



2005 Shaping the World: Conversation on Democracy Thomas Jefferson Talks With George Washington

George Washington

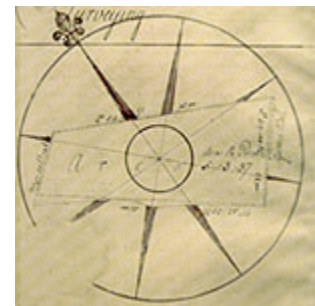
1732-1799

George Washington, the most celebrated person in American history, was born on 22 February 1732 on his father's plantation on Pope's Creek in Westmoreland county, Virginia. His father, Augustine, a third-generation English colonist firmly established in the middle ranks of the Virginia gentry, was twice married. He had two sons, Lawrence and Augustine, in 1718 and 1720, before his first wife, Jane Butler Washington, died in 1728. In 1731 Augustine married Mary Ball (1709-1789), and George was born a year later. Five other children followed Samuel, Elizabeth, John Augustine, Charles, and Mildred (who died in infancy). About 1735 the Washington family moved from Westmoreland County to Augustine, Sr.'s plantation on Little Hunting Creek, and lived there until they moved to a farm on the Rappahannock river opposite Fredericksburg in 1738.

Surveying the Land: An Early Career for Young Washington

George Washington became the "Father of his country" despite having lost his own father at an early age. In 1743, when George was eleven years old, Augustine Washington died and left the bulk of his estate to George's half-brothers. Lawrence inherited Little Hunting Creek plantation (which he later renamed Mount Vernon in honor of Admiral Edward Vernon under whom he had served in the War of Jenkins' Ear), and Augustine, Jr., inherited the Westmoreland County plantation where George was born. George himself inherited the more modest Rappahannock River plantation where he lived with his mother and siblings, but this was not enough to maintain his middling status in the Virginia gentry. His half-brother Lawrence suggested that George enter on a career in the British navy, but George's mother rejected the proposal. Instead, he was trained as a land surveyor, a profession of considerable importance in Virginia, where colonial settlement was pushing rapidly into the Shenandoah Valley and other parts of western Virginia.

Washington's surveying career benefited much from Lawrence's patronage, and more particularly from that of the wealthy Fairfax family of Belvoir, Lawrence's neighbors and in-laws. Washington became a surveyor of Lord Fairfax's extensive Northern Neck proprietary, and with his sponsorship was appointed surveyor of Culpeper County in 1748. Washington's profitable surveying career provided him with much that an ambitious white Virginian needed to make it big in the eighteenth century. He gained familiarity with the colony's back country while developing methodical habits of mind and wilderness survival skills. He established a reputation for fairness, honesty, and dependability while making favorable impressions on members of the provincial elite. Washington also learned self-dependence and earned the rewards of ambition fulfilled. Not only did he receive substantial fees for surveying, but he discovered firsthand how to speculate successfully in land, an especially important consideration in colonial America, where land equaled power. By 1751, when he accompanied Lawrence to Barbados, the younger Washington had accumulated almost as many acres of fertile soil in the Shenandoah as his half-brother had at Mount Vernon.



Building a Record in the Military

Although Lawrence at that time possessed two of the great prerequisites of rising Virginia gentlemen—an inherited estate and impressive marriage connections—George enjoyed something more important in the long run: an impressive physique and the blessing of good health. Washington survived a case of smallpox while in the West Indies, thus acquiring immunity to the disease that claimed the lives of many colonial Americans, but his brother died in 1752 after returning from the Caribbean, probably of tuberculosis. Lawrence's infant daughter, to whom he originally bequeathed Mount Vernon, died before reaching her majority, and in 1754 Washington leased the estate from Lawrence's widow, Ann Fairfax Washington, who held a life title to it.

Washington's burning ambition for personal distinction did not permit him to remain long content as a tobacco planter but compelled him to seek out honor on the battlefield. He persuaded the Virginia governor to appoint him to his deceased brother's adjutancy in 1752, which came with a commission as major and an annual salary of 100 pounds. He later transferred to the adjutancy of Virginia's Northern Neck and Eastern Shore with the responsibility of training the Northern District's militiamen.

In October 1753 Washington volunteered to investigate reports of French encroachments on Virginia's western frontier that threatened the interests of the colony's great land speculators. Upon the return to Williamsburg of his small party from the shores of Lake Erie in January 1754, Washington received popular recognition through the publication of his detailed journal of the rugged four-month-long expedition. That May the twenty-one-year-old became commander of the Virginia Regiment, raised to oppose the French in the Ohio Valley, and French retaliation for the attack on a small party across the Alleghenies provided his first defeat—the surrender of the hastily-constructed Fort Necessity in July 1754. Thus commenced the French and Indian War, the colonial phase of the Great War for Empire between the French in Canada and the British along the Atlantic seaboard and their respective colonists and native American allies. Washington learned much from the professionalism of British generals Edward Braddock and John Forbes under whom he served and earned a military reputation not only for courage and coolness under fire but also as an efficient administrator and a fair and able commander of men. He also developed a resentment of the British officials who denied him the regular army commission to which he aspired and proper respect for the contributions made by provincial troops in general and his Virginia Regiment in particular.

Love & Marriage

With his prestige enhanced by his military experiences and the potential of his land holdings vastly increased by bounties granted to officers and men of the Virginia Regiment (he owned 45,000 acres west of the mountains at his death), Washington returned to private life as a very eligible bachelor. On 6 January 1759 the twenty-six-year-old married Martha Dandridge Custis (1731-1802), the widow of Daniel Parke Custis, who had left her and their two children, John Parke and Martha Parke Custis, one of the greatest fortunes in Virginia. Washington was named their legal guardian two years later and devoted much time and energy over the next sixteen years managing the Custis estate. Also in 1761 he became the outright owner of Mount Vernon (which he expanded to about 7,300 acres by 1799) as his brother's residual heir upon the death of Lawrence's widow.

The master of Mount Vernon thus became one of the wealthiest planters in Virginia, and the next decade and a half of Washington's life were probably his happiest years. Although he and Martha had no children of their own, the couple raised Martha's children, and later two of her grandchildren, Eleanor and George Washington Parke Custis.

Washington's domestic life was a full one. Virginia plantation lords not only supervised agricultural operations and marketed a staple commodity (Washington began to shift the Mount Vernon farms over from the traditional tobacco crop to wheat, for which he built his own gristmill), managed an enslaved labor force (in Washington's case, of about 274 blacks), and provided sustenance, health care, and leadership for the entire plantation community. The deference that glued Virginia society together required gentlemen like Washington to manifest their social status by maintaining a lavish lifestyle modeled after that of the British landed gentry and aristocracy. Washington especially enjoyed the displays this entailed, such as renovating his mansion in the latest style and filling it with the finest furnishings, stocking his cellars with vintage Madeira, acquiring the best-blooded horses for his stables, keeping a deer park and riding to the hounds, conducting agricultural experiments, extending expansive hospitality to neighbors and strangers, and sacrificing some of his leisure time to serve in public office.

Politics & War

Washington was first elected to the Virginia House of Burgesses in 1758 as a representative of Frederick County, and he was later elected by Fairfax County landholders, serving a total of sixteen years in the colonial assembly. From 1760 to 1774 he also sat as a justice of the Fairfax County court at Alexandria. In the imperial crisis of the 1760s and 1770s, he became an early advocate of the patriot cause. After Governor Dunmore dissolved the Assembly in 1774, Washington met with other disgruntled Burgesses at the Raleigh Tavern in Williamsburg and adopted a nonimportation agreement. That same year he was elected by the first Virginia Convention as a delegate to the First Continental Congress, which adopted Virginia's program of economic coercion against the mother country. In May 1775, less than a month after a shooting war commenced at Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts, Washington again traveled to Philadelphia to take his seat in the Second Continental Congress. When it adopted the New England militia army that was besieging the British Army in Boston in June 1775, Congress recognized Washington's military experience and political trustworthiness by unanimously electing him its commander-in-chief. Washington arrived at Cambridge headquarters on 2 July 1775 and did not see Mount Vernon again for another six years, although Martha traveled to Cambridge that December and shared in her husband's difficulties throughout much of the war.

Washington's first challenge as a general was to mold an inexperienced and undisciplined group of patriotic volunteers into a professional army, and he did so by instituting efficient administrative procedures, setting high standards of personal conduct, and emphasizing discipline, cleanliness, and colonial unity. Washington also concentrated on instilling a professional ethic in the New England militia officers who remained in the Continental service, and in 1776 he reorganized the officer corps and ended the practice of having the troops elect their own officers. His greatest challenge, however, was to obtain dependable, long-term enlisted men without arousing deep-rooted American fears of a standing army. He derived more immediate satisfaction in March 1776 when he secretly fortified Dorchester Heights and compelled British forces to evacuate Boston.

Well-aware of military geography, Washington directly marched his army to New York City, correctly guessing it would be the enemy's next target, and he also sent detachments to Canada in an unsuccessful attempt to secure the other end of the vital Hudson-Champlain corridor by which the British could effectively isolate New England from the other rebellious colonies. He learned from his errors in the New York campaign, in which his only success was to save the army from total annihilation, and brilliantly counter-attacked at Trenton and Princeton, New Jersey, in the winter of 1776-1777.



Washington's greatest achievement, however, was to hold his little army together over the next two years in the face of public apathy, marginal state support, inadequate Congressional assistance, and a series of logistical and military frustrations at Valley Forge and during the subsequent Philadelphia campaign. Only successful diplomatic efforts enlisting the assistance of the French army and navy enabled Washington to mount a strategic offensive. At Yorktown in 1781 he completed a successful siege operation in the traditional European style and captured Lord Cornwallis's entire army; he later celebrated in typical understatement by naming one of his favorite greyhounds after the earl. Like the Roman hero Cincinnatus, Washington bid farewell to his comrades in arms in 1783, resigned his Continental commission, and retired to private life.

First President of a New Country

Washington's return to Mount Vernon was not permanent, however, for he soon realized that the mission he had set himself in 1775 was only half completed. America had won independence from Great Britain, but did not achieve effective self-governance. According to a 1783 circular letter to the states, Washington felt that a respectable national existence required an indissoluble union of the states under one federal head, a sacred regard for public justice, the establishment of proper national defense, and the suppression of local prejudices. During the Revolution, the government under the Articles of Confederation was barely able to provide for the common defense, and after the war it failed to ensure domestic tranquility, especially in rural New England, where armed insurgents closed the Massachusetts courts. Washington lent the great military and political prestige he had gained as commander-in-chief to the cause of forming a more perfect union that would secure the blessings of liberty for which he had fought and so many had died.

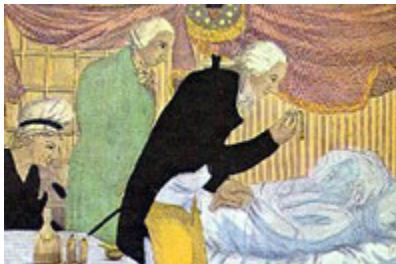
The meeting of joint commissioners for Virginia and Maryland at Mount Vernon to work out a code for use of the Chesapeake Bay and Potomac River (Washington had long been a proponent of canalizing the latter to create a water route to the interior), led to the Annapolis Convention of 1786, called to discuss regulation of interstate commerce. In 1787 Washington was chosen as a Virginia delegate to the Philadelphia Convention that was to revise the Articles of Confederation. Against his wishes Washington was elected presiding officer. The resulting Federal constitution that was adopted in September 1787 did not bear much of his handiwork, but it breathed the spirit of his strong nationalism, and his reputation was tied to its success. Not very surprisingly, Washington was elected president after it was ratified and became the first executive officer to serve under the new government. The same rigorous sense of duty that saw him through the Revolutionary War compelled the fifty-seven-year-old Washington to take the presidential oath of office on 30 April 1789 in the new federal capital of New York City. Dignity, common sense, political acumen gained from twenty years experience, and a keen judgment of men's characters and abilities were his chief assets in dealing with the new Senate and House of Representatives, establishing general precedent, and making appointments. He had a difficult time in finding qualified individuals to serve in the new federal judiciary, but the heads of the executive departments of war, state, and the Treasury, were men of talent, integrity, and even brilliance. The president supported Treasury secretary Alexander Hamilton's fiscal program of federal assumption of

state war debts and the creation of a national bank, both of which chiefly benefited the monied classes, as the only viable way for the United States to restore its national credit and assume its proper rank among the nations. Even before the end of Washington's first administration, opposition coalesced around secretary of state Thomas Jefferson and his friend congressman James Madison. These Virginia gentlemen favored a states' rights view of strict interpretation of the Constitution, domestic policies favoring the landed interests, and a foreign policy aligned more closely to France than Britain.

With growing polarization between Federalists and Democratic-Republicans, Washington's sense of duty prevented him from retiring after a single term. One final time he postponed retirement and again put his personal prestige on the line for the sake of the nation. Although he was unanimously elected to a second term as president, the nation was anything but united behind him. The small and ill-supplied United States Army suffered two disastrous defeats against Northwestern Indian nations. America found itself caught between warring European powers as the French Revolution reached an international phase. At home, the president called out the militia to put down an uprising in western Pennsylvania against Hamilton's new excise tax on distilled spirits. Democratic-Republican criticisms that he had become the head of a party instead of the nation boiled over in reaction to the treaty that John Jay had signed with the British and the Senate ratified in 1795. Although Washington himself was not satisfied with its terms, he was realistic enough to understand that it was the best that could then be negotiated and it did remove some major irritants from Anglo-American relations. In the face of growing newspaper attacks against him, which he tended to take personally, the president handed the reins of government over to his successor, John Adams, in the spring of 1797. Washington knew that his leadership was no longer indispensable to the survival of the nation, and he left as his political testament to the American people his Farewell Address, which was widely printed in newspapers and broadsides.

The Final Chapter

Only once more was the General called from his beloved plantation to serve the country. As war with France appeared imminent in 1798, President Adams appointed Washington as commander-in-chief of a new army, but the crisis passed before it was organized and raised. He had only a short time left to enjoy life at Mount Vernon, and Washington died with the eighteenth century. His end came suddenly on 14 December 1799 and the outpouring of grief over his death was widespread and sincere. By providing in his will for the freedom of his own slaves after Martha's death, the master of Mount Vernon added one final private statement to his long and valuable public career. The nation would have to wrestle with the challenge of slavery, as well as all its other great challenges of the new century, without his guiding hand.



Biographical information by Mark Mastromarino
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