34]

His adopted daughter, Nelly Custis Lewis, stated: “I have heard her [Nelly’s mother, Eleanor Calvert Custis, who resided in Mount Vernon for two years] say that General Washington always received the sacrament with my grandmother [Martha Washington] before the revolution.”[35] After the revolution, Washington frequently accompanied his wife to Christian church services; however, there is no record of his ever taking communion, and he would regularly leave services before communion — with the other non-communicants (as was the custom of the day), until he ceased attending at all on communion Sundays.[36][37] Historians and biographers continue to debate the degree to which he can be counted as a Christian, and the degree to which he was a deist.

Washington was also a Freemason, the most famous member of the society in America. A few portraits of Washington show him wearing Masonic regalia. He occasionally received letters from prominent families, asking him to publicly state that he was not a Freemason, but Washington would reply and say only that he was not a member of the Illuminati.[38]

According to one source,[39] Washington was also a member of the World or Great Council of
the Fraternitas Rosae Crucis, and as such a Rose Cross, though this was known only to the Great Council at the time as he chose to remain an “inconnu” or an “unknown” of the Fraternity.

He was an early supporter of religious toleration and freedom of religion. In 1775, he ordered that his troops not show anti-Catholic sentiments by burning the pope in effigy on Guy Fawkes Night. When hiring workmen for Mount Vernon, he wrote to his agent, “If they be good workmen, they may be from Asia, Africa, or Europe; they may be Mohammedans, Jews, or Christians of any sect; or they may be Atheists.”[36]

**Personal life**

Though Washington had no children, he did have two successful nephews. Bushrod Washington became an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court, and Burwell Bassett was a long-time congressman in both Virginia State and United States government.

Ample anecdotal evidence suggests that George Washington was an enthusiast of cricket, once a popular sport in America.[40] He played the game on at least one occasion with his troops at Valley Forge during the Revolution.[41] This is a sporting passion that other presidents have shared, such as Abraham Lincoln.

**Myths and misconceptions**

- An early biographer, Parson Weems, was the source of the famous story about young Washington cutting down a cherry tree and confessing this to his father, in an 1800’s book entitled The Life of George Washington; With Curious Anecdotes, Equally Honorable to Himself and Exemplary to His Young Countrymen. Some historians believe Weems invented or greatly embellished the dialogue, while others build Weems credibility by citing the facts that he did interview older people who knew young Washington. Weems did not, in fact, include the cherry tree story until the fifth edition of this work; he ascribed it to an “excellent lady,” not otherwise identified. Even so, a careful reading of the account does not state that young George “cut down” the cherry tree, only that he hacked it so badly that he killed it. (and, also within the context of the story, he had just been given the hatchet as a gift and would be, in his father’s eyes, the only likely suspect.)
- A popular belief is that Washington wore a wig, as was the fashion among some at the time. He did not wear a wig; he did, however, powder his hair,[42] as represented in several portraits, including the well-known unfinished Gilbert Stuart depiction.[43]
- An old legend about Washington was that he threw or skipped a silver dollar across the Potomac River. One would need a strong arm to throw an object across the Potomac, for it is about a mile wide at Mount Vernon. More likely he threw an object across the Rappahannock River, the river on which his childhood home stood.
- Washington’s teeth were not made out of wood, as was once commonly believed. They were made out of teeth from different kinds of animals, specifically elk, hippopotamus, and human.

References: biographies

- Cunliffe, Marcus. George Washington: Man and Monument (1958), explores both the biography and the myth
interpretation of Washington’s career.


Further reading

The literature on George Washington is immense. The Library of Congress has a comprehensive bibliography online, as well as online scans of diaries, letterbooks, financial papers and military papers. Notable works not listed above include:

Primary sources


“Patriarch: George Washington and the New American Nation”
Book by Richard Norton Smith
- Booknotes interview with Brian Lamb at BookTV.org
- Watch the Booknotes interview in streaming video
- Read the transcript of the Booknotes interview

Scholarly studies

- Bickham, Troy O. “Sympathizing with Sedition? George Washington, the British Press, and British Attitudes During the American War of Independence.” William and Mary Quarterly 2002 59(1): 101-122. ISSN 0043-5597 Fulltext online in History Cooperative
online at Ebsco. As protests from treaty opponents intensified in 1795, Washington’s initial neutral position shifted to a solid pro-treaty stance. It was he who had the greatest impact on public and congressional opinion. With the assistance of Hamilton, Washington made tactical decisions that strengthened the Federalist campaign to mobilize support for the treaty. For example, he effectively delayed the treaty’s submission to the House of Representatives until public support was particularly strong in February 1796 and refocused the debate by dismissing as unconstitutional the request that all documentation relating to Jay’s negotiations be placed before Congress. Washington’s prestige and political skills applied popular political pressure to Congress and ultimately led to approval of the treaty’s funding in April 1796. His role in the debates demonstrated a “hidden-hand” leadership in which he issued public messages, delegated to advisers, and used his personality and the power of office to broaden support.

• Gregg II, Gary L. and Matthew Spalding, eds. George Washington and the American Political Tradition. ISI (1999), essays by scholars
• McCullough, David. 1776 2005. 386 pp. very well written overview of the year in America
• Miller, John C. The Federalist Era, 1789-1801 (1960), political survey of 1790s.
• Muñoz, Vincent Phillip. “George Washington on Religious Liberty” Review of Politics 2003 65(1): 11-33. ISSN 0034-6705 Fulltext online at Ebsco. Abstract: Article argues GW articulated a much narrower definition of religious liberty than Jefferson or Madison. Although GW believed in religious freedom, he counseled that its exercise must be limited by the duties of republican citizenship. He viewed religion and morality as indispensable parts of both a political system and an involved citizenry. Religion, therefore, deserved the support of those in government. At the same time, however, he wrote that the expression of religion should be free from government hindrance unless it interfered with the duties of citizenship.
• White, Leonard D. The Federalists: A Study in Administrative History (1956), thorough analysis of the mechanics of government in 1790s

Notes

1. ^ George Washington had no middle name. He was born when Britain and her colonies still used the Old Style (O.S.) Julian calendar. After 1752 when the New Style (N.S.) Gregorian was adopted, many important British-American dates were changed to reflect New Style. Both GW dates correctly reflect N.S.
2. ^ Under the Articles of Confederation Congress called its presiding officer “President of the United States in Congress Assembled.” He had no executive powers, but the similarity of titles has confused people into thinking there were other presidents before Washington. Merrill Jensen, The Articles of Confederation (1959), 178-9.
10. ^ John K. Amory, M.D., “George Washington’s infertility: Why was the father of our country never a father?” Fertility and Sterility, Vol. 81, No. 3, March 2004. (online, PDF format)
12. ^ The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799, John C. Fitzpatrick.
19. ^ After Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected to an unprecedented four terms, the two-term limit was formally integrated into the Federal Constitution by the 22nd Amendment.
22. ^ George Washington’s Distillery
25. ^ He has gained fame around the world as a quintessential example of a benevolent national founder. Gordon Wood concludes that the greatest act in his life was his resignation as commander of the armies—an act that stunned aristocratic Europe. Gordon Wood, The Radicalism of the American Revolution (1992), pp 105-6; Edmund Morgan, The Genius of George Washington (1980), pp 12-13; Sarah J. Purcell, Sealed With Blood: War, Sacrifice, and Memory in Revolutionary America (2002) p. 97; Don Higginbotham, George Washington (2004); Ellis, 2004. The earliest known image in which Washington is identified as such is on the cover of the circa 1778 Pennsylvania German almanac (Lancaster: Gedruckt bey Francis Bailey).
29. ^ Two slaves escaped while in Philadelphia; one of these, Oney Judge, was discovered in New Hampshire. Judge could have been captured and returned under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, which Washington had signed into law, but this was not done so as to avoid public controversy. See Wiencek, ch. 9; Hirschfeld, pp. 187–88; Ferling, p. 479.
31. ^ Family Bible entry http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online_books/hh/26/hh26f.htm
32. ^ Image of page from family Bible http://gwpapers.virginia.edu/project/faq/bible.html
33. ^ Colonial Williamsburg website has several articles on religion in colonial Virginia
35. ^ [1] Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis’ letter written to Jared Sparks, 1833
36. ^ a b The Religious Beliefs of Our Presidents by Franklin Steiner
37. ^ [2] Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis’ letter written to Jared Sparks, 1833
38. ^ The History Channel, Mysteries of the Freemasons: America, video documentary, August 1, 2006, written by Noah Nicholas and Molly Bedell
41. ^ The American Revolution Webpage: The Winter At Valley Forge. Retrieved on 2006-12-
05.
43. ^ Gilbert Stuart. Smithsonian National Picture Gallery: George Washington (the

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2 Responses to “George Washington”

Linds

October 19, 2007 at 8:42 pm

u write too much
i got totally lost
dont write as much

Reply

Pages « Friends of the American Revolution
Trackback on July 22, 2008 at 10:49 am
Do we mean the American war? The Revolution was effected before the war commenced. The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people; a change in their religious sentiments, of their duties and obligations… This radical change in the principles, opinions, sentiments, and affections of the people was the real American Revolution. The Revolution was supported by such friends as Lafayette and Rochambeau from France, von Steuben from Prussia, and Kosciuszko from Poland and, although we Brits were ostensibly at war with the Colonies, it had its Friends in this country, too. The Duke of Richmond, a great grandson of Charles II, said in the House of Lords that under no code should the fighting Americans be considered traitors. The Revolutionary War was an insurrection by American Patriots in the 13 colonies to British rule, resulting in American independence. For more than a decade before the outbreak of the American Revolution in 1775, tensions had been building between colonists and the British authorities. Attempts by the British government to raise revenue by taxing the colonies (notably the Stamp Act of 1765, the Townshend Tariffs of 1767 and the Tea Act of 1773) met with heated protest among many colonists, who resented their lack of representation in Parliament and demanded the same rights as other British subjects. As memorials to American wars go, this one goes right back to the first one -- the Revolutionary War. And it is certainly among the most handsome and most intricate history lessons ever built. The replica of the Hermione set sail from Rochefort, France (where the original ship was built), on April 19, destination America. CBS News. Lafayette is the point of this story. The French aristocrat and great friend of George Washington's, the Marquis de Lafayette, was returning to the revolutionary battle aboard Hermione on that 1780 voyage, and he was bringing good news -- that French troops and more fighting ships were also coming to America to support the cause. They would prove decisive.
This volume is the culmination of Jerome Reich's research on conflicting political ideologies current in England and America during the second half of the eighteenth century and those English individuals who attempted--albeit unsuccessfully--to reconcile them. These short chapter studies profile a dozen British men and women, who, for diverse reasons, opposed the policy of the British government toward its thirteen colonies before and during the American Revolution and helped prepare the way for the recognition of the United States as an independent nation. Other partner organizations include the Richard Lounsbery Foundation and Friends of Hermione à€” Lafayette in America. This conference will highlight the well-known alliance between the United States and France as well as lesser-known relationships with the Netherlands, Spain, and other Europeans states and individuals. For the conference schedule, please click here. Mount Vernon is proud to serve as the 2015 conference host and co-sponsor for the Sons of the American Revolution (SAR)à€™s Annual Conference on the American Revolution. Other partner organizations include the Richard Lounsbery Foundation and Friends of Hermione à€” Lafayette in America.