

9th Grade Capstone

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George Washington: The Man Behind the Presidency

George Washington was a remarkable man who played a crucial role in laying the groundwork for which America would be built upon. He accomplished many feats in his 68 years of life, and he is most commonly celebrated for being the first president of the United States. Few people, however, have taken the time to get to know the man behind the presidency. While there is no doubt that Washington was an active member in our country's foundation, he had a wide range of interests and was a complex character who experienced a full life both inside and outside of his politics.

George Washington's story began in Popes Creek, Virginia on February 22, 1732. Washington had a total of seven siblings in his lifetime: four of which were half-siblings from his father's previous marriage to Jane Butler. In *Destiny Consul: America's Greatest Presidents*, Michael Riccards writes that George grew up in a household where he spent much time on his own due to his family relations. His father was rarely around and his mother was known to be over protective and over-bearing. As a result, it is said that young George was "withdrawn, restrained, and often self-reliant" (Riccards 2). George spent a great deal of his childhood at Ferry Farms, one of the many farms owned by his father. At age 12, George's father died after he caught a cold while riding his horse in the rain. The illness hastened his father's tuberculosis which resulted in his death. Later in Washington's life, he lived with his brother Lawrence who also succumbed to tuberculosis. Due to his brother's death, George inherited land from him which is known now as Mt. Vernon. The subsequent 20 years would engage Washington in a number of military endeavors including battles leading up to the French and Indian War. These

battles would help prepare him for his significant role as Commander-in-chief of the American Revolutionary War in 1775.

In 1758, Washington's life changed forever when he met Martha Dandridge Cutsis, also known as Patcy to her family. Martha was a wealthy widow when she met George. At only 26 years old, Martha owned 300 slaves and over 17,000 acres of property. Because of her financial status, Martha did not need to remarry; however, when she met George, there was mutual instant attraction. The couple began planning their future together within months of meeting. They were married in 1759. When his step son, John, died from a disease he contracted from a military encampment during the battle of Yorktown, George Washington and Martha began caring for their grandchildren and later took on the role as surrogate father for many other nieces and nephews who had lost a parent (Thompson).

While Washington strived to fill the role of father to a rambunctious group of stepchildren and kin, there was another rowdy group who equally needed his fatherly wisdom and guidance: the citizens of the 13 colonies. Initially, Washington showed little interest in politics. He was primarily interested in expansion and other Western endeavors (Friedel and Sidey). Washington was viewed as a radical due to his loyalty to the British crown. Having fought previously as a general for the King of the England, he believed peace should not be broken between the colonies and England. Nevertheless, Washington's comfortable lifestyle was drastically changed when the British ministry decided to acquire revenue from the colonies and restricted expansion into the West. The way in which the revenue was acquired was through a tax on imported goods, known as the Townshend Act and the Stamp Act. Due to these Acts, tensions grew in the colonies and boycotts of the taxed goods ensued. In July of 1765, George Washington along with George Mason, a fellow House of Burgesses member, co-wrote the

Virginia Resolves: a set of resolutions to ease the tensions between the colonies and Britain. The Virginia Resolves were presented to the House of Burgesses, which was at the time headed by George Washington, and ultimately passed. British reaction to the Virginia Resolves was bittersweet for the colonies. The Stamp Act was abolished, but British Parliament passed the Declaratory Act, which stated that only British Parliament had the authority to make legislative decisions about or within the colonies. The passing of the Declaratory Act coupled with the other Acts and actions enforced by British Parliament drove George Washington to denounce the king and instill his loyalty to the people of the American colonies.

With having rejected the British crown, George Washington joined the First Continental Congress, acting as the representative for Virginia. The Continental Congress, an assembly dedicated to the resistance to British rule, was made up of a delegate from each of the 13 colonies, with the exception of Georgia. During their meeting, they created the Articles of Association to send to King George III to try to weaken the tensions between the colonies and Britain and put an end to the Intolerable Acts. On May 10, 1775, with war against Britain already underway, the delegates of the First Continental Congress met again under the name Second Continental Congress, this time with a Georgian representative, and formed the Continental Army. For the second meeting, however, George Washington was not in attendance but was appointed as the Continental Army's commander by unanimous vote. Washington was the last to know of his role as commander to which he replied, "I beg it may be remembered that I, this day, declare with the utmost sincerity, I do not think of myself equal to the command I am honored with" (Knott). Upon hearing that Washington accepted this position, King George III declared he was a traitor to England and if the revolution failed Washington would be killed (Knott).

After leading America to victory, Washington was approached by a group of men who proposed to make him king. According to Stephen Knott in *George Washington: Life before the Presidency*, Washington declined the proposal because he felt he had spent the "past decade ridding America of the monarchy and was saddened and dismayed at the prospect of saddling the country with a monarchy" (Knott). A meeting ensued to discuss the next step for an independent administration, but no formal government was forged. From 1781- 1789 America was governed by the Articles of Confederation, which resulted in a weak and unstable government. Due to the weakened government, economic crisis ensued leading to conflicts between indebted farmers and those lending them money. Emotions came to a head when a group of angry farmers led by former Revolutionary officer, Daniel Shay, rioted through Massachusetts wanting to promote interstate commerce and strengthen the American government. As a direct result of Shay's Rebellion, in May 1787 delegates from each of the American states met in Philadelphia under the name of the Constitutional Convention. Within the walls of Independence Hall, delegates worked to revise the Articles of Confederation and debated the future of America's government. Eventually it was decided that a single person should be leader of America, and Washington was voted the best fit for this role.

On February 4, 1789 the Electoral College chose George Washington as the first president of the United States. He received support from all 69 members of the college. He was the best and possibly the only choice as he was both a national hero for being Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army in the American Revolution and also a favorite son with Virginia. Washington accomplished a lot during his time as president. He set up a six-member Supreme Court with one chief justice and five other justices. He created many government programs that became a part of American tradition, such as the cabinet. He also set up a democratic system,

despite fear that it might lead to political violence (Kazin). In 1791, the government passed a tax to all distilled spirits. With whisky being the most distilled beverage during that time, the tax became known as the Whisky Tax. Violence broke out because many people didn't like the tax. Fortunately, Washington was able to stop the Whisky Rebellion. On April 22, Washington issued The Proclamation of Neutrality, declaring the United States would remain neutral in the conflict between France and Great Britain. His decision kept the United States out of unnecessary violence. In late 1793, after American ships had been captured, goods were stripped, and people enslaved, Washington signed The Naval Act of 1794. The Jay's Treaty was signed between U S and Britain in 1795, under the presidency with George Washington. Britain vacated the western forts and the United States gave them the most favored nation trading status. After serving his country for nearly 20 years, Washington left with a farewell address that still remains one of the most influential statements in American history in which he "...urged Americans to forswear excessive party spirit and geographical distinctions" (Friedel and Sidey).

In his article "The President's House in Philadelphia," Edward Lawler explains that contrary to popular belief, George Washington did not reside in the White House in Washington D.C. during his term as president. Washington spent his time as president working from the President's House in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania after he was offered the house from Robert Morris, a colleague from the Constitutional Convention. The President's House was originally built for Mary Lawrence Masters in 1767. In the years prior to Washington residing in the house there were a number of different owners, some of which were historical figures. In 1790 Congress passed the Residency Act stating that Philadelphia would be the temporary home for the U.S. capitol for 10 years (Lawler). Washington resided in the Philadelphia home for the duration of his term as president. The house was used for both political and personal events. A

few of the major political events that took place in the home included drafting the ten amendments, improving the national banking system, and running the executive branch from the second floor (Lawler).

George Washington may be best remembered as the first president of our nation, yet he was a fascinating man for other reasons as well. Many people have heard stories about our first president's false wooden teeth and his truthfulness after chopping down his father's cherry tree, but few know that these stories are partially myths and misconceptions. Ironically, the story expressing Washington's inspiring honesty was actually fabricated shortly after his death by one of Washington's biographers, Mason Locke Weems. As Jay Richardson writes on the *Mount Vernon Digital Encyclopedia*, Weems set out to write a best-selling biography that would portray Washington as an upstanding role model for young Americans. In his attempt to paint a picture of an honorable and honest man, Weems actually told a lie that would be associated with Washington for hundreds of years (Richardson). The origin of the story of Washington's wooden teeth, another myth that is associated with our first president, is still unclear. According to dental historians, Washington's false teeth were actually made of ivory rather than wood. It has been presumed that the ivory turned brown due to lack of proper care, and as a result the ivory resembled wood (Etter).

Another little known fact about George Washington is that he played a major role in integrating mules into American society. In *History of the Mule*, Dave Babb credits Washington for the development of the mule population in the United States. In 1785, Washington had about 130 horses working on his farm in Mount Vernon. That same year, the King of Spain gifted Washington a stud jack. Babb explains that a year later, George Washington's personal friend, Marquis de Lafayette sent Washington another jack and two jennets to Mount Vernon.

Washington, finding that mules worked much harder than horses, began breeding the mules from the horses and donkeys he had at Mount Vernon. By 1799, Washington had 58 mules residing at Mount Vernon and had decreased his horse population to only 25 (Babb). Thanks to his integral role in bringing mules to America, Washington is often called the "Father of the American Mule."

Although George Washington was never able to have children of his own, there is no doubt that he was a leader and a father in more ways than one. He was "Father of our Nation," "Father of the American Mule," and surrogate father to stepchildren, grandchildren, nieces and nephews. Washington embodied integrity, leadership, and wisdom inside and outside of his political life. The belief that Washington "never told a lie" may be a myth, but George Washington was a man of honor, indeed. He was an admirable leader who led his nation's earliest military to victory and helped set the foundation for America's government.

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