

Rediscovering America's Heritage: George Washington, Mount Vernon, and the American National Character

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Americans continue to maintain their admiration for George Washington, who made immeasurable sacrifices with no expectation of an equivalent return. How do we repay such a sacrifice? One way is to steward Mount Vernon as the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association has done—and indeed to steward the homes of all those exceptional Americans who formed an exceptional nation. That is not to be done simply out of respect for the Founding. While we certainly owe Washington, Jefferson, and Madison our gratitude for their accomplishments and sacrifices, and in some sense for their legacies, what their homes have come to symbolize goes beyond the men themselves to include the American national character.

Introduction

[E]very political philosopher has always recognized, that there must be some conviction, usually embodied in the form of a story that can be told, comprehended, and taken to heart by all, which produces a sense of community and unites the hearts of those who call themselves fellow citizens. Without that fellow feeling there is no basis for mutual trust, and where there is no trust there can be no freedom.

—Harry V. Jaffa¹

In America, that story is of a founding. America did not come about by accident but through the choice of many who came together to form one people, united in their commitment to an idea that would find its purest expression in the Declaration of Independence.

The above quote by Dr. Harry Jaffa speaks to the heart of the controversy surrounding our historic sites, museums, and monuments. Many of our historic sites are unique, irreplaceable gathering places for school trips and family excursions, often bringing together multiple generations of Americans. As such, they form how we educate ourselves and thus preserve our central convictions.

While America is defined primarily by its principles, part of how we tell the American story is through place: through George Washington's Mount Vernon, Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, and James Madison's Montpelier. No matter how vividly a site is described in a book, there is something about the physical experience of walking down Washington's path, about glancing back at Monticello to witness the reality of the relief emblazoned on the nickel, about being in the room where Madison contemplated the Constitution. As our world becomes more disembodied, the impression of experiencing these places becomes lasting and sharpens, perhaps most especially for America's children.

These homes contain and symbolize America's heritage. In some ways, Monticello stands for the Declaration of Independence and Montpelier for the Constitution.

Yet there is something that undergirds both of these. That is the American character: the principles, habits, loves, and way of life that precede and in turn are defined and reinforced by America's twin founding documents. Before Madison, there was Jefferson, and before Jefferson, there was Washington: a public-spirited man "before there was any public to be spirited about."² If there is a word that describes General Washington and the mission to which he dedicated his life, it is character. Thus, in some ways, it is Mount Vernon that stands for the American national character.

This essay is about Mount Vernon, George Washington, and the American national character. Key to the story is Washington's personal character and the efforts, like directing the habits of the army and championing the Potomac River Project, that he undertook to form the American national character: a unified character grounded in the principles of the Declaration of Independence and aided by the expanding ties of charity, sympathy, and friendship that the Declaration and the Constitution nourish.

Mount Vernon and Washington's Character

Approaching Mount Vernon, most people will have “never seen a place for which nature had done more, or where natural beauty had been so little counteracted by an awkward taste.”³ The mansion is situated in beauty, overlooking the Potomac River on one side and an expansive lawn and countryside on the other. On first appearance, it seems to be made of cream-colored brick with a red roof and black shutters. Upon closer examination, the brick is in truth pressed sand formed into pristine blocks. While Washington originally designed the house to be symmetrical, he was adding to an existing structure and was forced to bend to practicality.⁴ The mansion is grand and austere without garish pretention, much like Washington the man.

Generally, visitors to Mount Vernon go through the servants' quarters, the New Room, the upstairs bedrooms, the kitchen, and Washington's study. We will pause in this last space: a room lined with books, underscoring Washington as not merely a strategic general, but also a brilliant thinker. While Washington did not receive much formal education, he was an avid reader and left behind 1,200 volumes at the end of his life.

Washington was determined to become a man of virtuous reputation and believed in the value of education by habit as well as by reading. As a young man, he meticulously copied a little work entitled “110 Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation.” Lest that title give the impression of fussy primness, some of the rules, such as “Let your conversation be without malice or envy,” are anything but fussy or prim.⁵ Many in the 18th century saw manners as connected to morals; as manners degraded, so would virtue. Decent habits and simple acts of kindness form the backbone of a good character; they help us to order our reason above our passions and impulses.

Since Washington was so rigid in his character, we can picture him as a somewhat taciturn and distant figure, and there is some truth to that image. Washington was not given to rash action or speech. He had the talent of knowing when to speak and was measured in his communication, so on those rare occasions when he asserted himself, everyone listened. For example, he spoke only a few times at the Constitutional Convention. Yet on the last day, when he stood to give support for a measure regarding representation, the measure passed without debate: a rare occurrence among the strongly opinionated, loquacious delegates.

Both personally and as President, Washington would often solicit advice from various parties before coming to a decision. As Thomas Jefferson wrote:

[P]erhaps the strongest feature in his character was prudence, never acting until every circumstance, every consideration was maturely weighed; refraining if he saw a doubt, but, when once decided, going through with his purpose whatever obstacles opposed. [H]is integrity was most pure, his justice the most inflexible I have ever known.⁶

Despite his reserve, however, Washington was not an unsociable and prickly man, especially in the company of close friends. It was Washington who added the New Room to Mount Vernon, an expansive room with a two-story-high ceiling that was made to accommodate many individuals and various functions. He was known for his dancing skills and wonderful hospitality, once quipping in a letter that, “Unless some one pops in, unexpectedly, Mrs. Washington and myself will do what I believe has not been [done] within the last twenty years by us, that is to set down to dinner by ourselves.”⁷

So Washington had a character that was both sound and compelling. As Daniel Webster said, “America has furnished 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.”⁸

Drawing on Character

One of the notable items in Washington’s study—one there to this day—is a portrait relief of Washington by Joseph Wright.⁹ Congress commissioned a statue and bust of Washington from Wright, and Wright presented the portrait relief, a spin-off of the larger project, as a gift to the general. Wright also produced a painting of Washington, which Washington said was a better likeness than any other and resides in the Museum of the American Revolution in Philadelphia.¹⁰

Wright’s Mount Vernon depiction is Roman in style; Washington’s head is encircled by a laurel wreath. This was not an anomaly. The Founding generation was well-versed in the ancient world, where they found examples of republics and classical republicanism. Washington was often compared to the Roman general Quinctius Cincinnatus, who was pulled from retirement on his farm and granted extraordinary powers to meet a crisis in Rome, powers he then relinquished after the tumult had passed. The parallels of patriotism between Cincinnatus and Washington, who gave up power twice and always yearned to sit under his vine and fig tree at Mount Vernon, were not lost on Americans.¹¹

The Wright relief serves as a reminder that, while inculcating a respectable personal character is a notable accomplishment in itself,

the character of George Washington also proved quite important for the formation of America as a republic. Washington, both as a military commander and as President, drew on his own character to shape the American national character.

In some sense, Washington's character is embedded in the presidency. Because he was the first to hold that position, everything Washington did set a precedent. The general powers of the executive are laid out in the Constitution, but the more particular and practical workings out of the office needed to be navigated first by Washington. As he wrote, "time and habit are at least as necessary to fix the true character of Governments, as of other human institutions."¹² For example, the restriction that a President may serve up to two terms was codified in the Constitution in 1951; until that point, politicians (with the exception of Franklin Roosevelt) followed and respected the tradition set by Washington.

In fact, it is rather doubtful that the presidency in the form given to it in the Constitution would exist without Washington. At the Constitutional Convention, many delegates were hesitant to establish a single executive, and many other Americans, who had experienced the tyrannies that often accompany monarchy, shared that hesitation. Yet all assumed that Washington would be the one to fill the post of the presidency, and confidence in his character assuaged their concerns. As contemporaneous historian Mercy Otis Warren wrote:

[N]o man in the union had it so much in his power to assimilate the parties, conciliate the affections, and obtain a general sanction to the new constitution, as a gentleman who commanded their obedience in the field, and had won the veneration, respect, and affections of the people, in the most distant parts of the union.¹³

Washington had earned his reputation as a man of character through his service during the French and Indian War and as commander of the Continental Army. His willingness to give up power following the Revolutionary War—something that only a select few like Cincinnatus have done throughout human history—said a great deal about what Washington loved most of all.

As commander of the Continental Army, Washington took a thoughtful interest in the conduct of his officers and soldiers, seeking to establish what could be called a chain of witness. He was a model for his officers, the officers were models for the soldiers, and the soldiers would be models for their communities. "[W]ith strong attachments to the Union," they would "carry

with them into civil society the most conciliating dispositions.” In doing so, they would “prove themselves not less virtuous and useful as Citizens, than they have been persevering and victorious as Soldiers.”¹⁴ Washington’s personal character formed his troops, who in turn would disperse and help to form the American national character.

Upon taking command, Washington soon realized that many of his troops were deeply undisciplined. On the whole, these were not the professional soldiers of the royal army; they were ordinary farmers risking all for the sake of liberty. Within six months, Washington laid down directives for the moral and physical discipline of his men. There were rules against profanity and drunkenness and rules in favor of neatness, cleanliness, discipline, and obedience.¹⁵ These standards, once again, reflect Washington’s belief in the importance of everyday habits and conduct for character formation.

Washington insisted that his men be upstanding and that the public be able to contrast the actions and disposition of America’s soldiers with those of the royal army that had infringed upon the rights of the colonists. His hope was that “every officer and man, will endeavor so to live, and act, as becomes a Christian Soldier defending the dearest Rights and Liberties of his country.”¹⁶ To those ends, local prejudices were to bend so that “the one and the same Spirit may animate the whole,” and those not on duty were expected to attend sacred service “to implore the blessings of heaven upon the means used for our safety and defense.”¹⁷ Washington even sought chaplains of varying denominations to preside over services for the soldiers and personally ensured that those chaplains were well-paid by Congress.¹⁸

These last edicts and efforts reflect the lifelong value Washington placed on the centrality of conscience. One of the rules of civility the 11-year-old Washington had copied for himself was to “Labor to keep alive in your breast that little spark of celestial fire called conscience.”¹⁹ Conscience directs and encourages virtuous actions; it is the precursor to and guardian of good habits. While reason is a defining human faculty, some of the Founders also viewed conscience as a distinct human faculty and believed that the moral sense deserves serious consideration and attention.²⁰ The most reliable way for an individual to become attentive to his or her conscience is through consistent religious study and practice. As Washington would further emphasize in his Farewell Address, some individuals are able to develop a moral framework through reason alone, but that is not a common occurrence upon which we can rely to cultivate national morality. Most do not have the opportunity and the leisure to philosophize. Religion strengthens the conscience and offers a character education that is accessible to the farmer, the lawyer, and even the academic.

For Washington, character formation was absolutely essential because what ultimately supports the written Constitution is what characterizes the American people: the habits, love of principle, and way of life that make up the American ethos. As Washington wrote:

[N]o compact among men (however provident in its construction and sacred in its ratification) can be pronounced everlasting and inviolable, and if I may so express myself...no Wall of words [and] no mound of parchm[en]t can be so formed as to stand against the sweeping torrents of boundless ambition on the one side, aided by the sapping current of corrupted morals on the other.²¹

Unity of Principles

While Washington was presiding over the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, he commissioned the construction of a weathervane that sits atop the cupola at Mount Vernon. The cupola overlooks the Potomac, and the ornament is a dove of peace: a golden dove with a green olive branch in its mouth.²² Like Benjamin Franklin's conclusion that the sun engraved into the back of the chair that Washington had used during the Convention was a rising and not a setting sun, this weathervane was also a culmination: one that symbolized Washington's hope for a secure, unified, and self-governing nation.

Washington perhaps commissioned the weathervane at that time because the Constitution was a notable step toward the vision of a unified and self-governing people's becoming a reality. The Constitution does not merely establish a confederacy of separate states tangentially held together by convenient and transitory self-interest; it protects a single people with a shared debt of protection and a common and lasting commitment to the cause of human freedom—a people, in short, who live at peace among themselves and endeavor to win peace with other nations. As Washington would explain in his Farewell Address, the Union “is a main pillar in the edifice of your real independence, the support of your tranquility at home, your peace abroad; of your safety; of your prosperity; of that very liberty which you so highly prize.” Peace, prosperity, and stability were not ends in themselves, but the means toward the loftier aspiration of a self-governing people.

As understood by Washington and the Founding generation, self-government has a dual definition. It is the people's effective control of the nation's political institutions through such measures as representative government, but it also is the rule of reason over the passions within each person, a rule that is achieved only through habituation in sound morals. Only when the

activities of the citizens and of the nation as a whole respect the inherent dignity of human beings can those individuals and that nation truly be considered self-governing.²³ These notions are ultimately traceable to the maxim, found most famously in the Declaration of Independence, that “all men are created equal.” Human equality means that no single person has been born to rule over others absent their consent. The differences between human beings (when it comes to skin tone, sex, levels of intelligence, etc.) are not fundamental in the way a man is different from a horse. Unlike animals, human beings have a conscience and the capacity for reason; we are therefore responsible for the choices we make and have the right and obligation to govern ourselves.

The unity of Washington’s American national character, of a self-governing people, is grounded in the principles of the Declaration of Independence. The “one and the same Spirit” that he hoped would “animate the whole” of the new nation was devotion to the truth that all people are moral agents tasked with governing themselves and thus maintaining, if need be against all the world, the freedom to do so.

Forging the Union

Washington was a careful political philosopher, but he was also a practical man and undertook efforts to ensure that American unity would become a reality. If we return to the New Room at Mount Vernon, we will notice engravings of crops and farm tools throughout, reminding visitors of Washington’s work as a surveyor and farmer.

In addition to those adornments, 22 framed prints and paintings are known to have hung on the walls of that grand space. The famous John Trumbull, who has been deemed the “Painter of the Revolution” (four of Trumbull’s Revolutionary War depictions hang in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda), served as an aide to General Washington. A commissioned engraving, “The Battle at Bunker’s Hill,” and the companion print, “Death of General Montgomery,” remain at Mount Vernon.

A considerable number of the paintings in the New Room are landscapes—yet another reminder of Washington’s respect and admiration for nature’s magnificence. “George Washington was among the first American art patrons to value the beauty and drama of the American landscape.”²⁴ Washington purchased the morning and evening views of the Hudson River from painter William Winstanley on April 6, 1793, and acquired the two *Great Falls of the Potomac* paintings offering different renderings of the river and *The Passage of the Potomac* from artist George Beck in 1797. These

paintings are of political significance; for Washington, the Potomac was the key to the West and American unity.

One of Washington's great projects was the Potomac River initiative, which improved American waterways and connected roads to those waterways. This infrastructure project enabled travel and thus unleashed commerce and prosperity. However, the immense economic benefits were not Washington's primary motivation in championing the Potomac project. His ultimate aim was union:

The great works of improving and extending the inland navigations of the two large rivers Potomac and James, which interlock with the waters of the Western Territory, are already begun, and I have little doubt of their success. The consequences to the Union, in my judgement are immense: more so in a political, than in a commercial view; for unless we can connect the new States which are rising in our view in those regions...they will be quite a distinct people....²⁵

The Potomac River project would strengthen connections to the western territories to prevent those in the West from having “different views, separate interests and other connexions.”²⁶ Many individuals from other countries were immigrating to the United States and settling the frontier, and the courting of those sparsely populated territories by foreign powers was a threat to national security. Strengthening trade routes between the West and the eastern states would intertwine the regions through commercial interests, causing the western territories to look to the east rather than to European powers for flourishing.

Because the Potomac winds its way through and along different states, developing its waters would also force states to cooperate with one another, and if “one or two states cooperated on farsighted measures, they could set an example for other states to emulate, a process that would help achieve continental political reform.”²⁷ Washington believed it was essential that the states come together and form a nation instead of splintering into separate confederacies. Unity was also urgently necessary for national security to guard against American states becoming mere pawns in European politics. As Washington wrote in a letter to Lieutenant Colonel Tench Tilghman:

In a word the Constitution of Congress must be competent to the *general purposes of Government*; and of such a nature as to bind us together. Otherwise, we may well be compared to a rope of Sand, and shall as easily be broken and in a short time become the sport of European politics, altho' we might have no *great* inclination to jar among ourselves.²⁸

The world was moving toward larger nation-states, and human history had demonstrated that small republics are in danger of being conquered. America's existence as a comparatively large country needed to be maintained, more territory meant more security, and America's fortunate physical distance from Europe made it less likely that it would be drawn into royal skirmishes that had been the downfall of empires.

Apart from concerns over unity and national security, Washington viewed the western territories as adding a positive element to the existing American states. The hearty straightforwardness of the westerners would be good for the American character. America was rapidly becoming more commercial, which had immense benefits (Washington wrote that a people "possessed of the spirit of commerce, who see, and who will pursue their advantages, may achieve almost anything"²⁹) but could also cause people to become greedy and focused on trivial matters.

This was a concern that many Founders, including Mercy Otis Warren, shared. "[T]he hurry of spirits, that ever attends the eager pursuit of fortune and a passion for splendid enjoyment," as she wrote in her *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution*, "leads to forgetfulness; and thus the inhabitants of America cease to look back with due gratitude and respect on the fortitude and virtue of their ancestors." For Washington, the frontier spirit would have an oppositional moderating effect on the dangers of avarice, and therefore on what Warren identified as greed's accompanying vice: ingratitude, a devastating impulse in a republic. Paraphrasing Xenophon, Warren noted that ingratitude was "an indication of the vilest spirit." The ungrateful man cannot love the divine or even his parents, friends, or country.³⁰

Friendship

A highlight of any tour of Mount Vernon is the key to the Bastille, a gift from the Marquis de Lafayette. The Bastille prison in France was a symbol of royal oppression and was stormed by French Revolutionaries on July 14, 1789. Before the French Revolution descended into violence, many Americans were hopeful that the spirit of 1776 was spreading throughout the world, that human equality nested within the laws of nature would govern the day. Time revealed that the French view of natural rights, which drew from the philosophy of Jean-Jaques Rousseau, differed from the American view, was untenable, and devolved into chaos.³¹

Aside from its political significance, the key is a reminder of the friendship between Washington and Lafayette. George Washington met Lafayette when

the marquis was just 19 years old, and Lafayette served on Washington's staff in the Continental Army. Theirs was a lifelong friendship that developed into a kind of paternal-filial bond. Such ties of sympathy, goodwill, and friendship were essential to the formation of an American national character.

In his 1783 Circular to the States, Washington urged Americans "to forget their local prejudices and policies, to make those mutual concessions which are requisite to the general prosperity, and, in some instances, to sacrifice their individual advantages to the interest of the community."³² Much of Washington's focus in the circular is on how we conduct ourselves, how we treat one another, and the loyalty we offer our fellow Americans—in other words, character, goodwill, and unity. Washington was reiterating, as he had done as commander of the army, that local prejudices needed to bend for a "conciliating disposition" to prevail among our citizens.

The sort of benevolence Washington promoted is necessary, albeit insufficient, for the establishment of a civil society. Republics are not held together by the old ties of blood, patronage, and rigid hierarchies; they rely on character, moral sensibilities, and an expanding sphere of sympathy and sociability. As John Quincy Adams wrote in his July 4, 1821, address:

The sympathies of men begin with the affections of domestic life. They are rooted in the natural relations of husband and wife, of parent and child, of brother and sister; thence they spread through the social and moral propinquities of the neighbor and friend, to the broader and more complicated relations of countryman and fellow-citizen; terminating only with the circumference of the globe which we inhabit, in the co-extensive charities incident to the common nature of man. To each of these relations, different degrees of sympathy are allotted by the ordinances of nature.³³

According to Dr. Matthew Mehan, this sentiment, which he terms the complex of charity, was commonly expressed during the Founding era. It is rooted in the ideas of Cicero, one of the thinkers who most influenced the Founders and who "makes clear that this deep network of loves is the primary source of any and all sense of civic duty to one's republic."³⁴

The Founders reflected on how to maintain unity and social cohesion while the old forms were being challenged and disrupted. Thomas Jefferson, for example, while serving in the Virginia legislature from 1776 to 1779, introduced bills aimed at "feudal and unnatural distinctions" like primogeniture and entail laws.³⁵ Instead of force and necessity keeping people dependent on one another, civic friendship would be the binding element. "Civic friendship entails like-mindedness in respect to the advantageous and just," writes

Madison scholar Dr. Colleen Sheehan; “it involves sharing a common or public opinion, which in turn informs public decisions and actions.... [T]he bonds of their association are more than legal; they are also moral, involving public trust and goodwill. These bonds are a kind of pledge of protection and friendship which constitute the basis of a genuine republic.”³⁶

Citizen friendship, while perhaps not as robust as the highest form of friendship, is still grounded in a common understanding of the good, which in America is articulated in the Declaration of Independence. Even apart from that, Washington understood that local prejudices needed to be mitigated so that goodwill and the friendship and unity that follow from it could prevail.

Conclusion

If visitors continue to wander the paths at Mount Vernon, they will end with a reverential visit to Washington’s tomb, framed by two marble obelisks. Inscribed on a stone tablet over the entrance is the simple acknowledgement: “Within this Enclosure Rest the remains of Gen.l George Washington.”³⁷ Washington asked that the family vault be repaired and improved and that it be made of brick, but he left little instruction to specify how he wished to be remembered.

The Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association, the organization responsible for saving, restoring, and preserving Mount Vernon, has commemorated him well, holding a crucial line for their fellow citizens. Whereas so many other Founders and statesmen have fallen from grace, Americans have maintained particular admiration for Washington, who made immeasurable sacrifices with no expectations of an equivalent return.

How are we to repay such a sacrifice? One way is to steward Mount Vernon as the Association has done—and indeed to steward the homes of all those exceptional Americans who formed an exceptional nation. That is not to be done simply out of respect for the Founding and for subsequent generations. While we certainly owe Washington, Jefferson, and Madison our gratitude for their accomplishments and sacrifices, and in some sense for their legacies, what these homes have come to symbolize goes beyond the men themselves. It must be so, as they were men committed to something transcendent: to an idea, an American national character, and a new nation informed by that idea and character. If they had furnished nothing else to the world, that would be enough.

Endnotes

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