

A Portrait of George Washington

Clyde McAvoy Perry

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George Washington's face is remarkably familiar, in part because we see his portrait each time we use a dollar bill. Yet, very few Americans possess much knowledge about the man behind the image. It is particularly distressing that George Washington is losing his well-deserved place in the schoolroom. His portrait disappeared from most classroom walls decades ago, but now George Washington is also becoming less prominent in history textbooks.

The textbook used in the public school system in Richmond, Virginia, forty years ago included almost 10 times more coverage of George Washington than the history textbook used in the same schools today. Obviously, today's book must cover four additional decades of historic events. Yet, George Washington and the other founding fathers have clearly been short-changed. What makes this situation disturbing is this simple fact:

We need the example set by George Washington now more than ever.

People today long for men and women who possess old-fashioned qualities such as honesty, strong morals, good judgment, patriotism, courage and, most of all, character. We should not simply relate the tried-and-true stories of George Washington's leadership in both war and peace. We also need to communicate the true personality and character of this great man, so that younger generations will once again be attached to George Washington as a role model in their own lives. So the next time you gather together with family and friends, turn the conversation to George Washington, and ask your friends if they are aware of the following aspects of George Washington's life.

A Portrait of George Washington – Clyde McAvoy

1. *George Washington was one of early America's foremost businessmen.* Not only was he successful at harvesting several cash crops, but he also operated a successful gristmill and a distillery that produced more than 11,000 gallons of liquor over a period of a year. He organized a fishing operation that netted some one million shad and herring in a short six-week season. He invested in real estate in a major way, expanding his Mount Vernon estate from 2,000 to 8,000 acres. He purchased more than 60,000 additional acres of land in what would today be seven different states and the District of Columbia. Among his holdings were 2,000 acres near Berkeley Springs, West Virginia, 4,000 acres of the Dismal Swamp, and lots in both the city of Alexandria and the new nation's capital. He also owned more than 33,000 acres in the Ohio Valley, more than 1,000 acres in Maryland, 5,000 acres in Kentucky, and 3,000 acres near the site of present-day Cincinnati. Despite the fact that he was constantly distracted from his own business ventures by the call of his country, George Washington was a successful entrepreneur who believed wholeheartedly in investing in the future of America.

2. *When he was just 23 years old, George Washington was in command of the entire Virginia Regiment in the French and Indian War.* At the onset of the French and Indian War, George Washington joined General Edward Braddock's ill-fated mission to the Monongahela in 1755 as an aide-de-camp. This was by no means a shining moment in Washington's career. Washington warned Braddock that the guerrilla-style tactics used by the enemy would require a different approach to warfare, but Braddock ignored Washington's council, and his forces were severely defeated. The General himself was mortally wounded. When General Braddock fell, the men around him naturally turned to Washington, who organized the retreat and kept the army from disbanding. By the end of the battle, a large percentage of the English soldiers had fallen, and Washington himself had four bullet holes in his coat and was on his third horse. Yet the young Virginian was an unquestionable hero, even in defeat. He was almost immediately appointed a colonel and given complete command of the Virginia Regiment. Washington was just 23 years old, and off to an auspicious start in his military career.

3. *George Washington never went to college, but he was one of the most well-read and accomplished writers of all American presidents.* Washington's father died when he was 11 years old. As the oldest son of a second wife, Washington discovered there was little money or time for him to attend a university. Instead, he became a surveyor at age 16 to help support his family. Still, Washington was a voracious reader, and he eventually assembled a personal library of some 900 books of all descriptions. He was also a prolific writer. At the age of 14, he copied down 110 rules of civility. Five decades later, he was still writing lengthy letters to governors, congressional leaders, and influential friends in support of our new government. Scholars at the University of Virginia are currently assembling the papers of George Washington and, before the project is completed, the editors expect to issue about 90 separate volumes. In an age before typewriters and word processors, Washington recognized the power of an old-fashioned quill pen.

4. *In all likelihood, Washington could have been America's first king, but he turned down a crown.* Scholars seem to agree that the most critical moment of Washington's military career came not during the war itself, but at the close of the Revolutionary War. Many of Washington's officers were furious that they had not been properly paid or appreciated for their efforts in the Revolution, so they started to plan a second revolt, this time against Congress. There was talk of placing Washington as king of a new nation. But Washington was not about to become a monarch like the one he had worked so hard to defeat, so he used his powers of persuasion to stop the revolt before it got started.

Unlike successful leaders of past revolutions, Washington willfully and unconditionally surrendered his power just when it reached its apex. When many world leaders expected Washington to assume his rightful place as the ruler of a new nation, he laid down his sword and took up his plow.

Today, we, take our freedom so much for granted, and accept democracy as so natural and so right, that it is hard to imagine the importance of Washington's voluntary retirement. But in 1783, it was an earth-shattering event. The highly skeptical King George III, perhaps confident that Washington's retirement was some sort of a scam, predicted that if the commander in chief gives up all his power and returns to his farm, he will be the "greatest man in the world." Just a few years later, when Napoleon lay on his death bed, defeated and forlorn, his last words were "they expected me to be another Washington." It was as if the people of France had asked for the impossible how could anyone possibly live up to Washington's standards?

5. *Washington was one of the wealthiest men in Virginia, but also one of the most frugal.* After his father died when he was just 11 years old, Washington, his mother, and his siblings had to struggle to make ends meet. At the age of 16, Washington started work as a surveyor to help his mother cover the family expenses. Washington's fortunes changed after he inherited Mount Vernon from his older half-brother and he married the wealthy widow Martha Dandridge Custis. But throughout his life, he remembered the value of a dollar. When he needed a much larger home, he continued to add to a simple frame house instead of tearing down a perfectly good structure and starting from scratch. When the house was expanded, the staircase in the small original house was recycled to serve as the access to the garret. When the Revolutionary War started, he purchased a used traveling trunk much like you or I would at a yard sale today and placed his family brass nameplate directly on top of the last owner's initials. He was always pressing his farm managers and workers to recycle old materials, and to use fallen wood from the forests rather than cut down trees. A stickler for detail, Washington once calculated that a bushel of timothy seeds would include on average 13, 410, 000 kernels. Washington died a wealthy man because he believed in his friend Benjamin Franklin's edict, "a penny saved is a penny earned."

6. *Washington owned slaves, but at the end of his life he was against slavery.* Washington became a slave owner at the age of 11, when he inherited about 10 slaves at the death of his father. By the time he died, Washington and his wife owned more than 300. Yet during the course of 50 years, Washington's opinions about the institution of slavery changed dramatically. His travels north taught him that agriculture could be carried out successfully without slave labor, and he witnessed young African Americans fighting fiercely for the colonists' cause in the Revolution.

Unlike most of the Founding Fathers who owned slaves, Washington freed his slaves in his last will and testament and set aside funds to help them begin a new life. He wrote on several occasions that he was opposed to slavery, noting that "there is not a man living who wishes more than I do, to see a plan adopted for the abolition of it."

7. *Washington's teeth were not made from wood, but they were definitely false.* Lots of people were "dentally challenged" in the 18th century and because there were far fewer methods to prevent decay than we have today, few adults possessed a full set of pearly whites. It seems that Washington tried to crack walnuts with his teeth when he was a teenager, and long after, they began to loosen and fall out. Washington's dental problems were clearly evident by the time he reached his late twenties, when a fellow soldier noted that Washington's "mouth is large and generally firmly closed, but from time to time disclosed some defective teeth." Although Washington followed the advice of contemporary dentists he used dental powders and a toothbrush remarkably similar to our own, his dental dilemma persisted. In the 1780s, a French dentist tried unsuccessfully to transplant teeth into Washington's mouth, and some evidence exists that several enterprising slaves at Mount Vernon sold their teeth for this experiment. By the time he took the oath of office as president, Washington was in full dentures, which produced a noticeable change in the appearance of his face, as well as a somewhat hollow and flat voice.

Despite legends to the contrary, Washington's false teeth were not constructed from wood. The teeth were carved from the larger teeth of animals such as cows, or in some cases, from ivory tusks. They were then attached to a metal frame, fitted with tiny springs. Washington tried several different pairs of dentures, but always complained that they were ill-fitting.

8. *Washington was in the midst of many savage battles, but he was never hit by a bullet or touched by a sword.* Washington's life was full of near misses. Although he was often in the forefront of chaotic battles where many men fell dead and wounded, Washington was never injured. He also survived bouts of malaria, a severe case of smallpox, typhoid fever, a slight case of tuberculosis, two near-fatal encounters with the flu, and a serious case of pneumonia. An infection in his leg nearly took his life. Fortunately, Washington faced each of these trials with courage and determination. It may simply be luck or coincidence that "The Father of Our Country" came so close to death, both on the battlefield and from illness, on so many different occasions. But a better explanation may be inscribed opposite George Washington's portrait on the dollar bill. The words "In God We Trust" were exceedingly meaningful to George Washington.

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