

GEORGE WASHINGTON: A TRULY REMARKABLE MAN II

This STB is Part II on the life of George Washington We again would like to thank the Mt. Vernon Ladies Association of the Union and Mr. James Rees, Assoc. Director for its preparation and allowing MSA to reproduce the photo of the "Texas Gate".

On December 12, 1799, following his usual routine, Washington rose at five in the morning, long before the rest of the household, and went downstairs to the study where he answered correspondence and took breakfast before starting out on his horseback tour of the farms. It was a stormy day but Washington, always the devoted farmer, was not about to delay his plan to clear away some underbrush near the Potomac River shoreline. Washington's diary entry for the 12th reads: "About 1 o'clock it began to snow--soon after to Hail and then turned to a settled cold Rain. The mercury was 28 at night."

Washington rode out through the snow and rain, and when he returned, his clothes were soaked through and it was clear that he had taken a chill. Nevertheless, the next morning he went out into the cold again, marking out land to be cleared in the spring. That evening he returned to his desk to draft instructions to his farm manager. It seems fitting that the last of the tens of thousands of letters that Washington wrote was about farming.

In just a matter of hours, George Washington contracted quinsy, an infection of the throat not unlike what we call strep throat today. Two doctors were rushed to his bedside and, following 18th-century medical practices, they bled the General on at least two occasions, which only made him weaker. His throat contracted to the point that breathing was simply impossible and, on December 14, 1799, with Martha at his side, he died in his own bed at Mount Vernon. The entire nation was plunged into mourning for "The Father of Our Country".

Two centuries later, we still remember Washington as "First in War, First in Peace and First in the Hearts of His Countrymen." His image is easily recognized by people of all ages, and his name is still attached to hundreds of cities and towns, thousands of streets and avenues. But there is significant evidence that many Americans--particularly those in the younger generations--have lost touch with Washington, the man. How many students, even those about to graduate from high school, can describe his accomplishments? How many Americans, no matter what their ages, still remember that George Washington's true birthday is February 22, and not the third Monday in February? And when we "celebrate" this annual occasion, how many Americans pause to reflect upon the character of George Washington, rather than the department store sales that fill our newspapers?

It is ironic indeed that Americans are losing touch with their greatest hero at a time when foreign nations are pointing to George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and other Founding Fathers as role models for their leaders of today. It may be that the freedom fighters in China and the Soviet

Union understand the character and patriotism of George Washington better than our own children. They comprehend the sacrifices made by George Washington and his compatriots because they are being called upon to make similar sacrifices.

Perhaps too many Americans have been spoiled by several decades of relative prosperity. Perhaps the concepts of "heroism" and "patriotism" are no longer viewed as applicable to the American experience. Whatever the reasons, the people who live and work in America today are missing an opportunity to draw upon the inspiration and leadership of George Washington. To know and appreciate this remarkable man is to know and appreciate our nation.

More than one tourist visiting Mount Vernon has pronounced that George Washington was a "great but boring man." Sadly, by today's standards, this statement is understandable. George Washington was happily married to a devoted and steady wife, and even the most adventurous scholar cannot discover evidence that he was ever unfaithful. He constructed a modest home on a large plantation, yet his business ventures were only moderately successful. His "hobbies" were horticulture, hunting, reading and writing. He never attempted to draft flowery memoirs. He was respected more than any American before or since, yet he carefully guarded his privacy and that of his family. He offered warm hospitality to hundreds of guests at Mount Vernon, but he often retired very early--sometimes at eight p.m.--so that he could arise to begin his busy day between four and five in the morning. He possessed many acquaintances, but very few close friends. His writings tell us that he was an admirable stepfather and grandfather to Martha's children and grandchildren, and that he worried about the same family matters that parents do today. He seldom traveled except to fulfill his duties to his nation, and never sailed to Europe or vacationed in exotic climes. He like to drink and eat, but seldom to excess, and he was not known for fascinating or moving speeches.

In so many ways, George Washington appears today as an "average" American. The public relations whiz-kids who advise our 20th-century politicians would probably look at Washington as a difficult candidate, someone who would be hard-pressed to capture the public's attention during a 15-second spot on the television news.

This appraisal of George Washington is remarkably shallow. And it is the duty of organizations like the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association to reverse this trend, to reinstate George Washington as a model of leadership and courage for each new generation. Washington was a fascinating man with many talents and interests beyond those previewed in textbooks. He owned a huge fishing operation, a quarry, and a distillery. He helped to finance a canal system and funded the school that would eventually become Washington & Lee University. He experimented with a variety of new plants and fertilizers, and he took great pride in creating a new plow for American farmers. He served as his own architect and landscape designer, and Mount Vernon stands today as supreme and incontestable proof of his genius. He supervised the interior decoration of his home and personally selected the vast majority of Mount Vernon's furnishings.

Washington was a complex man who strove to make each and every day a productive one. By the time he had reached the age of 30, his life and the course of our nation would be intertwined, not to be separated until his death in 1799. Many of the challenges he faced, and the burdens he accepted, were not sought by Washington. Time and again, he accepted "the call of my country."

Today, thousands of Americans, from every corner of this great nation, still visit Mount Vernon and pay their respects at Washington's tomb. This is an encouraging sign; our respect for George Washington still runs deep, even though our knowledge about him and his times is fading fast.

Almost all visitors to Mount Vernon pass through a handsome gate with an impressive center arch. This brick gate was first constructed in 1899, with the financial support of the Grand Lodge of Texas. Almost a century later, the Grand Lodge once again demonstrated its devotion to George Washington by contributing \$150,000 to restore and modernize the "Texas Gate." The inscription on a special bronze plaque at the gate pays homage to George Washington: (See page 7)

This renewal of the Texas Gate must be accompanied by a renewed interest in the character and leadership of George Washington. For never has our nation needed a genuine hero more than it needs one today.