

GEORGE WASHINGTON: A TRULY REMARKABLE MAN

George Washington has long been one of our greatest heroes. MSA is truly grateful to the Mt. Vernon Ladies Association of the Union and Mr. James C. Rees, Assoc. Director for preparing this STB on the life of Washington. Mt. Vernon was loved by Washington who spent all the time there he could, and he is here presented as a lover of the soil. The Short Talk will actually take two issues to present. February 1991 is Part I. March 1991 will be Part II. Editor

To those of us who work at Mount Vernon, it is commonly accepted that a Mason--whether he represents the local lodge in Alexandria, Virginia, or a faraway state such as Texas or California--is well-informed about George Washington. I have never met a Mason who was not able to offer at least one new story or fact about "The Father of Our Country."

As Washington's 259th birthday approaches, it is indeed a privilege--and a formidable challenge--to relate a side of George Washington that may not receive as much attention as his military and political achievements, but was much closer to his heart. Throughout his life, whether on the battlefield or at the seat of government, Washington's thoughts were never far from Mount Vernon, his home on the banks of the Potomac River in Virginia. For more than 130 years, the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association has owned and preserved Mount Vernon as a national shrine. The annual visitation of about one million people makes Mount Vernon the nation's most popular historic house, and tells us that the memory of Washington lives on in the hearts of the American people. Mount Vernon is also one of our finest examples of the blending of historic preservation and private initiative. For never, in all the years since the Association was founded, has Mount Vernon received any funding from state or federal governments. The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association operates Mount Vernon as a business enterprise, with nearly all of its expenses covered by visitors' admission fees.

Visitors who travel from across the nation and the world to see Mount Vernon are impressed with the wide open spaces, beautiful gardens, and huge lawns that open up to sensational vistas across the Potomac River. They often comment how fortunate we are to possess 500 acres of such rich and valuable land so close to the nation's capital. But the Mount Vernon of 1990 is tiny in comparison to the 8,000 acres George Washington originally owned on the banks of the Potomac. Washington divided this huge tract into five separate farms, and on many mornings he rode from farm to farm to personally supervise the day's activities.

George Washington may be remembered most for what he accomplished during his absences from Mount Vernon, but it is probably fair to say that his farming activities meant as much to him as the honors he gained on the battlefield or at the seat of government. Washington's distinguished biographer, Douglas Southall Freeman, has written that "whether patriot and statesman or patriot and soldier, Washington never ceased to be a planter. What others derived from books and games, Washington took from the land. Agriculture remained the only hobby of

his life." And certainly, no theme appears more often in Washington's own writings than his love of farming, his love of his Mount Vernon lands and everything that flourished in them.

Indeed, agriculture stands as the unifying theme of Washington's life. He added sprigs of wheat to the Washington family coat-of-arms and had an array of farming tools--the scythe, the rake, the hoe and the sickle--molded into the elegant stucco ceiling of his large dining room.

One famous English agronomist said that George Washington was a better farmer than he was a general. Whatever the truth of this assessment, the importance of Washington's agricultural career cannot be overemphasized. It is a key to the understanding of his character.

The remarkable energy and determination displayed by Washington as a soldier and statesman were first the qualities of Washington the farmer. And nowhere is the man's almost superhuman attention to detail more evident than in the agricultural record he entered into his diary on a rainy day in 1787, when he sat down to calculate the number of individual grains in a bushel of Timothy and came up with the figure of 13,410,000.

But Washington's farming career is also important in its own right. Throughout his life, he was an agricultural pioneer, constantly experimenting with the most advanced techniques and working to improve farming practices throughout the country. In terms of the amount of land he kept under cultivation, it is fair to say that George Washington was the most innovative large-scale farmer in America during the last quarter of the 18th century.

Washington was required to be creative, however, because he faced a number of problems, the most serious of which was the nature of the soil itself. The land had always been poor, and years of tobacco cultivation had further drained its limited fertility. Moreover, by the time Washington acquired Mount Vernon, the entire region of Virginia's northern neck had reached its peak and was entering a period of decline. Washington attacked these problems with the same tenacious energy that characterized his military career. In 1764, Colonel Washington contracted with John Carlyle, the Alexandria merchant, to supply yearly harvests of wheat. Three years later, wheat had eclipsed tobacco as the main Mount Vernon crop. George Washington had become a farmer, concentrating on the production of grain and other foods, rather than a planter who relied on a single cash crop. The change was one of profound importance to Mount Vernon and its master. In one stroke, he had ended his dependence on the uncertain tobacco market and spared his lands further damage from an utterly ruinous crop. The shift to farming also allowed him to introduce more sophisticated methods, such as crop rotation and intensive plowing. He began to engage in the agricultural experimentation that would continue to absorb him for the rest of his life. By the time he was called away to take command of the Revolutionary forces in 1775, his methods were beginning to show results. During the next eight years, however, General Washington was able to visit Mount Vernon only twice, and then only briefly, on his way to and from Yorktown in 1781 .

When he was finally able to return to Mount Vernon in 1783, it was with a renewed determination to transform his neglected fields. The years following the Revolution saw Washington's greatest period of agricultural activity. He began his correspondence with the leading English agronomists, men like Arthur Young and Sir John Sinclair. From them he

imported not only ideas but also new crops, skilled workmen and sophisticated equipment. Realizing that even the most advanced techniques would be of little use unless he could enrich the soil itself, he experimented tirelessly with different fertilizers. He used animal manure on crops to be plowed under, and even tried spreading the fields with Potomac mud and the fish that the river yielded so abundantly. In 1785 he asked an English friend to find him an overseer, on who could, in the peculiar alchemy of farming, "Midaslike . . . convert everything he touches into manure, as the first transmutation towards Gold. . . ." Washington continued to try new crops, hoping as always to find something that would flourish in the weak Mount Vernon soil. By the end of his life he had raised, or at least experimented with, as many as 60 different crops.

George Washington was also described by his contemporaries as one of the finest horsemen of his day. Certainly, he must have ridden as though born in the saddle. His legendary fox hunts sometimes stretched from dawn to dusk. On his way to Yorktown in September of 1781, he covered more than 120 miles on horseback in two days, leaving his exhausted staff, younger men all, to catch up a day later. He had an eye for good horse flesh, and besides the one hundred or so ordinary horses he usually kept at Mount Vernon, he owned a number of fine racehorses. He loved to race them and sometimes gave his servants, both black and white, the day off to watch the horses run. His cash account books, however, show that he lost more often than not. On one occasion, he disputed the finish, complaining so vehemently that the stewards reversed themselves and awarded him the purse. Washington was a very serious competitor--and perhaps a bit of a sore loser--even in sport. Yet it should be noted that he later gave the prize money to charity. Probably the finest horse he ever owned was Magnolio, a full-blooded Arabian whose line could be traced to North Africa by way of South America and Connecticut. Magnolio must have lost one race too many for, in 1788, Washington traded him to his friend, "Lighthorse Harry" Lee for five thousand acres of virgin Kentucky land. The land was far beyond the mountains, and no doubt both men believed they had the better of the bargain. It is easy to imagine Washington on horseback, because so many portraits depict the General with his favorite mounts. But most Americans would be surprised and bewildered to see a portrait of George Washington proudly standing beside a good old-fashioned mule. However, this would be a very appropriate subject for a portrait because, believe it or not, it was none other than George Washington who introduced the mule to America.

Washington, the avid student of all things agricultural, knew that mules could do much more than horses, lived longer, ate less, and were far hardier. Horses were fine for riding and racing, the General thought, but what the American farmer needed was "an excellent race of mules." The problem was obtaining proper breeding stock. The best jackasses in the world resided in Spain. They were beasts of remarkable strength and proportions, which the monarchy had long guarded by prohibiting their export. Nevertheless, by 1784, the name Washington meant something even in the courts of Europe and soon word of his quest reached the King of Spain. Hoping to win the goodwill of the foremost citizen of the strange republican nation across the Atlantic, Charles III, King of Spain, arranged for two fine Spanish Jacks to be dispatched at once to George Washington. Washington was overjoyed at the news, but had to wait nearly a year for his first jack, which he named "Royal Gift," to arrive in December of 1785. When the spring breeding season approached, he was prepared, indeed anxious, to oversee the genesis of his "race of excellent mules." Royal Gift, however, seemed anything but prepared for the work to which he

had been called. Although his master had assembled a veritable harem, thirty mares of his own and more from his neighbors, the stubborn jack refused to perform.

Dismayed as Washington was by this development, his humor did not desert him. The Spanish jack, he wrote, "was perhaps too full of Royalty, to have anything to do with a plebeian race." Still, Washington was disappointed. He even began to suspect that the wily Spaniards might have "altered" the creature. His mares could wait no longer if they were to be bred that year and the office was assigned to the ready-and-waiting Magnolio, who performed unflinchingly. Fortunately, the following spring was different. Royal Gift performed to his master's complete satisfaction. Moreover, by this time, several more jacks had arrived at Mount Vernon, the second of the two promised by King Charles and two more that Lafayette had obtained by circumventing the Spanish export laws. Farmers from throughout the mid-Atlantic states sent breeding stock to Mount Vernon and, indeed, so intense was the demand for the services of his Spanish jack that eventually Washington sent Royal Gift on a thousand-mile tour of the southern states.

Washington's prediction of the importance of mules was amply confirmed in the years to come. At Mount Vernon, the livestock inventory for 1785 lists 130 working horses and no mules. The census for 1799, the year of the master's death, tallies 25 horses and 58 mules. Until supplanted by the internal combustion engine, mules performed invaluable services on countless American farms.

So today, as we celebrate the talents, accomplishments and leadership of George Washington, we should be sure to include his lasting contributions to agriculture. Indeed, it was this occupation to which Washington devoted his energies until the day he died.

PART II WILL FOLLOW AS MARCH, 1991 STB