

# The First American Citizen

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George Washington has been known by many names, like General, Commander, Mr. President, and The Father of His Country. Another title that seems most fitting is that of The First American Citizen. Washington was born on February 22, 1732 in Popes Creek in Westmoreland County in Virginia. His father was a landowner and farmer, not wealthy but well off. Washington's father Augustine had gone to school in England but settled in Virginia to manage his growing estate. Augustine was a widower and married Mary Bell, George's mother in 1731. George would be the oldest of six children born from this union. Augustine died when George was 11 years-old and Lawrence George's half brother provided a home for him. Lawrence was married to Anne Fairfax and George was sent to live with the Fairfax family where he learned social manners and a proper formal education. Washington at age 16 he began working with Thomas, Lord Fairfax surveying the Shenandoah lands and western territory. Washington loved the outdoors, camping, hunting, and learning about the weather. Another interest of Washington was the military arts. Washington show early signs of leadership and Robert Dinwiddie, Virginia's lieutenant Governor appointed him adjutant with the rank of major in the Virginia militia. In 1754, he was commissioned a lieutenant colonel in the Virginia Militia. He fought in various skirmishes that eventually became the French and Indian War. The following year, as an aide to General Braddock, he escaped injury despite four bullets ripping his coat and two horses being shot from under him.

Washington retired from military service in December 1758 due to frustration regarding decisions being made excessively slow, poor support from the colonial legislature, and poorly trained recruits. Washington applied for a commission with the British Army and was turned down. Washington resigned his commission with the Virginia militia in December 1758.

From 1758 until the time of the American Revolution, Washington managed his Mount Vernon property, served in the Virginia House of Burgesses, and married the widow Martha Dandridge Curtis. Washington, like other landowners and planters felt exploited by British merchants, hampered by British regulations, and began to express his objection and resistance to these regulations in a moderate but firm voice.

In May 1775, the Second Continental Congress assembled in Philadelphia and Washington was one of the Virginia delegates. Washington was elected Commander in Chief of the Continental Army and took command on July 3, 1775 in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He took charge of an ill-trained and ill-prepared troops and embarked on a war that would last for the next six grueling years.

In August 1776, the British army attacked and quickly took New York in one of the largest battles of the war. Washington suffered the surrender of some 2,800 soldiers. Washington ordered the remainder of his army to retreat across the Delaware River into Pennsylvania. Washington knew General Howe wintered his troops at Trenton and Princeton which left Washington free to attack at any time.

By December 1776, Washington and his troops sought to attack the British forces in Trenton, New Jersey. Washington hoped to wage a pre-dawn attack, we moved his men across the Delaware River then an eight-mile march into the Trenton. However, crossing the river took longer than expected and they were delayed by heavy snow and extremely cold weather. The attack did catch many British soldiers off guard and the attack was successful. Many battles ensued in the New York and New Jersey area. Washington carried the flag of a new nation into battle September 11, 1777 at the Battle of Brandywine. The flag of thirteen strips red alternating white with thirteen white stars on a blue field.

In the winter of 1777 at Valley Forge was the darkest time for Washington and his Continental Army. He had a force of 11,000 troops in winter quarters and over the next

six months thousands died from disease. General Howe failed to capture Colonial cities and was replaced by Sir Henry Clinton. The British army left Philadelphia to return to New York. Washington and his men delivered quick blows to the British near Monmouth Courthouse which proved his army was capable of open field battle.

On at least one occasion, Washington dressed in his formal uniform fearing his efforts were lost sought to ride onto the battle field as a martyr. One of his aides seeing this grabbed the reins of his horse preventing Washington. After this, Washington learned that the best strategy was to harass the British. He reported to Congress, "We should on occasion avoid general action, or put anything to the Risque, unless compelled by a necessity, into which we ought never to be drawn." He also realized that he must not let the British win, but he must not lose. There several battles that Washington slowly withdrew his troops and then strike unexpectedly. Washington's knowledge of the land aided him well by allowing him and his troops to change locations quickly and move into positions behind the British forces.

For the remainder of the war, George Washington was content to keep the British forces confined to New York. With the aid of the French alliance, its large army and navy fleet Washington decided to allow Clinton to remain in New York and move to attack General Charles Cornwallis at Yorktown, Virginia.

Finally, in 1781 with the aid of French allies-he forced the surrender of General Cornwallis at Yorktown on October 19, 1781. The French army and navy departed in 1782. The Americans had won their independence, Washington formally bade his troops farewell on December 23, 1783. He resigned his commission as commander-in-chief of the army and returned to Mount Vernon.

Washington was again called into public service in 1787. This young republic has been struggling with the Articles of Confederation, a structure of government that centered power with the states. Yet the states were not unified. Washington was elected

President of the Constitutional Convention. Amending the Articles of Confederation was insufficient and a new constitution that would give authority to the national government was required. During the presidential election of 1789, George Washington received every vote from the elector to the Electoral College, the only president in American history to be elected by unanimous approval. As Washington travelled into New York and moving through the Wall Street he realized he had won his victory over the British army. He took the oath of office at Federal Hall in New York City, the capital of the United States at the time.

As our first president, Washington was astutely aware that his presidency would set a precedent(s) for all who follow. He carefully attended to the responsibilities and duties of the office. He sought not to emulate any European royal court. He preferred the title "Mr. President," rather other names that were suggested. He declined the \$25,000 salary offered wanting to protect his image as a selfless public servant. Congress persuaded him to accept the salary to avoid giving the impression that only wealthy men could serve as president. He surrounded himself with highly capable people to help him run the administration of the country. He selected Alexander Hamilton as Secretary of the Treasury and Thomas Jefferson as Secretary of State. He delegated authority wisely to his cabinet members. He established broad-ranging presidential authority, but he maintained the highest of integrity, exercising authority with restraint and honesty. In doing so, he set a standard which has rarely been met but his successors and established an ideal by which all are judged.

Some of his accomplishments set the precedent of two term as president. Enacted a series of measures proposed by Alexander Hamilton to reduce the nation's debt. Established several peace treaties with Native American tribes. Approved a bill to establish the nation's capital in a permanent district along the Potomac River. In 1791, Washington signed a bill authorizing Congress to place a tax on distilled spirits. Washington invoked the Militia Act of 1792, summoning local militias from several states to out down the rebellion. Washington personally took command, marching his troops

into the areas of rebellion. This demonstrating that the federal government would use force when necessary to enforce the law. In foreign affairs, Washington took a cautious approach. He understood that this young nation could not succumb to Europe's political intrigues. France and Britain were again at war. Washington disregarded the United States alliance with France and took a neutral course. In 1794, he sent John Jay to Britain to negotiate a treaty (known as the "Jay Treaty") to secure peace with Britain and clear up some issues held over from the Revolutionary War. He secured and formulated the power of the presidency as part of the government's three branches, able to exercise authority when necessary, but able to accept the balance of power inherent in the system. Washington could have been a king, instead he chose to be a citizen. Washington was not only considered a military and revolutionary hero, but he was a man of great personal integrity, with a deep sense of duty, honor, and patriotism. In a letter to James Madison he wrote, "It is devoutly wished on my part, that these precedents may be fixed on true principles." Washington retired to his Mount Vernon home in March 1797 when John Adams assumed the presidency. In December 1799, Washington took his final ride around this property during a snowstorm. He ate supper and hastened to bed in his wet clothes. On December 13<sup>th</sup> he woke with a severe sore throat, he died in the late evening of December 14, 1799.

Throughout the course of this young nation who sought to dissolve the bounds with her parent, into the struggles of war, securing victory at Yorktown, Virginia, and rose to the presidency to lead her into this nation. Washington the First American Citizen.