



# George Washington AND SLAVERY

**M**any people wonder how George Washington, the father of liberty and freedom, could own slaves. By our modern social values and ethics, it is difficult to understand the world in which Washington lived—a world where slavery was common and people were not treated equally.

**George Washington was well known as a patriot and our first president, but he was also a farmer. In this painting, Washington stands among African American field workers harvesting grain; Mount Vernon in background.**

At the age of 11, Washington inherited ten slaves in his father's will. He was certainly accustomed to the institution of slavery. His father, brothers, and neighbors used slaves to work their land, keep their houses, and even help care for their

children. Between 1743 and 1775, Washington purchased an additional 50 to 75 slaves, and Martha Custis brought 25 slaves into her marriage with Washington in 1759. By that time, Washington was working hard to establish a successful farming

operation at Mount Vernon, and to establish himself in Virginia society. The acquisition and management of land and property was a measure of one's social standing.

### AN ECONOMIC DEPENDENCY

Like his contemporaries, Washington was dependent upon a colonial plantation system that used slave labor. He and other large landowners had thousands of acres under cultivation. Since there were few **indentured servants** available to work the land, colonists had to look elsewhere for labor. By the late 1600s, slavery had become firmly rooted in the plantation economy. Slave labor offered a permanent labor force that was economically more advantageous than contracting with indentured servants or **itinerant** free men.

In the Chesapeake Bay region in the 1700s, most slave owners knew their slaves and often worked in the fields with them. At smaller properties and farms, slaves often shared their owners' homes. George Washington certainly knew most of the slaves at Mount Vernon. He was familiar with their names, their work skills, their families, and their personalities. Yet his relationship with them always remained formal. One possible exception was Billy Lee, who served Washington throughout the Revolutionary War, and was the only slave granted immediate freedom in Washington's will.

### A SHIFT IN ATTITUDE

Although Washington probably viewed slavery as a normal aspect of his world when he was a young man, his attitude began to change as he grew older. Prior to the revolution, he promised not to sell any slave without his or her permission, because he did not wish to break up family units.

(There is one recorded exception—he did order the sale of a slave who had been causing serious problems on the estate.) Washington's experience in the Revolutionary War probably had the greatest influence on his attitude toward slavery. He spent eight years leading the army—much of it in the North, where slavery was far less common than at home in Virginia—and saw firsthand an economic system that did not depend upon slavery. More important, the concepts and ideals for which he was fighting were directly opposite to the system that viewed human beings as property. Almost certainly, Washington saw the irony in this situation.

In 1794, he wrote to a friend, "Were it not then, that I am principled against selling Negroes, as you do cattle in the market, I would not,

**Indentured servants agree to work for another person for a given length of time, as an apprentice to a master.**

**Itinerant refers to people whose work or profession requires them to travel from place to place.**

Negros

Belonging to George Washington in the own Right and by Marriage

G.W		Dover	
Names	Remarks	Names	Remarks
Tradesmen do		Tradesmen do	
Apah	Wife	Tom Davis	B. Co.
George	B.	James	Cook
Francis	Carp	Cyrus	Dist.
James	B.	Wilson	Dist.
Jambs	B.	Godfrey	Cart
Sally	B.	Jacob	B.
Sam	B.	Abner	Dist.
Tom	Cook	Peter	B.
Moses	B.	Wet	B.
Sarah	B.	Samuel	B.
George	Serv	Samth	B.
Sperry	B.	Ab. Joo	Dist
Bartowans	Dist	Abige	B.
Barndis	B.	Amos	B.
Charles	B.	Lucy	Cook
Chas	B.	Charlotte	Cart
Chas	Wife	Jack	B.
Soraster	B.	Caroline	B.
Wash	no Cook	Peter	Dist.
M. Muelers	Cart	Abas	Wife
Reba	Cart	Betsy	Wife
Mattias	Wife	Abas	Wife
Tomas	Wife	Lucy	Wife
Will	Wife	Abas	Wife
		Peter	Cart
		Abas	Wife
amount	24	amount	28
Mansion House		Mansion House	
Papered Labour		Papered Labour	
Joseph	50	Will	
James	90	Wife	
Sam	50	Abas	
		Abas	
		Mama	
		Lucy	
		Grace	
		Abas	
		Abas	
		Abas	
		Abas	
		Abas	
		Abas	
		Abas	
		Abas	
amount	3		
		Children	
		Abas	
		Abas	

Courtesy of Mount Vernon Ladies' Association

Washington kept detailed records of his slaves and updated these accounts regularly. This page is from his 1799 Census of Slaves.

in twelve months from this date, be possessed of one, as a slave. . . .”

As president, Washington was approached by abolitionists who wanted his support. Although his personal attitude had changed, Washington considered the issue of slavery volatile enough to tear the struggling young nation apart. He felt the southern states would never agree, and refused to take a public stand. As early as 1786, however, he wrote to his friend John Francis Mercer:

I never mean (unless some particular circumstances should compel me to it) to possess another slave by purchase; it being among my first wishes to see some plan adopted by the Legislature by which slavery in the Country may be abolished by slow, sure, and imperceptible degrees.

Washington also had an economic reason for wanting slavery abolished. He was an extremely practical man. Both his calculation of the economic return on slaves and his experience at Mount Vernon made him question the economic viability of the system. Washington was, in fact, responsible for feeding and clothing a community of more than 300 people, almost one half of whom were either too old or too young to work.

### GRANTING FREEDOM

In 1793, he wrote to British agriculturist Arthur Young and proposed renting all but the Mansion House Farm to British tenant farmers. Part of this plan called for freeing his slaves, who would then be paid by the tenant farmers to work the land. The plan illustrates how deeply torn Washington had become over the issue of slavery. If successful, the plan would have provided them with a means of support. Washington feared that freeing slaves without proper training

in a trade would set them adrift in the world. The plan, however, was never implemented. Instead, Washington chose to use his will as

the means to free the 123 slaves at Mount Vernon who belonged to him. He also stipulated in his will that younger slaves be trained in a skill or trade before being freed, and that those too old or too ill to work be cared for by his estate. Washington’s struggle with slavery, however, was only partly successful since, by law, he was unable to free the dower slaves (slaves owned by the estate of Martha Washington’s first husband). As a result, family units were broken apart and separated. Thus, he understood better than most the cost slavery would eventually have on our nation.

**Abolitionists refer to people who worked to end slavery.**

**Dower slaves were slaves given to a widow when her husband died.**

In his will, Washington specified that children whose parents were unable or unwilling to care for them would be bound by the Court until reaching the age of 25. Under his specific direction, they were to be taught to read and write and to be taught a “useful occupation.”

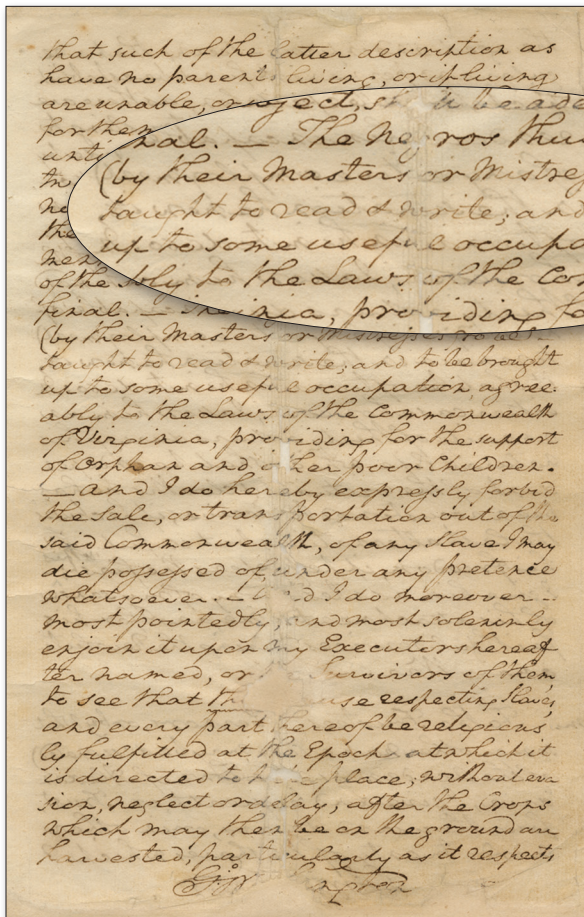


Image courtesy of John T. Frey, Clerk Fairfax Circuit Court

**GENERAL OF THE CONTINENTAL ARMY:**

June 15, 1775 to December 23, 1783

**PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES:**

April 30, 1789 to March 4, 1797

**BIRTH DATE:**

1732 at Pope's Creek, Virginia

**DEATH DATE:**

1799 at Mount Vernon, Virginia (Age 67)

**HEIGHT:**

6' 2"

**WIFE:**

Martha Dandridge Custis Washington  
(Married in 1759)

**CHILDREN:**

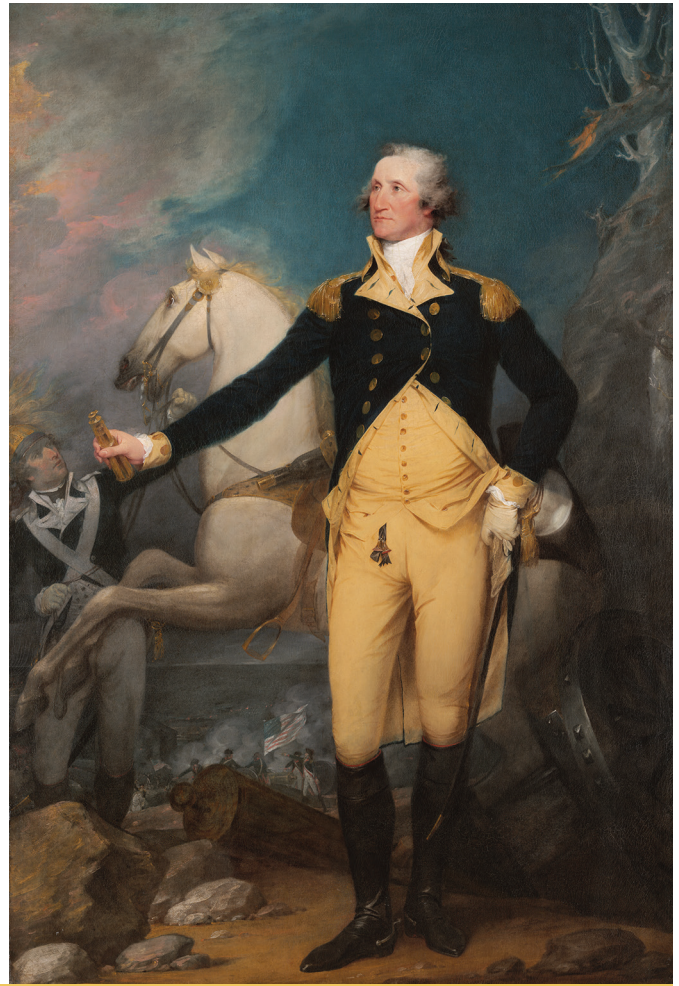
None

**RELIGION:**

Anglican/Episcopalian

**POLITICAL AFFILIATION:**

None



Yale University Art Gallery

# GEORGE WASHINGTON

## DID YOU KNOW?

★ **George Washington did not attend college.**

When George's father died in 1743, George's formal education ended. Unlike his father and two older half-brothers, lack of money prevented the boy from studying in England, and unlike many of the Founding Fathers, Washington did not attend college. Always sensitive to this lack of formal education, Washington embarked upon a lifelong pursuit of self-education. Washington was an avid reader and was continually seeking the latest texts on a variety of subjects ranging from military arts to agriculture and political topics.

★ **Washington helped establish a number of charitable organizations, schools, and colleges.**

Despite not having a formal education, Washington was a strong supporter of education. Toward the end of the Revolution, he gave 50 guineas to Washington College in Chestertown, Maryland, which was used to purchase scientific equipment. In his will, Washington left money for the support of a free school for poor and orphaned children in Alexandria, Virginia, and for Liberty Hall Academy, which later became Washington & Lee University. Washington also left money for the establishment of a national university within the Federal City (Washington, DC), but this never came about.



MOUNT VERNON

★ Washington was called the “foremost farmer” of America.

An Englishman described Washington as the “foremost farmer” in America after visiting Mount Vernon. Washington, who believed that America should become a “granary to the world,” was a pioneer in improving many aspects of farming. His advanced crop rotations, use of fertilizers, experimentation with crops, and innovative farm equipment made him one of the leading agricultural leaders in America.

★ Washington did not have children of his own.

Washington was fond of children, but he and Martha did not have any children of their own. Martha Washington had two children, John Parke Custis and Martha Parke Custis, from her previous marriage. There were always children in the Washington household throughout their marriage. Together they raised Mrs. Washington’s two children, as well as two of her four grandchildren, and several nieces and nephews. A great-grandchild was born at Mount Vernon just two weeks before George Washington’s death.

★ Washington lost more battles than he won, but his leadership helped secure American independence.

Given Washington’s ultimate success during the Revolution, it’s important to consider that he lost more battles than he won throughout his military career. In many of the battles that Washington either directly led or played an important role in, his forces were defeated. Despite the long list of defeats, Washington brought many important characteristics to his military command. His ability to rally men under fire, his ability to sustain the Continental Army’s morale, his administrative talents, and his grasp of the larger strategy all made Washington the great general that history remembers and celebrates.

★ Washington was the first to sign the Constitution.

As the President of the Constitutional Convention, George Washington was the first to sign this important document.



Library of Congress

MARTHA WASHINGTON



WASHINGTON CROSSING THE DELAWARE

★ Washington was unanimously elected President of the United States, twice.

At this early stage of the United States, presidents were selected only through the vote of the Electoral College, not by popular vote. The 69 votes that Washington received in 1789, and the 132 he received in 1792 represented all of the available Electoral College votes, thereby making Washington the only president in United States history to have been unanimously elected.