

Chapter 24 -- The First President, George Washington

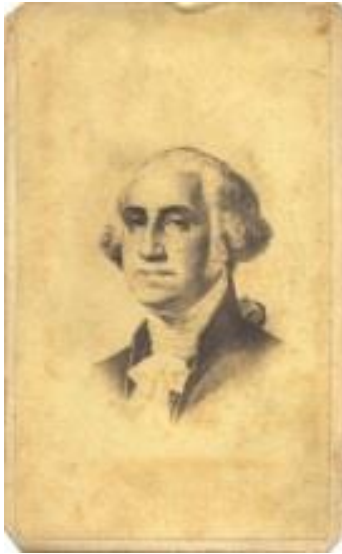


Dates:
1732-1799

Sections:
• George Washington – Personal Profile

Time: February 22, 1732- December 14 1799

George Washington: Personal Profile



America's first President is born on February 22, 1732 at his parent's Pope's Creek Estate, situated in northeast Virginia along the Potomac River.

Washington's father, a plantation owner, dies when he is only eleven – and he is raised by his mother and his devoted half-brother, Lawrence, 14 years his senior.

Lawrence, a military man for years, has married into the prominent Fairfax family, owners of vast tracts of land throughout Virginia. Along with his father-in-law, he is also a partner in The Ohio Company, which is dedicated to acquiring acreage west of the Appalachians and opening new British settlements there.

In many ways, Washington will follow in his brother's footsteps as he matures.

President George Washington (1732-1799)

His formal education is sparse, but largely through Lawrence he is surrounded by “the best families” and quickly masters the social graces. He is also a very physical man, drawn to horseback riding and hard work on the farm.

Through Lawrence's connections, Washington is appointed Surveyor for Culpepper County at age seventeen, in 1749. His earnings are substantial and they go into buying land in the Shenandoah Valley, the first of many such purchases.

In July, 1752, Lawrence dies after a long battle with tuberculosis at Mt. Vernon.

At age twenty, Washington comes fully into his own – inheriting Lawrence’s estate and also succeeding him in the Virginia militia, where he is assigned the rank of Major, by Governor Robert Dinwiddie.

His active military service begins in 1753, just as Britain and France are about to fight the Seven Year’s War (1756-63) for worldwide dominion. The North American theater of this war opens in the “Ohio Country” around Pittsburgh, a strategic linchpin connecting French settlements in Quebec with those on the Mississippi -- and also the target of The Ohio Company’s planned expansion to the west.

When Governor Dinwiddie, also a partner in The Ohio Company, sends Washington to clear out the intruders, it sparks the French and Indian War (1754-63).

Ironically then, Washington will learn about warfare while serving in the British Army.

As Colonel of the Virginia Regiment, his experience consists mainly of minor battles fought against assorted Indian tribes. But along the way he masters military organization, recruiting, training, tactics, discipline and logistics.

When the war ends, the crown promises him 20,000 acres of land in Ohio in reward for his service – but then reneges after King George III decides against opening new settlements. While the deal is eventually completed, Washington will never forget the British sleight. (He will die owning just over 41,000 acres, or 64 square miles, of frontier land.)

In 1759 he weds the widow, Mary Custis, whose inheritance immediately makes him one of the richest men in the colonies. In quick order Washington doubles the size of his Mt. Vernon estate, buys more slaves, switches his main crop from tobacco to wheat, and settles into the roles of businessman and social host to all the leading families in Virginia and beyond.

This is a pleasing life for Washington, and he lives it outside of the growing unrest that is forming toward the crown.

While he has been a member of the Virginia House of Burgesses since 1758, it is not until 1769 that he speaks up in opposition to Britain’s bullying tactics – in this case the Townshend Act imposing duties on “necessities” such as glass, paper, lead and tea that were available only through English shipping.

His proposal is incendiary in character – calling for Virginia to boycott British goods until the act is repealed.

When Parliament responds to the December 1773 Boston Tea Party with the “Intolerable Acts” of April 1774 (closing the port of Boston, banning free assembly, etc.), Washington chairs the session calling for the First Continental Congress to meet in Philadelphia.

As the Revolution plays out, he emerges as the calm and steady presence holding the colonists together, converting the rag-tag militias into a real army, and eventually winning America’s freedom from Britain.

After his role in calling for and chairing the 1787 Constitutional Convention, it is clear to all that his destiny lies in serving as the new nation’s first Executive leader.

Washington’s “bearing” is noted by all in his presence. An English observer writes: “there is a remarkable air of dignity about him.” A Frenchman: “he carries himself freely and with a sort of military grace.” The patriot, Benjamin Rush, says that his deportment is such “that you would distinguish him to be a general

and a soldier from among 10,000 people; there is not a king in Europe that would not look like a valet by his side.” Even the sharp tongued Abigail Adams, wife of the new Vice President, is drawn to his graceful demeanor and confidence.

Time: 1674 and Forward

Sidebar: Washington's Mount Vernon Plantation



George Washington's Mt. Vernon Plantation –
Slave Quarters Left of House

Washington inherits Mt. Vernon in 1752, at age twenty – and expands it from 2,000 acres to over 8,000 acres after he weds the very wealthy widow, Martha Custis, in 1759.

The hub of the plantation is a 2½ story mansion with 20 rooms, and 12 outbuildings, including slave quarters which, at their peak, house about 317 blacks, who work in the fields, serve in the residence, or handle duties such as carpentry, shoe-making, weaving, milling and gardening.

Washington treats Mt. Vernon like a business, dividing the property into 5 separate farms, each run by an overseer, and each using the latest methods of mulching and annual crop rotation to maximize their output. Over time he experiments with 60 different crops and also runs a sizable fishing operation, with a catch taken from the Potomac, then cleaned, salted and shipped across the colonies and even abroad.

Mt. Vernon is not a cotton plantation.

Its main crop is tobacco up until about 1765, when Washington decides to concentrate on wheat – a move that eliminates his dependence on English “factors” to complete his sales transactions.

But like other plantation barons, Washington discovers that in addition to the tobacco or wheat or cotton in his fields, he has a “second crop” that is incredibly valuable – the crop of slaves to be breed and sold in the open market.

Like Jefferson, Washington is expanding his inventory of slaves all the way up until his death in 1799, when the count tops out at 317.

Number of Slaves Owned by Washington

1743	1760	1770	1774	1799
10	49	87	135	317

And he is also selling slaves along the way, as in this 1766 request to a sea-going trader:

With this letter comes a Negro (Tom) which I beg the favor of you to sell...for whatever he will fetch. This fellow is a rogue...but exceedingly healthy, strong and good at the Hoe..keep him handcuffed till you get to sea.

Washington is not known to be harsh with his slaves, and is fairly unique among his class by writing a detailed will guaranteeing that each is to be freed and educated upon his death. Still, while alive, his overall attitudes are typical of plantation owners of his era – the blacks are his property and a major source of his total wealth.

As the economist Robert Ransom points out, the presence of even 15-25 slaves on a plantation signals a 60-fold increase in wealth vis a vis the average small farm in the region.

Relative Wealth of Southern Plantations

Slave Labor	%	Value Then	Value in 2010 \$
No slave	67	\$ 2,362	\$ 58,000
A few slaves	31	9,634	237,000
Plantations	2	154,785	3,808,000

Note: Ransom p. 63 (for 1860)

This puts plantation owners like Washington among the economic elites of America, the Southern version of industrial tycoons emerging in New England.