

George Washington

“Father of His Country,” “The Sage of Mount Vernon,” “The Foundingest Father of them all” ... Martha Washington called him “Her Old Man.”

On April 30, 1789, George Washington, standing on the balcony of Federal Hall on Wall Street in New York, took his oath of office as the first President of the United States. He wrote James Madison,

“As the first of every thing, in our situation will serve to establish a Precedent, it is devoutly wished on my part, that these precedents may be fixed on true principles.”

Born in 1732 into a Virginia planter family, he learned the morals, manners and body of knowledge requisite for an 18th century Virginia gentleman.

The unexpected death of their father, when George Washington was eleven, prevented him from receiving a classical, Latin-based education at Appleby School in England. Instead, private tutors and possibly a local school in Fredericksburg provided the young man with the only formal instruction he would receive.

Throughout his life, George Washington felt keenly embarrassed by his lack of a formal education, privately admitting that he was “conscious of a defective education,” and for good reason.

The majority of the founders were college-educated gentleman who had spent years reading law and studying the classics. Washington was one of the few in his generation who rose to leadership without these advantages.

In addition to reading, writing, and basic legal forms, Washington studied geometry and trigonometry - in preparation for his first career as a surveyor - and manners - which would shape his character and conduct for the rest of his life.

The printed word, as much as the trials of battle, forged George Washington the soldier and was central to his efforts to create disciplined, effective armies.

The war stories told by his half-brother, Lawrence Washington, an officer in the Virginia militia likely ignited Washington’s interest in a military career, but printed histories may have also inspired him.

He pursued two intertwined interests: military arts and western expansion.

In 1747, Washington executed his first practice surveys, and in 1749 he secured the lucrative office of county surveyor in Culpeper County, Virginia. At 16 he helped survey Shenandoah lands for Thomas, Lord Fairfax.

Commissioned a lieutenant colonel in 1754, he fought the first skirmishes of what grew into the French and Indian War. The next year, as an aide to Gen. Edward Braddock, he escaped injury although four bullets ripped his coat and two horses were shot from under him.

While serving in the British Army during the French and Indian War, Washington grew frustrated.

He did not understand why Virginians with the same rank were paid less those with royal commissions. In a letter to Robert Dinwiddie, May 18, 1754, Washington said,

I would rather prefer the great toil of a daily laborer, and dig for a maintenance, provided I were reduced to the necessity, than serve upon such ignoble terms

for I really do not see why the lives of his Majesty's subjects in Virginia should be of less value, than of those in other parts of his American dominions; especially when it is well known, that we must undergo double their hardship.

I could enumerate a thousand difficulties that we have met with, and must expect to meet with, more than other officers who have almost double our pay; but as I know you reflect on these things, and are sensible of the hardships we must necessarily encounter, it would be needless to enlarge.

Only a few months later, the army restructured and Washington was demoted. Instead of serving as lieutenant colonel he would become a captain of one of ten Virginia regiments.

Furthermore, anyone with a royal commission who held the same rank would outrank him. Despite wanting to remain in the army, Washington decides he must quit. In a November 15, 1754 letter to William Fitzhugh, Washington stated,

I think, the disparity between the present offer of a Company, and my former Rank, too great to expect any real satisfaction or enjoyment in a Corps, where I once did, or thought I had a right to, command

In short, every Captain, bearing the King's Commission; every half-pay Officer, or other, appearing with such commission, would rank before me

My inclinations are strongly bent to arms.

In March 1755, Washington rejoined the British Army, this time as an unpaid aide-de-camp to General Edward Braddock. However, he was still seen as a second-rate aide and Braddock did not listen to colonists despite their experiences. The result was a disaster. On July 18, 1755 he wrote to Robert Dinwiddie,

In short the dastardly behaviour of the Regular Troops exposd all those who were inclin'd to do their duty, to almost certai(n) Death;

and at length, in despight of every effort to the contrary, broke & run as Sheep before Hounds, leavg the Artillery, Ammunition, Provisions Baggage & in short every thing a prey to the Enemy;

and when we endeavoured to rally them in hopes of regaining the ground and what we had left upon it it was with as little success as if we had attempted to have stopd the wild Bears of the Mountains. or rivulets with our feet, for they wd break by in spite of every effort that could be made to prevent it.

After his service with Braddock, Washington was appointed commander-in-chief of all Virginia forces. However, the promotion did little to ease his frustrations with the British Army. Washington did not

understand why his service in battle was considered less valuable than a British officer who had trained at St. James's and never seen battle. He said in a March 10, 1757 letter to Dinwiddie,

We cant conceive, that being Americans shoud deprive us of the benefits of British Subjects; nor lessen our claim to preferment: and we are very certain, that no Body of regular Troops ever before Servd 3 Bloody Campaigns without attracting Royal Notice.

As to those Idle Arguments which are often times us'd—namely, You are Defending your own properties; I look upon to be whimsical & absurd;

We are Defending the Kings Dominions, and althô the Inhabitants of Gt Britain are removd from (this) Danger, they are yet, equally with Us, concernd and Interested in the Fate of the Country, and there can be no Sufficient reason given why we, who spend our blood and Treasure in Defence of the Country are not entitled to equal prefermt.

Some boast of long Service as a claim to Promotion—meaning I suppose, the length of time they have pocketed a Commission—I apprehend it is the service done, not the Service engag'd in, that merits reward;



and that their is, as equitable a right to expect something for three years hard & bloody Service, as for 10 spent at St James's &ca where real Service, or a field of Battle never was seen

After years of frustration, Washington resigned from the British Army for good. Continuing to serve with his men was clearly his preference, but he could no longer do so.

From 1759 to the outbreak of the American Revolution, Washington managed his lands around Mount Vernon and served in the Virginia House of Burgesses.

In both the French and Indian War and the American Revolution, George Washington faced the frustrating task of transforming liberty-loving colonists into disciplined soldiers.

Officers were often as unfamiliar with the basic commands as their troops, and Washington urged them to read military manuals. One Hessian soldier recalled with surprise the books found in the captured bags of American officers: "This was a true indication that the officers of this army studied the art of war while in camp."

Married to a widow, Martha Dandridge Custis, he devoted himself to a busy and happy life. But like his fellow planters, Washington felt himself exploited by British merchants and hampered by British regulations. As the quarrel with the mother country grew acute, he moderately but firmly voiced his resistance to the restrictions.

Washington knew British control extend too far within the government as well. As the British Parliament continued to tax the colonies his anger grew. On April 5, 1769, he wrote to George Mason,

At a time when our lordly Masters in Great Britain will be satisfied with nothing less than the deprivation of American freedom, it seems highly necessary that something shou'd be done to avert the stroke and maintain the liberty which we have derived from our Ancestors;

but the manner of doing it to answer the purpose effectually is the point in question.

That no man shou'd scruple, or hesitate a moment to use arms in defence of so valuable a blessing, on which all the good and evil of life depends; is clearly my opinion; Yet Arms I wou'd beg leave to add, should be the last resource; the de[r]nier resort.

Addresses to the Throne, and remonstrances to parliament, we have already, it is said, proved the inefficacy of; how far then their attention to our rights & privileges is to be awakened or alarmed by starving their Trade & manufactures, remains to be tried.

The first time George Washington ran for public office, he lost. Despite the loss, Washington decided to run again for the House of Burgesses. It seems that by November 1757, some already knew Washington's intentions to run in Frederick County.

The last session of the House of Burgesses Washington attended was in May 1774. During the session burgesses called for a day of "fasting, Humiliation and prayer," to show support to those being punished by Parliament for the Boston Tea Party.

British Governor Dunmore promptly dissolved the House of Burgesses and did not recall it until June 1775.

When the Second Continental Congress assembled in Philadelphia in May 1775, Congress created the Continental Army on June 14, 1775, and John Adams nominated George Washington to serve as the army's Commander-in- Chief.

On July 3, 1775, at Cambridge, Massachusetts, he took command of his ill-trained troops and embarked upon a war that was to last six grueling years.

Despite having little practical experience in managing large, conventional armies, Washington proved to be a capable and resilient leader of the American military forces during the Revolutionary War.

While he lost more battles than he won, Washington employed a winning strategy that included victories at the Battle of Trenton in 1776 and Yorktown in 1781.

He realized early that the best strategy was to harass the British. He reported to Congress

"we should on all Occasions avoid a general Action, or put anything to the Risque, unless compelled by a necessity, into which we ought never to be drawn."

Ensuing battles saw him fall back slowly, then strike unexpectedly.

Crossing the Delaware

Washington attacked the Hessian military base (belonging to hired German soldiers who fought for the British) in Trenton, New Jersey, on Christmas Day 1776, inspiring new hope for the cause of the Patriot Army.

Provisions were low, as was morale, during this period. Washington feared more troubles were ahead for the Continental Army. As losses mounted for the Americans, it became more difficult to recruit and retain soldiers, with many choosing to desert rather than face a cold winter of battle with limited supplies.

Washington understood the importance of a much-needed victory before the year let out, and a concentration of around 1,300–1,500 hired Hessians at Trenton became his target.

Washington and his men (around 2,400, including future president James Monroe) were part of a larger plan that included two other crossings, but only his was successful in reaching the Hessians. Still, they arrived in Trenton with plenty of artillery and support from Col. Henry Knox, who would be stationed with men at the top of the town.



Sailing on cargo vessels that ranged from 40 to 60 feet in length across the frigid icy waters of the Delaware, Washington and his soldiers were hit with a harsh rain that turned to a snow-sleet mix by midnight.

Traveling with heavy artillery, horses, and more men behind him, Washington had support from experienced seamen under the command of Col. John Glover at the crossing site. (National Geographic)

Yorktown

Between 1778 and 1781, after the British withdrawal from Philadelphia, George Washington placed his army outside of New York and waited for an opportunity to attack the forces of General Sir Henry Clinton while the British waged a largely successful campaign across the south.

Late in the summer of 1781, the British, specifically Lord Cornwallis, finally made the mistake Washington had been waiting for. Cornwallis entrenched his army around Yorktown, Virginia, where he waited for either reinforcement from Clinton or evacuation to New York.

Washington quickly moved south with his French allies and coordinated with the Marquis de Lafayette to keep Cornwallis in place. At the same time, French naval forces maintained control over access to the Chesapeake Bay, which prevented naval assistance and reinforcements from reaching Yorktown.

Washington fired the first American cannon of the siege. The capture of key portions of the British entrenchments, and the opening of a second allied siege line signaled the end for Cornwallis, who formally surrendered on October 19, 1781.



First President of the United States

Washington longed to retire to his fields at Mount Vernon. But he soon realized that the Nation under its Articles of Confederation was not functioning well, so he became a prime mover in the steps leading to the Constitutional Convention at Philadelphia in 1787.

When the new Constitution was ratified, the Electoral College unanimously elected Washington President.

He did not infringe upon the policy making powers that he felt the Constitution gave Congress. But the determination of foreign policy became principally a Presidential concern.

When the French Revolution led to a major war between France and England, Washington refused to accept entirely the recommendations of either his Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson, who was pro-French, or his Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton, who was pro-British. Rather, he insisted upon a neutral course until the United States could grow stronger.

To his disappointment, two parties were developing by the end of his first term. Wearing of politics, feeling old, he retired at the end of his second term.

In his 1796 Farewell Address, Washington's principal concern was for the safety of the eight-year-old Constitution. He believed that the stability of the Republic was threatened by the forces of geographical sectionalism, political factionalism, and interference by foreign powers in the nation's domestic affairs.



Washington wrote,

“I have, with good intentions, contributed towards the organization and administration of the government the best exertions of which a very fallible judgment was capable.”

He urged Americans to subordinate sectional jealousies to common national interests. Writing at a time before political parties had become accepted as vital extraconstitutional, opinion-focusing agencies, Washington feared that they carried the seeds of the nation's destruction through petty factionalism.

Although Washington was in no sense the father of American isolationism, since he recognized the necessity of temporary associations for “extraordinary emergencies,” he did counsel against the establishment of “permanent alliances with other countries,” connections that he warned would inevitably be subversive of America's national interest.

White House

George Washington, selected the site for the White House in 1791, but he never lived in it. The following year, the cornerstone was laid and a design submitted by Irish-born architect James Hoban was chosen. After eight years of construction, President John Adams (the 2nd US President) and his wife Abigail moved into the still-unfinished residence.

Mount Vernon

George Washington's Mount Vernon mansion is ten times the size of the average home in colonial Virginia. Mount Vernon was the home of George Washington.

It was also home to hundreds of enslaved men, women and children who lived there under Washington's control. At the time of George Washington's death, the Mount Vernon estate's enslaved population consisted of 317 people.

The building began as a one and one-half story house built in 1734 by George Washington's father, Augustine Washington (when George was only two), and received its well-known name from his half-brother Lawrence Washington.

Lawrence lived at the property from 1741 until his death in 1752. George Washington began leasing the property in 1754. Although he did not inherit it outright until 1761, George expanded the house in the last 1750s, raising the roof to make the Mansion two and a half stories high and over the next 45 years slowly enlarged the dwelling to create the 21-room residence we see today.

Washington oversaw each renovation, advising on design, construction, and decoration, despite being away much of the time. Conscious that the world was watching, Washington selected architectural features that expressed his growing status as a Virginia gentleman and ultimately as the leader of a new nation.

The farm was more than 3,000 acres that Washington cultivated during the second half of the 18th century. They planted and harvested Mount Vernon's major cash crops - first tobacco and later wheat - as well as corn, vegetables and grasses. Throughout his lifetime, George Washington cultivated hemp at Mount Vernon for industrial uses. The fibers from hemp held excellent properties for making rope and sail canvas.

He also has Ossabaw Island Hogs, Hog Island Sheep, Dominique Chickens and Red Devon Cattle on the Farm, as well as horses, mules, and oxen.

Washington enjoyed less than three years of retirement at Mount Vernon; he died of a throat infection December 14, 1799. For months the Nation mourned him. (White House)

Information here is primarily from White House; National Geographic; Mount Vernon

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the American Revolution, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young