

George Washington (1732 - 1799)

1st President of the United States (1789-1797)

Born: February 22, 1732, Pope's Creek, Virginia

Nickname: "Father of His Country"

Education: The equivalent of an elementary school education

Religion: Episcopalian

Marriage: January 6, 1759, to Martha Dandridge Custis (1731-1802)

Children: None

Career: Soldier, Planter

Political Party: Federalist

Died: December 14, 1799, Mount Vernon, Virginia

Buried: Family vault, Mount Vernon, Virginia

Life Before the Presidency

John Washington, George's great-grandfather, reached the New World in 1657, settling in Virginia. Little definitive information exists on George's ancestors before his father, but what is known is that by the time George was born to Augustine and Mary Washington on February 22, 1732, the family was part of the lower echelon of Virginia's ruling class. He was the eldest child of Augustine's second marriage; there were two sons from the first. Farming and land speculation had brought the family moderate prosperity. However, when George was eleven years old, his family was dealt a terrible setback. Augustine became mortally ill after surveying his lands during a long ride in bad weather -- ironically, the same circumstances killed George almost seven decades later.

His mother, Mary, a tough and driven woman, fought to hold home and hearth together. She hoped to send George to school in England, but these plans were aborted and the boy never received more than the equivalent of an elementary school education. Although George was shy and not highly literate, he was a large, strong, and handsome child. His half brother Lawrence, fourteen years George's senior, looked out for him. Lawrence counseled the boy about his future and introduced him to Lord Fairfax, head of one of the most powerful families in Virginia.

Despite George's meager education, he had three great strengths: his mother's ambitious drive, a shy charm, and a gift for mathematics. Lord Fairfax discerned all three traits and invited the sixteen-year-old to join a team of men surveying Fairfax lands in the Shenandoah Valley region of the Virginia colony. It was the young man's first real trip away from home, and he proved his worth on the wilderness journey, helping the surveyors while learning their trade. Surveying offered George decent wages, travel

opportunities, and time away from his strict and demanding mother. By the time he was seventeen, he went into the surveying business on his own.

However, the next year, tragedy visited the Washington family once again: George's beloved half brother and mentor, Lawrence, contracted an aggressive strain of tuberculosis. George accompanied Lawrence to the island of Barbados in the West Indies in the desperate hope that the tropical climate would help his brother. Unfortunately, it did not, and George returned to Virginia alone, concluding the one trip of his life outside America.

Lawrence had commanded a local militia in the area near the Washington family home. Soon after returning to Virginia, George, barely out of his teens, lobbied the colonial government for the same post and was awarded it. The young man possessed no military training whatsoever, and it soon showed in disastrous fashion.

#### Folly on the Ohio

England and France, vying for control of the American continent north of Mexico, were at odds over the Ohio River Valley. The French were entering the region from Canada and making alliances with Native Americans, and the English-based government in Virginia was determined to stop these incursions. Serving as a British military envoy, Washington led a group of volunteers to the remote area, gathered intelligence on enemy troop strengths, and delivered a message ordering the French to leave the region. They refused, and when Washington returned home, he proposed that a fort be built on the Ohio River in order to stop further French expansion into the area. In the spring of 1754, he put together a poorly trained and equipped force of 150 men and set out to reinforce troops building this stockade, which he called Fort Necessity. On the way, he encountered a small French force and promptly attacked it, killing ten of the French -- an unknown young militiaman from Virginia had fired the first shots of the French and Indian War.

Because one of the men killed was a French envoy delivering a message to the British, Washington had taken part in the killing of an ambassador, a serious violation of international protocol. Repercussions of this rashness reached all the way to Westminster Palace and Versailles. Native Americans in the region, sensing British-American ineptitude, sided with the French. The joint Native American-French force attacked the small, ill-placed Fort Necessity and overwhelmed Washington and his men. They were forced to leave the area after signing a surrender document. The document was in French, and in it, Washington, who did not read French, supposedly admitted to breaches of military protocol, thus handing the French a great propaganda victory when the text of the document was released in Europe. Not long afterward, Washington was passed over for promotion, and he resigned from the army, bitter that the British had not defended his honor.

England decided that the best way to drive the French from the Ohio River Valley was to send in regular troops from the Royal Army. Their commander, General Edward Braddock, needed an aide with experience in the conflict and offered the post to Washington.

Eager to regain favor with the English army, Washington accepted. In July of 1755, the British force approached the French stronghold at Fort Duquesne. Washington had warned Braddock that the French and Indian troops fought very differently than the open-field, formalized armies of Europe, but he was ignored. A few days later, the British were attacked by a large Native American force and completely routed. Washington fought bravely despite having two horses shot from under him. Braddock was killed, his terrified British troops fled into the forest, and his young aide barely escaped with his life.

#### Militia Command, Marriage, and Life as a Gentleman Farmer

London blamed the colonials for the fiasco. The colonials, refusing to be England's scapegoat, reacted by elevating Washington as a hero. To convey their approval of his leadership and abilities, the colonials gave him command of all Virginian forces and charged him mainly with defending the colony's western frontier from Native American attacks. Washington was only twenty-two years old. This sudden turn of events provided him with a superb apprenticeship for the supreme command that would come two decades later: Washington learned how to raise a force, train it, lead it into battle, and keep it from deserting. But the young commander was always short of recruits and money, and appeals to the English military authorities did little good. Washington became increasingly annoyed with their condescension and their rebuffs of his attempts to win a regular army commission. After commanding a regiment that finally captured Fort Duquesne in 1758, he resigned from the military and went home to Mount Vernon, the farm he had inherited from Lawrence. A year later, Washington married a rich young widow named Martha Custis. He won a seat in the lower Virginia legislature and settled into the life of a Virginia planter.

His early married years were happy ones. Washington worked hard and learned everything he could about farming, but his new occupation gave him another reason to resent the mother country. He found that he was largely at the mercy of a trade system that heavily favored British merchants buying tobacco, his major crop. Consequently, after a few years, he owed a significant debt. By 1766, he abandoned tobacco farming and diversified Mount Vernon into crops that could be sold more easily in America. He also dabbled in light industry such as weaving and fishing. All of these ventures were aimed at making his plantation more self-sufficient, thus minimizing his business ties to England.

Several hundred slaves labored at Mount Vernon. As Washington turned to crops that were less labor intensive than tobacco, he had more help than he needed. However, although he could pursue greater profits by minimizing labor expenses, he almost never sold or moved a slave to another property unless the slave wanted to leave. As he approached middle age, Washington expressed increasing qualms about the practice of slavery.

#### The Seeds of Revolution

By the mid-1760s, colonial resentment of British rule was widespread. To replenish its coffers that were drained for the war with the French, London imposed taxes on the colonies. Moreover, to force compliance, England established punitive laws against the

colonials. Americans, who had no say in British parliamentary decisions, voiced their disdain for these tariffs that had suddenly raised the prices on necessities such as tea. As the controversy grew hotter, more British troops poured into the colonies, which only compounded the problem.

Generally, the southern colonies were less openly defiant toward England during the early stages of the independence movement. Like most Virginians, the master of Mount Vernon was slow to warm to revolutionary fervor, hoping that the British would end their oppressive ways. But a series of English provocations -- the closure of Boston Harbor, new taxes, the shooting deaths of five colonials in an altercation with Royal troops, the abolition of the Massachusetts state charter -- made Washington a firm believer in American independence by the early 1770s. He was one of the first leading citizens in Virginia to openly support resistance to English tyranny. In 1774, the Virginia legislature voted him one of seven delegates to the First Continental Congress, an assembly devoted to resistance to British rule -- interestingly, a thirty-one-year-old Virginian named Thomas Jefferson finished out of the running. Washington joined the majority of the assembly in voting for new economic reprisals against England.

In April 1775, electrifying news came from the North. Local militias from towns around Boston had engaged British troops at Lexington and Concord. When Washington rode to the Second Continental Congress a month later, there was talk that he might be named commander of all the colonial forces. Washington, his confidence weakened by the misadventures against the French and Native Americans, resisted the appointment. But he was the natural choice for several reasons: he was still considered a hero from the French and Indian War; at forty-three, he was old enough to lead but young enough to withstand the rigors of the battlefield; and northerners hoped a general from Virginia would help draw the reluctant South into the conflict. Above all, the leadership and charisma of the tall, quiet, stately Virginian was unsurpassed. Washington did not attend the congressional session that took the vote for the army's command. He was the last of its members to know that he had been chosen -- by a unanimous vote. He refused a salary and told the Congress, "I beg it may be remembered that I, this day, declare with the utmost sincerity, I do not think myself equal to the command I am honored with."

In accepting command of colonial forces, George Washington had crossed a deadly serious line. In the eyes of the English, he was now leading an armed insurrection against King George III. He was a traitor, and if the rebellion failed, he would soon find a rope around his neck.

#### Command of the Continental Army

Any military expert would have given the Continentals little chance. After all, King George's army was the best-trained, best-equipped fighting force in the Western world. The matchless Royal Navy could deliver an army to any shore and strangle enemy nations by blockade. England's forces were commanded by career soldiers who were veterans of wars all over the globe. In sharp contrast, the colonial force staring them down was less of an army than a large gang. Its soldiers came and went almost at will. The officers leading them had little command, let alone fighting experience. Furthermore, in the colonies,

support for the rebellion was far from firm.

Washington's first duty was to turn this unruly crowd into a real army by instituting disciplinary regulations. To facilitate his efforts, he urged the Continental Congress to provide enough money to pay for longer enlistments for his soldiers. But when New Year's Day dawned in 1776, much of his army had gone home because their enlistments had ended.

Washington first commanded American forces arrayed around Boston. Using cannon captured by Henry Knox from Fort Ticonderoga and heroically transported miles to Boston, Washington fortified a high point overlooking the city. Unnerved by the colonials' sudden tactical advantage, the British withdrew from Boston by sea. Washington, however, had no illusions that his enemy was finished. The question was where they would strike next.

By spring, it was plain that the British plan was to seize New York. It offered several advantages including a large port, the propaganda value of holding one of the rebels' biggest cities, and a route by which troops could be delivered to the American interior via the Hudson River. Washington moved to stop them. In July -- a few days after the Declaration of Independence was signed -- the British landed a huge force on Staten Island. By August, 30,000 troops marched on Washington's force. On their first engagement late that month, much of the Continental army either surrendered or turned and fled in terror. On September 15, the British landed on Manhattan, and again Washington's troops ran away. Enraged, he shouted at them, "Are these the men with whom I am to defend America?" A day later, his troops were resolute in their defiance and won a small engagement in Harlem Heights. But by November, the British had captured two forts that the Continentals had hoped would secure the Hudson River. Washington was forced to withdraw into New Jersey and then Pennsylvania. The British thought this signaled the end of the conflict and dug in for the winter, not bothering to chase the Americans.

Washington now realized that by trying to fight open-field, firing-line battles with the British, he was playing to their strengths. He turned to tactics he had seen Native Americans use to great effect in the French and Indian War. On Christmas Day, he led his army through a ferocious blizzard, crossed the Delaware River into New Jersey, and surprised an enemy force at Trenton. A few days later, he took a British garrison at nearby Princeton. These actions were less large-scale battles than they were guerrilla raids. Nonetheless, these minor victories gave his army confidence, brightened the spirits of the American people, and told the British that they were in for a long and bitter struggle.

#### A Turning of the Tide: 1777

The Revolution's third year was its turning point. Another Continental force, commanded by Major General Horatio Gates, won the first significant American victory at Saratoga, New York. This victory convinced the French that the Revolution was winnable for the Americans. They began to consider an alliance with the colonial rebels -- partly to get back at an old enemy, England, and partly to share in prizes from raids on British ships. At the same time, the English embarked on an unfortunate military strategy that

included an invasion of the southern colonies, which subjected them to guerrilla warfare.

For Washington, however, 1777 was a profoundly trying year. He lost two major battles with the British and failed to keep them from taking Philadelphia, home to the new nation's government, which was forced into hiding. In response to such a loss, an attempt was made by some in Congress and the army to oust Washington as commander. The winter of 1777-1778 saw his army camped in freezing, wretched huts at Valley Forge. One of the army's doctors summed up the conditions in his diary: "Poor food -- hard lodging -- cold weather -- fatigue -- nasty clothes -- nasty cookery -- vomit half my time -- smoked out of my senses -- the devil's in it -- I can't endure it."

#### Valley Forge to Yorktown

By springtime, things began to improve as the army drilled hard and marched out of Valley Forge a more disciplined fighting force.

In May 1778, the French agreed to an alliance with the Americans, sending troops, munitions, and money. By mid-1779, 6,000

French troops were fighting alongside the Americans.

George Washington was not a great general but a brilliant revolutionary. Although he lost most of his battles with the British, year after year he held his ragtag, hungry army together. This was his most significant accomplishment as commander of the American forces. One French officer wrote: "I cannot insist too strongly how I was surprised by the American Army. It is truly incredible that troops almost naked, poorly paid, and composed of old men and children and Negroes should behave so well on the march and under fire." Knowing that one great victory by his army would undermine support in England for their endless foreign war, Washington patiently waited year after year for the right circumstances. The British relentlessly dared Continental forces to fight a line-to-line battle in the open. But Washington stayed with his own hit-and-run tactics, forcing the frustrated British to play the game by his rules. He kept their main army bottled up in New York much of the time, wary of fighting him.

The British altered their strategy in 1778 and invaded the South. The new plan was to secure the southern colonies and then march a large army northward, forcing the rebellion out of upper America. It was a mistake. While they captured Savannah, Georgia, in 1778 and Charleston, South Carolina, in 1779, the British found themselves fighting a guerrilla war, facing shadowy bands of expert snipers. An American soldier, fighting in and for his homeland, could work on his own while a Redcoat could not. Colonial troops could move twice as fast as their equipment-heavy enemies, and every English soldier killed or captured meant a new one had to be sent from England -- a journey of several weeks that weakened British presence elsewhere in their empire. By 1781, the war was deeply unpopular in England.

That summer, Washington received the news for which he had been waiting. The British southern force, commanded by Lord Cornwallis, was camped near the shores of the Chesapeake Bay in Virginia. Washington secretly hurried his army southward from New York. He deceived British spies with counterintelligence ruses that hid from them the mission's true objective. As usual, there

was no money, and Washington had to talk many of his men out of quitting. A large French fleet, meanwhile, had left the West Indies, setting sail for the Virginia coast. On the way there, Washington stopped for a day at his Mount Vernon home -- for the first time in six years.

### "The World Turned Upside Down"

Yorktown was a port city on a peninsula, jutting out into the Chesapeake. On September 1, 1781, the French fleet formed a line off Yorktown, cutting off any chance of British escape by sea. Three days later, the first American and French ground forces were at the base of the peninsula, a perfectly coordinated campaign designed by Washington. On September 5, the French ships thwarted an English fleet attempting to evacuate Cornwallis's troops. The British fate was sealed.

American and French troops squeezed the enemy against the sea and tormented them with a constant hail of cannon fire. On October 19, Cornwallis had seen enough. Stunned British troops, many in tears, surrendered as their band played "The World Turned Upside Down." Early the following spring in London, Parliament withdrew its support for the war in America. The British began to leave the colonies -- but not without smuggling out a sizable number of American slaves.

### Forging a Nation

The thirteen colonies had fought the Revolution as if they were thirteen different nations. After the war, there was much controversy as to whether the colonies would coalesce into one country or several and how all of it would be governed.

The war's end saw considerable maneuvering for personal power, and matters came to a head in the spring of 1783. Washington was approached by some senior army officers who proposed to make him king. A great many men -- almost any man -- would have jumped at the chance for such authority; George Washington, however, was not one of them. He had spent the past decade ridding America of a monarch and was saddened and dismayed at the prospect of saddling the country with a monarchy. The officers set a meeting to advance their ambitions, but Washington preempted them with a meeting of his own.

Many people attending Washington's meeting favored the idea of installing some form of military dictatorship. If they had had their way, America might have disintegrated into rule by a pack of feudal warlords, ripe for anarchy or foreign takeover. Washington and his officers traded cold stares. Then the general began to read a letter supporting his viewpoint, but he stopped and put on a pair of spectacles -- something few of them had ever seen him wear. Washington quietly said, "Gentlemen, I have grown gray in your service, and now I am going blind." In seconds, almost everyone was wiping away tears. The so-called Newburgh Mutiny had ended even before it began, thanks to Washington's meeting.

On April 19, 1783, Washington announced to his army that England had agreed to a cessation of hostilities with the United States. Eight years, to the day, had passed since Massachusetts' militia traded musket fire with Redcoats at Lexington Green. By the end of the year, the last English troops had shipped out of New York, and Washington came home to Mount Vernon on

Christmas Eve.

As far as he was concerned, his public life was over. Washington spent most of the next three years attempting to restore the fortunes of his property, which had declined in his years fighting the British.

During the years immediately following the war, America was governed according to the Articles of Confederation, which resulted in a weak and unstable government. Poor economic conditions led to conflict between indebted farmers and those lending them money, especially in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut. In 1786, the government of Massachusetts put down an uprising of angry farmers led by former Revolutionary War officer Daniel Shay. Shays's Rebellion helped to convince the delegates of five states assembled at Annapolis, Maryland, to discuss a means of promoting interstate commerce and to call a national convention to strengthen the American government.

A meeting of all the states, known now as the Constitutional Convention, was held in Philadelphia in May 1787. Because the convention proceedings were secret, there was public apprehension about the fate of their fledgling country. It was obvious to the convention delegates that leadership was needed to soothe public doubts and to lend the proceedings credibility. Despite his reluctance, Washington was unanimously chosen to head the assembly that developed the Constitution, the foundation of American government. One of its provisions called for something known as a president, and immediately the delegates began whispering that there was only one man to consider for the position. Washington did not want the office, but he worked for over a year to ensure the Constitution's ratification, which was achieved in June of 1788.

Family Life

Martha Washington had two young children from her first marriage, Martha and John. She had no children with George Washington. Washington thought it his duty as a stepfather to be "generous and attentive," and expensive orders to London merchants during the childhoods of "Jacky" and "Patsy" reveal doting, caring parents.

Martha Washington was highly indulgent toward her children. Patsy had everything a teenage girl would want in that day -- countless clothes, her own piano, a parrot, and dancing lessons. However, by her adolescence, it was plain that Patsy was epileptic. In 1773, the sixteen-year-old girl died during a seizure, and a distraught Martha promptly turned all her attention to her son. Jacky did poorly in school, grew up soft and lazy, and did little during the Revolution. He horrified friends by teaching his two-year-old child to sing obscene songs at adult parties. Against his stepfather's wishes, he visited the Continental army encampment shortly before the Battle of Yorktown. Such camps were rife with diseases, and Jacky soon died, again devastating his mother. His two young children were raised by the Washingtons at Mount Vernon.

The Washingtons lived in a rented house in New York at the beginning of the presidency. In early 1790, they moved into an executive mansion in Philadelphia when the nation's capital was relocated there. At first, the house was swamped with visitors and office seekers. The President's advisers finally instituted strict visiting hours. Once a week, Washington opened the doors of his home for public receptions and events that were open to any citizen meeting the dress code. Martha Washington hosted similar events for women.

[HYPERLINK "documents.html"](#)

IKTM  
MEDIA