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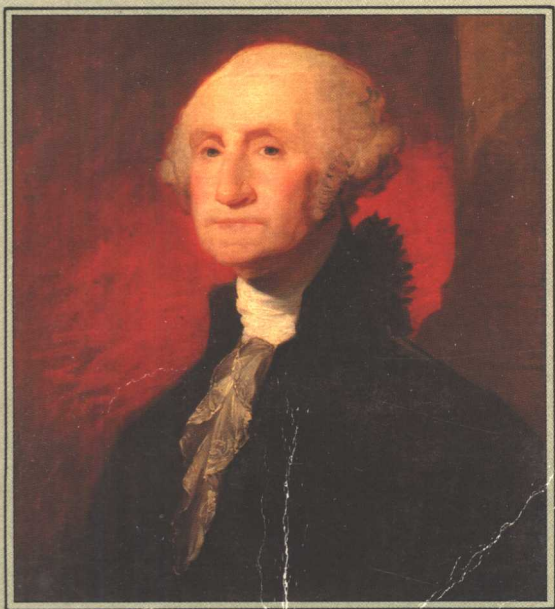


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THE NEWLY UPDATED AND REVISED EDITION OF
THE CLASSIC BIOGRAPHY OF WASHINGTON, A STATESMAN
WHOSE GREAT AND LASTING ACHIEVEMENTS ARE ALL THE
MORE ADMIRABLE FOR HIS HUMAN FALLIBILITY.

George Washington

MAN AND MONUMENT



BY MARCUS CUNLIFFE

George Washington



MAN AND MONUMENT

Revised Edition

By
MARCUS CUNLIFFE



A MENTOR BOOK

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Chronology

GEORGE WASHINGTON 1732-1799

1732	February 22 (February 11, Old Style)	<i>Born at Bridges' Creek (Wakefield), Westmoreland County, Virginia</i>
1743	April 12	<i>Death of father, Augustine Washington</i>
1749	July 20	<i>Appointed surveyor of Cul- peper County, Virginia</i>
1751	September- March 1752	<i>Visited Barbados with half brother, Lawrence Washing- ton</i>
1752	November 6	<i>Appointed major in Virginia militia</i>
1753	October 31- January 16, 1754	<i>Sent by Governor Dinwiddie to deliver ultimatum to the French (Fort Le Boeuf)</i>
1754	March-October	<i>Lieutenant colonel of militia in frontier campaign</i>
1755	April-July	<i>Aide-de-camp to General Braddock</i>
	August 1755- December 1758	<i>Colonel of Virginia Regi- ment, responsible for frontier defenses</i>

1758	June–November	<i>Took part in Forbes expedition against Fort Duquesne</i>
	July 24	<i>Elected burgess for Frederick County, Virginia</i>
1759	January 6	<i>Having resigned commission, married Mrs. Martha Dandridge Custis</i>
1761	May 18	<i>Re-elected burgess</i>
1762	October 25	<i>Vestryman of Truro Parish, Fairfax County</i>
1763	October 3	<i>Warden of Pohick Church, Truro Parish</i>
1765	July 16	<i>Elected burgess for Fairfax County (re-elected 1768, 1769, 1771, 1774)</i>
1770	October	<i>Justice of the peace, Fairfax County</i>
1773	May–June	<i>Journey to New York City</i>
1774	July	<i>Member and chairman of meeting that adopted Fairfax County Resolves</i>
	August	<i>Attended first Virginia Provincial Convention at Williamsburg</i>
	September–October	<i>Attended First Continental Congress at Philadelphia as a Virginia delegate</i>
1775	May–June	<i>Delegate at Second Continental Congress</i>
	June 16	<i>Elected General and Commander in Chief of the Army of the United States</i>

	July 3	<i>Took command of Continental troops around Boston</i>
1776	March 17	<i>Occupied Boston</i>
	August 27	<i>Battle of Long Island</i>
	October 28	<i>Battle of White Plains</i>
	December 25-26	<i>Victory over Hessians at Trenton, New Jersey</i>
1777	January 3	<i>Success at Princeton; establishment of winter quarters at Morristown, New Jersey</i>
	September 11	<i>Battle of Brandywine</i>
	October 4	<i>Battle of Germantown</i>
	October 17	<i>Surrender of Burgoyne at Saratoga</i>
1777-1778		<i>Winter at Valley Forge</i>
1778	June	<i>British evacuation of Philadelphia; battle of Monmouth</i>
1778-1779		<i>Winter headquarters at Middlebrook, New Jersey</i>
1780	July	<i>Arrival of French fleet and army (under Rochambeau) at Newport, Rhode Island</i>
1781	August-October	<i>Campaign at Yorktown, Virginia, culminating in Cornwallis's surrender (October 19)</i>
1783	March 15	<i>Reply to the "Newburgh Address" by discontented officers</i>

	June 8	<i>Circular letter to the states</i>
	June 19	<i>Elected president-general of the Society of the Cincinnati</i>
	December 4	<i>Farewell to officers at Fraunces' Tavern, New York City</i>
	December 23	<i>Resigned commission to Congress at Annapolis</i>
1784	December	<i>Attended Annapolis conference on Potomac River navigation</i>
1785	May 17	<i>President of the Potomac Company</i>
1787	March 28	<i>Elected Virginia delegate to federal convention in Philadelphia</i>
	May 25	<i>Elected president of convention</i>
	September 17	<i>Draft of Constitution signed; convention adjourned</i>
1788	January 18	<i>Elected chancellor of William and Mary College</i>
1789	February 4	<i>Unanimously elected President of the United States</i>
	April 30	<i>Inaugurated President at Federal Hall, New York City</i>
	August 25	<i>Mother, Mary Washington, died at Fredericksburg, Virginia</i>
	October–November	<i>Tour of New England (excluding Rhode Island)</i>

1790	August	<i>Visit to Rhode Island</i>
	September	<i>Arrived in Philadelphia, new temporary capital of the United States</i>
1791	April-June	<i>Tour by coach of the Southern states (1887 miles in 66 days)</i>
1792	December 5	<i>Unanimously re-elected President</i>
1793	March 4	<i>Inaugurated President for second term at Independence Hall, Philadelphia</i>
	April 22	<i>Proclamation of Neutrality</i>
	September 18	<i>Laid cornerstone of federal Capitol (Washington, D.C.)</i>
	December 31	<i>Resignation of Thomas Jefferson as Secretary of State</i>
1794	September-October	<i>Tours of inspection in connection with Pennsylvania "whiskey rebellion"</i>
1795	January 31	<i>Resignation of Alexander Hamilton as Secretary of the Treasury</i>
1796	September 19	<i>Farewell Address (dated September 17) published in Philadelphia Daily American Advertiser</i>
1797	March	<i>Retirement, and return to Mount Vernon, following inauguration of John Adams as President</i>

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|------|-------------|---|
| 1798 | July 4 | <i>Appointed Lieutenant General and Commander in Chief of the Armies of the United States</i> |
| 1799 | December 14 | <i>Died at Mount Vernon (buried in the family vault there, December 18)</i> |
| 1802 | May 22 | <i>Death of widow, Martha Washington</i> |

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1

The Washington Monument

The shades of Vernon to remotest time, will be trod with awe; the banks of Potomac will be hallowed ground.

CHARLES PINCKNEY SUMNER, *Eulogy on the
Illustrious George Washington*, February, 1800

Does not that Colossal Unit remind all who gaze at it . . . that there is one name in American history above all other names, one character more exalted than all other characters, . . . one bright particular star in . . . our firmament, whose guiding light and peerless lustre are for all men and all ages . . . ?

ROBERT C. WINTHROP, *Dedication of the Washington
National Monument*, February, 1885

THE Washington Monument in Washington, D.C., is, we are told, 555 feet high—higher than the spires of Cologne Cathedral, higher than St. Peter's in Rome, much higher than the Pyramids. When George Washington died, in December 1799, the new federal capital had already been named in his honor. As a further gesture, the House of Representatives resolved that a marble monument should be built, "so designed as to commemorate the great events of his military and political life." Washington's body was to be entombed beneath the shrine. But for various reasons, some unedifying,

it was never erected. The soaring obelisk that we call the Washington Monument was a later project, not completed until a hundred years after George Washington had achieved victory and independence for his nation. Many thousand tons of concrete are buried under its base. Yet the bones of the man it celebrates are not there either; they repose a few miles away, in the vault of his Mount Vernon home.

Innumerable tourists visit Mount Vernon. It is a handsome place, as they can testify, refurbished with taste and maintained in immaculate order. But the ghosts have been all too successfully exorcised in the process; Mount Vernon is less a house than a kind of museum-temple. We know that George Washington lived and died there; we do not *feel* the fact, any more than we can recapture the presence of William Shakespeare at Stratford-on-Avon. Both men are baffling figures to us, prodigious and indistinct. One American writer has said of them that "England's greatest contribution to the world is the works of Shakespeare; America's is the character of Washington." On this sort of scale are they measured; and it is not a human scale.

There is a difference, of course. Whereas we can find out almost nothing about Shakespeare, we have a vast amount of information about Washington. Only one blank portrait of Shakespeare exists; the portraits of Washington—some of them apparently excellent likenesses—require three volumes to list in full. There are no autobiographical fragments from Shakespeare's hand; Washington's letters and diaries fill over forty volumes, in printed form. Hardly any of his contemporaries mentioned Shakespeare; scores of friends, acquaintances and casual callers set down for us their impressions of George Washington. A strange obscurity envelops the figure of Shakespeare; Washington stood in the glaring limelight of world fame. But the result—optically, so to speak—is similar: the darkness and the dazzle both have an effect of concealment.

Trying in vain to discern the actual man behind the huge, impersonal, ever-growing legend, biographers have reacted in various ways. In the case of Shakespeare, some have denied his authorship of the plays and have attempted to substitute a more plausible bard: a Bacon or even a Marlowe. The reaction in the case of Washington has naturally been otherwise.

No one, in face of such a quantity of evidence, can pretend that he never existed, or that some other man deserves the credit. But he has become entombed in his own myth—a metaphorical Washington Monument that hides from us the lineaments of the real man. Year by year this monument has grown, like a cairn to which each passer-by adds a stone. Pamphlet, speech, article and book; pebble, rubble, stone and boulder have piled up. As far back as 1885, Robert C. Winthrop of Massachusetts, speaking at the dedication of the Monument, ruefully asked: "What can any man say of Washington, which has not already been rendered as familiar as household words. . . ? How could I hope to glean anything from a field long ago so carefully . . . reaped by such [biographers] as John Marshall and Jared Sparks, by Guizot and Edward Everett and Washington Irving . . . ?" Anecdote, monograph, panegyric: whatever the level and value of each contribution it has—ironically, in the instance of more important contributions—tended to smother what it seeks to disclose.

Worse, Washington has become not merely a mythical figure, but a myth of suffocating dullness, the victim of civic elephantiasis. There is a drouth, a dearth of emotion, a heaviness well caught in John Updike's poem "February 22":

More than great successes, we love great failures.

Lincoln is Messiah; he, merely Caesar.

He suffered greatness like a curse.

He fathered our country, we feel, without great joy.

Confronted by the shelves and shelves of "Washingtoniana"—all those sonorous, repetitious, reverential items, the set pieces in adulation that are impossible to read without yawning—we seek some sour antidote to so much saccharine, and tend to agree with Emerson: "Every hero becomes a bore at last. . . . They cry up the virtues of George Washington—'Damn George Washington!' is the poor Jacobin's whole speech and confutation." When we have allowed ourselves the relief of this irreverence, though, the monument still looms before us, and must be reckoned with before we can get to grips with Washington the man. We may suspect, however, that myth and man can never be entirely separated,

and that valuable clues to Washington's temperament, as well as his public stature, lie in this fact.

The first thing to note, in exploring the monument, is that the myth-making process was at work during Washington's own lifetime. "*Vae, puto deus fio*," the dying Roman emperor Vespasian is supposed to have murmured: "Alas, I think I am about to become a god." Such a mixture of levity and magnificence would have been foreign to George Washington. Yet he might with justice have thought the same thing as he lay on his deathbed at Mount Vernon in 1799. Babies were being christened after him as early as 1775, and while he was still President, his countrymen paid to see him in waxwork effigy. To his admirers he was "godlike Washington," and his detractors complained to one another that he was looked upon as a "demi-god" whom it was treasonable to criticize. "O Washington!" declared Ezra Stiles of Yale (in a sermon of 1783). "How I do love thy name! How have I often adored and blessed thy God, for creating and forming thee the great ornament of human kind! . . . our very enemies stop the madness of their fire in full volley, stop the illiberality of their slander at thy name, as if rebuked from Heaven with a—'Touch not mine Anointed, and do my Hero no harm!' Thy fame is of sweeter perfume than Arabian spices. Listening angels shall catch the odor, waft it to heaven, and perfume the universe!"

Here indeed is a legend in the making. His contemporaries vied in their tributes—all intended to express the idea that there was something superhuman about George Washington. We need not labor the point that, after death, "godlike Washington" passed still further into legend, his surname appropriated for one American state, seven mountains, eight streams, ten lakes, thirty-three counties; for nine American colleges; for one hundred and twenty-one American towns and villages. His birthday has long been a national holiday. His visage is on coins and banknotes and postage stamps; his portrait (usually the snaffle-mouthed, immensely grave "Athenaeum" version by Gilbert Stuart) is hung in countless corridors and offices. His head—sixty feet from chin to scalp—has been carved out of a mountainside in South Dakota. There are statues of him all over the United States—and all over the world: you can see them in London and in

Paris, in Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro, in Caracas and Budapest and Tokyo.

All these are outward signs of Washington's heroic standing in the world. But we should look a little more closely at the monument. If the metaphor may be extended, we can observe that the monument has four sides: four roles that Washington has been made to play for posterity's sake. The four are not sharply distinct—nothing is, in this misty Valhalla—but it is worth our while to take a glance at each of them before turning to the actual events from which the legends emanated. This is, of course, not to argue that Washington is undeserving of praise; his merits were genuine and manifold. The crucial point is that the real merits were enlarged and distorted into unreal attitudes, and that this overblown Washington is the one who occurs immediately to us when his name is mentioned. He might occur in any or all of the following four guises: a) *the Copybook Hero*; b) *the Father of His People*; c) *the Disinterested Patriot*; d) *the Revolutionary Leader*. These are all guises of the hero figure. In each, Washington is a member of a pantheon; and for each pantheon there is a kind of antipantheon of heroes who fell from grace.

The Copybook Hero

Washington's life lay completely within the eighteenth century, though only just. But Washington as he has descended to us is largely a creation of the nineteenth-century English-speaking world, with its bustling, didactic, evangelical emphasis. This is the world of tracts and primers, of Chambers's *Miscellanies* and McGuffey's *Readers*, of Samuel Smiles and Horatio Alger, of mechanics' institutes and lyceum lectures, of autograph albums and gift annuals. It is the age of Masonic rituals. Freemasons were prominent in the ceremony both for the start of the Washington Monument in 1848, and at its dedication in 1885. Bazaars and bridges are opened, foundation stones laid, prizes and certificates distributed, drunkards admonished and rescued, slaves emancipated. It is, in the convenient term of David Riesman, the age of the "inner-directed" personality whose essential attributes are

summed up in the titles of Smiles's various works—*Self-Help*, *Thrift*, *Duty*, *Character*—or in a short poem of Emerson's that is also called "Character."

*The stars set, but set not his hope:
Stars rose; his faith was earlier up:
Fixed on the enormous galaxy
Deeper and older seemed his eye;
And matched his sufferance sublime
The taciturnity of time . . .*

Character is the key word in the copybook view of George Washington, as we have already seen in the statement linking him with Shakespeare.* Lord Brougham is of the same opinion: "The test of the progress of mankind will be their appreciation of the character of Washington."

The enterprising Mason Locke Weems, a Victorian before the Victorian era, was the first to fit Washington into what was to become the pattern of the century. His aim in writing a pamphlet biography of Washington was, Weems explained to a publisher in 1800, to bring out "his Great Virtues. 1 His Veneration for the Diety [*sic*], or Religious Principles. 2 His Patriotism. 3^d. His Magnanimity [*sic*]. 4 his Industry. 5 his Temperance and Sobriety. 6. his Justice, &c &c." Here is the copybook canon. Weems was not quite as high-minded as this statement might suggest, though there is no reason to doubt that he shared the general American veneration for Washington. As he told the same publisher, his proposal could win them "pence and popularity." At any rate, he did not hesitate to fabricate incidents, or to style himself "Rector" of the non-existent parish of Mount Vernon. His pamphlet grew into a book, embodying stage by stage the famous false Weemsian anecdotes: Washington chopping down the cherry tree ("I can't tell a lie, Pa; you know I can't tell a lie. I did cut it with my hatchet."—Run to my arms, you dearest boy, cried his father in transports); Washington upbraiding his schoolmates for fighting—an episode that gradually disappeared

*It is emphasized in 1843 by Daniel Webster, in an oration at Bunker Hill. America, he says, owes a considerable debt to the Old World. She has repaid it in large part by furnishing "to the world the character of Washington! And if our American institutions had done nothing else, that alone would have entitled them to the respect of mankind."