

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

A Short Biography of George Washington

“More than most, Washington’s biography is the story of a man constructing himself.”

— W. W. Abbot¹

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Early Life

America’s first president was born on February 22, 1732² to Augustine Washington (1694–1743) and his second wife, Mary Ball Washington (1708–89), at their family plantation at Popes Creek, Westmoreland County, Virginia. Together with his four siblings (Elizabeth, Samuel, John Augustine, and Charles; a fifth, Mildred, died as an infant), George spent much of his childhood on the move with his family. (George also had three stepsiblings from his father’s previous marriage: Lawrence and Augustine II—respectively 14 and 12 years George’s senior—and Jane, who died when George was two.) When he was three, the family relocated 60 miles upstream to their home at Little Hunting Creek on the Potomac (later named Mount Vernon); three years later, they moved once more, this time to a smaller plot of land on the Rappahannock River near Fredericksburg that was close to an iron furnace George’s father was then managing.

When Washington, at age 11, lost his father to a sudden illness, the family owned nearly 50 slaves and 10,000 acres of land, planting the family firmly in the landed gentry of Virginia—though by no means near the top of that class. George’s inheritance included, among other things, the family plot near Fredericksburg and its ten slaves. With his father’s death also came the news that he would not be able to attend the classical Appleby School in England as his stepbrothers had. This lack of a liberal education was much regretted by Washington as an adult, who would later write that “future years cannot compensate for lost *days* at this period” of one’s educational life.³

¹ W. W. Abbot, “An Uncommon Awareness of Self,” *Prologue: Quarterly Journal of the National Archives and Records Administration* 29 (1989): 7–19; repr. in *George Washington Reconsidered*, ed. Don Higginbotham (University Press of Virginia: 2001), 277. Abbot (1922–2009) was the longtime editor-in-chief of *The Papers of George Washington* project.

² Washington was born under the Julian calendar then in use in the British Empire on February 11, 1731; this date was changed to February 22, 1732 when the Gregorian calendar was implemented in 1752.

³ George Washington, Letter to George Steptoe Washington, December 5, 1790, qtd. in Ron Chernow, *Washington: A Life* (New York: Penguin Press, 2010), 12.

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Instead, George learned lessons that would benefit him practically as a farmer and landowner: math, geometry, surveying, law (e.g., leases, bonds, and patents) and basic economics (interest, currency conversions, etc.). With an intense desire to improve himself, the teenage Washington regularly mined books for their maxims to live by; he famously copied out all 110 “Rules of Civility & Decent Behaviour in Company and Conversation.”

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At the same time, George regularly visited his older stepbrother Lawrence, who had inherited Mount Vernon and, shortly after his father’s death, married Ann Fairfax, daughter of the powerful Colonel William Fairfax. Lawrence’s marriage into the family quickly elevated him into the higher social class, and he soon won election to the Virginia House of Burgesses. Lawrence regularly invited George to visit him at Belvoir, the Fairfax estate not far from Mount Vernon, and soon George won the approval of the Colonel himself, who took him on fox hunts (George was, even at a young age, already noted for his riding ability) and taught him to navigate the world of the upper gentry.⁴

In 1746, at the age of 16, Washington set out with George William Fairfax (Colonel Fairfax’s son) to survey much of the Northern Neck Proprietary, which the Fairfax family had received from King Charles II in 1649. The surveying trip took Washington into the Shenandoah Valley, and it was here that he first became accustomed to life in the wild—even as he simultaneously sought to fit into polite society back home. For the next several years, George worked as a surveyor for the Fairfax family, and by the time he turned 21 had accumulated nearly 2,500 acres of his own in the Shenandoah Valley.

Early Military Career

In 1752, Lawrence Washington died of tuberculosis, leaving his seat as an adjutant general of the Virginia militia vacant. George, inspired by his stepbrother’s example and with a handful of influential patrons who would vouch for him, applied for the position despite his lack of military experience. In February 1753, just before his 21st birthday, he received the appointment as district adjutant for the Northern Neck of Virginia, becoming a major in the Virginia militia. At six-feet-tall and a muscular 180 pounds, he looked the part.

⁴ For more on Washington’s time at Belvoir, see Noemie Emery’s “Young Washington and Cato.”

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In October of the following year, Washington was given the assignment to venture into the western territories of the Ohio Country (so named for the Ohio Company, a land speculation company that both of Washington's stepbrothers had helped found in 1747) to learn if the French were building forts in the land that England claimed as hers. If they were, Washington should ask them to peacefully depart; if they didn't, Washington was, in an order signed by King George II, "strictly charge[d] and command[ed] . . . to drive them off by force of arms."⁵

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Joined by a small band of outdoorsmen and a French interpreter, Washington set off into the Ohio wilderness, where he quickly became plagued by miserably cold weather and freezing rain. Nevertheless, he made contact with local Iroquois Indians, who guided Washington to a French trading post; from there, they made their way to the French Fort Le Boeuf, arriving at the fort (in present day northwest Pennsylvania) in mid-December. The French were not keen to obey Washington's request that they leave, and Washington hurriedly returned to Williamsburg to report the news. Presenting Governor Dinwiddie with the French reply, along with his own estimates of French military power and a detailed journal of the expedition, Washington impressed his superiors with the diligence with which he undertook the mission. His reports were soon published in newspapers across the Colonies and in Great Britain, making the young George Washington instantly famous—and setting the stage for the soon-to-come French and Indian War.

A few months later, the now-Lieutenant Colonel Washington led about a hundred militiamen and a number of Mingo Iroquois warriors back into the wilderness, this time to confront the French. In an ambush by Washington against a French force of about 35 men, a French envoy, Joseph Coulon de Villiers de Jumonville, who carried a message to the British, was killed, setting off a diplomatic nightmare. (Washington claimed that the French were spying on his party and preparing to launch their own ambush.) Aware that the French would retaliate, Washington swiftly began constructing defenses, which he labeled Fort Necessity. On July 3, 1754, the French finally attacked, killing a third of Washington's soldiers while only suffering three dead of their own. By nightfall, the French commander—who was the fallen Jumonville's brother—accepted Washington's surrender and allowed him and his men to return to Virginia.

The failed expedition raised Washington's profile both in the Colonies and abroad, though not in the way the ambitious young officer desired: while many Americans

⁵ Chernow, 32.

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thought Washington brave, if inexperienced, many in London and elsewhere derided the infamous disaster and the brash young colonial who caused it. With war soon to be declared between Britain and France, it is not too much to say with Sir Horace Walpole of London that “the volley fired by a young Virginian in the backwoods of America set the world on fire.”

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Following the surrender of Fort Necessity, Washington served as an aide-de-camp to British General Edward Braddock. After a disastrous expedition in which Braddock was killed along with much of his fighting force, Washington—who had two horses shot out from under him and four bullets tear through his hat and clothes—was hailed as a hero for his courageous actions during the battle. Soon he was made a colonel in the Virginia militia and commander in chief of all forces raised in Virginia, overseeing about 1,500 men. As commander, Washington spent much time and energy in training his men to be soldiers, but was constantly plagued by the problems of deserters and frustrations with the political leaders who seemed, to him, to hinder his every move. After serving for three years—and being repeatedly denied a regular military appointment in the British army—Washington retired his commission in December 1758.

Planter and Revolutionary

A month after retiring from the military, Washington married the wealthy widow Martha Dandridge Custis. Just a couple of years later, Lawrence’s widow died and Washington inherited Mount Vernon, which he and Martha would from then on call home. He also soon took his seat in the Virginia House of Burgesses, whose members immediately welcomed him with a resolution thanking him for his brave service to Virginia and to the Crown. The 27-year-old planter had, thanks to his ambition, discipline, and general good fortune, finally arrived to the place of distinction he had always craved.

Over the next few years, Washington remained involved in Virginian politics while overseeing his ever-more-productive estate at Mount Vernon. Throughout the 1760s, he struggled with debt as his tobacco crops failed, but saw the struggle as an opportunity to diversify his crops—eventually bringing 3,000 of his 8,000 acres at Mount Vernon under cultivation—and to take on more diversified business ventures, including fishing, milling, horse breeding, spinning, weaving, and land speculation.

As his frustrations with British creditors grew, so too did his protest against the policies of the British Crown. In 1765, he opposed the unpopular Stamp Act; a few years

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later, he led opposition against the Townshend Acts (opposition to which, in Boston, eventually led to the Boston Massacre in 1770), encouraging Virginia to boycott British goods until the Acts were repealed. Though angered by the acts themselves—the Stamp Act imposed a direct tax on the colonists’ use of printed materials, and the Townshend Acts similarly imposed new taxes on the colonists in order to raise revenue—Washington’s larger disagreement with them was their enactment by a British parliament that lacked American representation. This taxation without representation was viewed by Washington as a violation of the colonists’ rights as Englishmen. His frustrations continued to grow over the next few years. Though not agreeing with the Boston Tea Partiers who dumped 342 chests of tea into Massachusetts Bay in the winter of 1773, he found the British response—to send soldiers to Boston—intolerable, declaring it an “unexampled testimony of the most despotic system of tyranny that ever was practiced in a free gov[ernment].”⁶

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In August 1774, at 42 years old, Washington was elected as one of Virginia’s seven delegates to the First Continental Congress to meet in Philadelphia. In the company of great orators and statesmen from the 13 colonies, Washington was noted for his quiet, reserved manner and prudence. From the early days of the Congress, Washington stood out as a potential choice as commander in chief—if things came to that. In April 1775, the first military engagements of the American Revolutionary War were fought, when a group of Massachusetts militiamen defended their store of military supplies at Concord against about 700 British army regulars ordered to seize them. The Battles of Lexington and Concord, begun with the “shot heard ’round the World,” as Ralph Waldo Emerson would later call it, marked the beginning of open hostilities. When the Second Continental Congress met in May, Washington appeared in full military uniform, signaling his willingness to serve in a military capacity. On June 16, it was announced the he had been unanimously selected by the Congress to lead the army of the United Colonies.

General

Washington’s first order of business as general was to form a regular army out of the assortment of colonial militias that had been created. After assuming command of the colonial forces outside Boston, Washington, urged by Congress to attack the British, called for restraint and instead took the time to build his forces and plan a suitable attack.

⁶ Chernow, 166.

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His planning paid off. In March 1776, he placed cannon, earlier transported from Fort Ticonderoga by Henry Knox, on the top of Dorchester Heights, which overlooked the British-held city of Boston—leading the occupiers to evacuate the city.

Washington then led his army to New York. In the summer, British General William Howe, supported by his brother, Admiral Richard Howe, began a campaign to capture New York City. Heavily outnumbered, Washington and his army were soundly beaten and forced to retreat. For the next few months, the Continentals lost city after city in New York and in New Jersey to the advancing British, while also losing their own men to desertion and expiring enlistments. Morale was low (“These are the times that try men’s souls,” Thomas Paine would write that December), and the future of the army—and the fledgling country it fought for—was at stake. Though many of his 7,600 men were personally loyal to their commander—indeed, as one officer wrote, many of the men felt that they could not “desert a man . . . who has deserted everything to defend his country”⁷—they also had debts to pay and families who felt the hardship of their absence. Many planned on leaving the army when their enlistments expired at the end of the year.

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Washington, acutely feeling the desperation of the moment, knew it was time for a decisive victory. Wagering the future of his army on an operation whose watchword was “Victory or Death,” on the frigid night of December 25, 1776, he led his men across Delaware River into Trenton, New Jersey, to surprise a group of Hessian soldiers. The gamble paid off, and Washington captured nearly 900 Hessian soldiers and much-needed supplies. The army, invigorated, lived to fight another day.

Throughout 1777, Washington engaged the British in Pennsylvania and New York, suffering a defeat at the Battle of Brandywine in September that enabled General Howe to capture the American capital of Philadelphia. In October, Washington again lost at the Battle of Germantown. However, while engaging General Howe, Washington sent Generals Horatio Gates and Benedict Arnold to fight against British General John Burgoyne in New York. On October 17, after losing roughly a thousand of his men in the Battle of Saratoga, Burgoyne surrendered his army. The American victory prompted the French to enter the war and openly ally with the American cause.

In the winter of 1777, Washington set up camp for his 11,000 men 20 miles northwest of Philadelphia at Valley Forge, which he described as “a dreary kind of place and

⁷ Chernow, 272.

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uncomfortably provided.”⁸ On the way into camp, Washington saw the bloody footprints left by his underequipped and barefoot men in the snow, a sign of things to come. Moved by his men’s suffering, he angrily wrote against members of the Pennsylvanian legislature who had criticized him for retiring his men into winter quarters: “I can assure those gentlemen that it is a much easier and less distressing thing to draw remonstrances in a comfortable room by a good fireside than to occupy a cold bleak hill and sleep under frost and snow without clothes or blankets. However, although they seem to have little feeling for the naked, distressed soldiers, I feel superabundantly for them and from my soul pity those miseries which it is neither in my power to relieve or prevent.”⁹ Over the next few months, Washington would lose to disease between two and three thousand of his men.

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With France now in the war on America’s side (which, in addition to providing the Americans much needed military and monetary support, also divided the British presence in the Americas as they now had to defend their colonies in the Indies and elsewhere), Washington was able to pursue the British in New York once more. In 1781, with the aid of the French General the Comte de Rochambeau and a young Marquis de Lafayette, Washington set out on what would become known as the Yorktown campaign. Joined by the Comte de Grasse and his fleet of French warships near the Chesapeake Bay, Washington and Rochambeau set siege to the British encampment at Yorktown. On October 17, the British, under the command of Lord Cornwallis, surrendered. Though no one knew it at the time, this battle marked the end of open hostilities.

The Treaty of Paris was signed in September 1783, officially ending the war. On December 4, Washington assembled his officers and, with a shaky voice, announced that he was taking his leave. Then, the man famous for his self-control took each of his officers in a tearful embrace and departed. As one witness wrote, “Such a scene of sorrow and weeping I had never before witnessed . . . *The simple thought . . . that we should see his face no more in this world seemed to me utterly insupportable.*”¹⁰ Three weeks later, on December 23, 1783, after eight long years of serving as commander in chief, Washington formally resigned his commission to the Continental Congress and went home to his beloved Mount Vernon.

⁸ Chernow, 323.

⁹ George Washington, Letter to Henry Laurens, December 23, 1777, www.apnewsarchive.com/1991/Excerpts-from-Washington-s-Dec-23-1777-Letter-to-Henry-Laurens-With-AM-Washington-Letter/id-297701aeb7f7ddfc071905ee2f5e9617.

¹⁰ Chernow, 452.

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Statesman, President, and Beyond

For the next several years, Washington, now in his fifties, set to work reordering his affairs at Mount Vernon and making the plantation profitable again. Next to Benjamin Franklin, Washington was the first American celebrity, and his estate was the destination of a constant stream of friends, veterans, and complete strangers who came to see the man who had led the American Revolution. (Washington's hospitality goes, in part, to explaining why he always found his expenses to outweigh his income.)

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In late 1786, Washington was informed that—without his asking—he had been made the head of Virginia's delegation to the upcoming Constitutional Convention, to be held in May of the following year. Washington reluctantly agreed to go, but, once there, was unanimously made the Convention's president. Participating little in the debates, his presence alone had enormous significance—not least, for the designing of the American presidency, a position all in the room thought Washington would be first to fill.

On April 30, 1789, after being unanimously elected by the Electoral College, Washington took the oath of office at Federal Hall in New York City and became the first President of the United States. At the country's first inauguration, Washington set a number of precedents: despite earning his fame as a military commander, he left his military uniform at home; though the new US Constitution said nothing about an inaugural speech, he delivered the First Inaugural Address; and, according to legend, he ended his recitation of the oath of office with the words "So help me God."

Once in office, Washington set about creating a presidency that upheld the dignity of the office while not smacking of monarchy or royalty. Instead of accepting the proposed Senate title—"His Highness, the President of the United States of America, and Protector of their Liberties"—he chose the simpler "President of the United States," which had been adopted by the House. He held official dinners every other week, and designated a weekly time when visitors could meet with him. He also established the first Cabinet, appointing Thomas Jefferson as Secretary of State, Alexander Hamilton as the Secretary of the Treasury, Henry Knox as the Secretary of War, and Edmund Randolph as Attorney General.

In the early 1790s, Washington pushed for the creation of a national bank (which Congress approved in 1791), made a tour of the United States, oversaw the creation of

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the capital city, and kept the United States officially uninvolved in the French Revolution and the war between France and Great Britain. In 1792, he won reelection—again unanimously. Two years later, in a strong showing of federal authority, he raised a militia and, at 62 years old, personally led the troops to quell a growing rebellion of Pennsylvanian farmers who opposed a federal tax on whiskey.

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On September 19, 1796, Washington published his Farewell Address, announcing that he would not seek a third term. On March 4, 1795, the 65-year-old attended the swearing in of John Adams as the nation’s second president, and he and Martha left for their home at Mount Vernon.

Once back in Virginia, Washington continued his tradition of hospitality and remained active in politics, encouraging, for example, Federalist candidates like John Marshall and Henry Lee to run against the Jeffersonian Republicans. He also set about getting his own affairs in order: arranging his correspondence and penning his will, in which he freed his slaves (upon Martha’s death). On Thursday, December 12, 1799, he went out for a tour of his farm on horseback, returning five hours later in the midst of snow and freezing rain. On December 14, he died. Four days later, a private military funeral was held at Mount Vernon. A Virginia cavalry unit led the solemn procession to bury Washington, followed by a group of infantry, a small military band, four clergymen, and, in a fitting image, Washington’s horse, outfitted with a saddle and pistols but conspicuously missing its legendary rider. Washington was laid to rest in his family’s vault down the road from the main mansion at Mount Vernon. According to Washington biographer Ron Chernow, “It speaks to Washington’s humility that the greatest man of his age was laid to rest in a communal tomb where nobody could single out his grave or honor him separately.”¹¹

¹¹ Chernow, 810.