

# George Washington

## Father of His Country



*George Washington (1732–1799) was commander-in-chief of the colonial armies during the American Revolution and served as the United States' first president from 1789 to 1797.*

Those who knew George Washington as a boy would hardly have guessed that he would grow up to be one of the United States' greatest leaders. He was very shy and awkward, and his family owned only a small amount of property in the English colony of Virginia.

**Virginia Gentleman** When he was 14, George obtained a copy of a manners book entitled *Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior*. The book advised readers to always speak quietly and to carefully consider what they wanted to say before speaking. All his life, Washington followed this advice, making him one of the most polite men in Virginia.

His good manners impressed Lord Fairfax, the richest man in the region. Fairfax took Washington under his wing and included him on a crew surveying land in the Ohio River Valley. Washington was soon able to use his surveying skills to make money. He began to buy his own property along the Virginia frontier.

**French and Indian War** In 1752, the royal governor, Lord Dinwiddie, hired Washington as a messenger. He was to take word to the French in the Ohio River Valley that they were trespassing on land claimed by the English. The French told Washington that they would hold the land at all costs.

During his journey back to Virginia, Washington nearly died in the freezing weather that hit the mid-Atlantic region in the winter of 1753–54. When he finally delivered the message, Dinwiddie was furious. He ordered Washington to lead 160 volunteers to confront the French.

On May 28, 1754, Washington's men fired the first shots of the French and Indian War, killing 10 French soldiers, wounding one, and taking 21 more

prisoner. By that summer, though, the French gained the upper hand. They used guerrilla warfare to outsmart the English forces.

By 1755, Washington's knowledge of the wilderness earned him a position as special assistant to General Edward Braddock. Washington urged the general to use the same tactics as the French and their Native American allies. Braddock refused, saying that firing from behind rocks and trees was not the way gentlemen waged war.

On July 9, Braddock's men were ambushed, and he and his troops were slaughtered. Only Washington and some of the Virginia volunteers escaped. When the soldiers returned, they proclaimed Washington a hero for his bravery under fire. By the time Washington was 26, the war had turned in England's favor, and France soon admitted defeat.

In 1759, Washington married Martha Dandridge Custis, a widow with two small children. For the next 15 years, Washington built their Mount Vernon plantation into one of the most successful in Virginia. His methods of crop rotation and planting wheat instead of tobacco kept the soil healthy and made him famous as an agriculturist. He was also named to the House of Burgesses, the colonial assembly of Virginia.

**American Revolution** Beginning in 1763, the English heavily taxed the colonies without giving them a say in the matter. Many freedoms the colonists had enjoyed all their lives were being taken away. When Lord Botetourt, the British royal governor, grew tired of colonial protests, he dissolved the House of Burgesses. It was then, in 1769, that Washington began to consider the idea of independence for the colonies.

By 1775, the problems between the British and Americans had erupted into violence. Washington was summoned to the Second Continental Congress, where he was elected commander-in-chief of the army. Underfunded, the army suffered greatly. Washington had to outsmart the English, who boasted the most powerful military in the world. In March of 1776, he achieved the impossible by having his men haul dozens of heavy cannons over thickly forested mountains to surround and take the city of Boston. In July of that year, Congress signed the Declaration of Independence.

The war was far from over, however. It lasted until 1781, when Washington again outsmarted the British, surrounding them at Yorktown, Virginia, and forcing a full surrender. In 1783, the British accepted terms of peace and the war was officially ended. After the war, Washington returned to Mount Vernon, looking forward to many peaceful years of retirement.

But Washington's retirement was brief. America's first constitution, the Articles of Confederation, was beginning to appear too weak to hold the country together. In 1785, Washington welcomed a group of concerned Americans to Mount Vernon to discuss ways to strengthen the government.

**Presidency** By 1787, the movement for a stronger government grew into a Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. Washington was selected president of the convention. After the 13 states adopted the constitution, Washington was unanimously elected as the first president of the United States. In his First Inaugural Address, Washington spoke humbly about his qualifications for this new role.

#### A VOICE FROM THE PAST

The magnitude and difficulty of the trust to which the voice of my country called me, being sufficient to awaken in the wisest and most experienced of her citizens a distrustful scrutiny into his qualifications, could not but overwhelm with despondence [worry] one who (inheriting inferior endowments [abilities] from nature and unpracticed in the duties of civil administration) ought to be peculiarly conscious of his own deficiencies.

GEORGE WASHINGTON, First Inaugural Address

Washington became one of the United States' most respected leaders. He selected the smartest Americans to advise him, whether they always agreed with each other or not. He would listen to all sides before finally deciding where he stood on any issue. He detested partisan politics and urged Americans to be loyal to common sense, not political parties.

Washington served two terms as president, avoiding calls from some that he should become president for life, or even king. In 1796, he retired as president and returned to Mount Vernon. There he hosted an endless stream of guests for the next three years. Then, on a freezing December day in 1799, Washington contracted a throat infection after checking his fields in the rain and snow.

After giving final instructions to his personal secretary and repeating them to make sure he was understood, Washington died on December 14. His friend Henry Lee remembered him as "First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen." His death was mourned all over the world. In the United States, people wore black for months to mourn his passing.

#### Review Questions

1. What was it about Washington that caused Lord Fairfax to give him a job?
2. What part did Washington play in the French and Indian War?
3. What farming practices did Washington use? Why?

#### Critical Thinking

4. **Recognizing Causes** How could Washington afford to buy land on the Virginia frontier?
5. **Analyzing Points of View** In his First Inaugural Address, do you think Washington fairly evaluated his qualifications for the presidency?
6. **Making Inferences** Why might Washington have been a good decision-maker?