

# GEORGE WASHINGTON

## *The Image and the Man*

By Charles C. Wall,

*Resident Director, The Mount Vernon Ladies Association  
of the Union, Mount Vernon, Virginia*

FOR 30 YEARS and more I have been inhabiting the domestic environment created by George Washington, studying the man and his life, while carrying on the activities of my custodial position. During much of this time I have been troubled by the difference between the man as he was and the images of him that are dominant in the minds of his present posterity. Vainly, in my small way, I have tried to set the record straight, denying the slanders, disputing the legendary myths, discounting the trivialities that seem to fascinate the folk mind. It has been a futile occupation and an unattractive role.

Some time ago I happened to read an editorial in a local paper about one of England's national heroes whose reputation had been attacked by a biographer. The British were indignant. The editorial was devoted to the emotional source of this indignation, not to the justice or injustice of the attack. "Heroes are mirrors in which a people see themselves reflected," the editor wrote. Of course! How true! Heroes personify the national ideal; we, the Nation, and we, the individual citizens, see what we want to see when we contemplate our illustrious dead. To say that these images are often distorted would be a mild understatement. This is certainly true of the public image of George Washington. Not all of these distortions are important in terms of the heritage value of the man, but to the historian all are troublesome.



*Photograph, courtesy, Mount Vernon  
Ladies Association of the Union*

### Central Hall Staircase.

I can truly say I had rather be at Mount Vernon with a friend or two about me, than to be attended at the seat of Government by the officers of State and the representatives of every power in Europe.  
*George Washington to David Stuart, June 15, 1790.*





# The President General's Message

DEAR DAUGHTERS:

During this month of February it is hoped special emphasis will be given all American History Month activities. Do strive to be alert to every local opportunity to further the observance and appreciation of our American ideals, principles and heritage during this period, which is highlighted by the birth dates of two great Americans, Washington and Lincoln. . . . Remember, too, another chance to stress the importance of our Constitution is very appropriate, in compliance and cooperation with President Kennedy's proclamation of October 10 extending the celebration period of the 175th anniversary of the signing of the Constitution from September 17, 1962 to July 4, 1963.

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With the New Year now well underway, it is hoped all goes well as respects YOUR Chapter's Honor Roll status for this year. If a point is still in question, it is the time now—as the deadline approaches—to exert that "extra ounce of energy" necessary to achieve the best possible stand. . . . Best wishes!

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In April, the National Society meets once a year, in Congress assembled, to report work accomplished; to hear outstanding speakers on matters pertaining to our three-fold objectives—historic preservation, promotion of education, and patriotic endeavor; to evaluate current events affecting these objectives; and to pass resolutions stating policies regarding same.

Last month the vital role of the conscientious Chapter delegate to Continental Congress, her responsibility and valuable contribution were cited. Now, in this issue of the Magazine, much general information relative to the forthcoming 72nd Congress, including details covering the operation of certain committees, is contained. More will appear in the March issue.

It is the goal of this administration to present an inspirational and stimulating program. Much time and thought have already gone into revamping the Congress setup. Although, of course, the overall coverage will follow previous years, presentation will be accelerated and changed somewhat to accommodate groupings according to allied subjects and interest. Breakdown of sessions will follow the broad headings: Historic, educational, and patriotic, with units under each. Two major changes will be initiated: ONE FULL BUSINESS SESSION is scheduled for Wednesday morning, April 17. At this time National Board Recommendations will be presented, voting on Resolutions will take place and the several Revisions to the Bylaws will be considered. On Thursday night, April 18, an AWARDS EVENING will be inaugurated. Another important innovation will be the informal, "extracurricular" OPEN FORUM ON RESOLUTIONS to be held Tuesday afternoon, April

16. (Refer to page 125 for details.) Purpose of this Forum is to provide better understanding and fuller clarification of proposed resolutions. In addition to an explanatory period, time will be allowed for questions and answers.

The foregoing is but a preview glimpse of the forthcoming 72nd Continental Congress, April 15-19. A particularly fine array of speakers has been secured for both the official sessions and the Committee functions. Your President General joins the National Officers and Congress Program Committee in hoping all will meet with your ready response and approval.

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Recommended Reading Item: Resolutions, once passed, become the policy of our National Society, and since it appears that to a considerable portion of the public—and indeed, to a segment of our own membership as well—knowledge and image of the NSDAR are limited to an impression of resolutions as reported through news media only, it behooves each and every Daughter (especially those who will serve as delegates) to assume individual responsibility to be informed and to give most careful attention to these. Only in this way can best results be guaranteed. Remember, the Resolutions Committee is charged with the responsibility of receiving, reviewing, and reporting resolutions. It does not pass the resolutions. The Congress does that. To better understand the operation and problems of the Resolutions Committee, your particular attention is called to the article on page 124 entitled, "The Chairman of the Resolutions Committee Answers Some Questions," by Mrs. Elizabeth M. Cox.

It is felt you will be interested to know that, during this administration, there is at least one member from every State Society serving on this Committee. Do you know your representative? Will you, as a delegate, come prepared to do your part by exercising an intelligent vote when resolutions are considered?

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Little-Known DAR Fact: Apropos of February, Washington's Birthday, and Mount Vernon, a quilted bedspread, circa 1830-40, made by Miss Ann Pamela Cuninghame, founder of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union, was presented to the NSDAR in 1954 by Miss Cuninghame's great-niece, Mrs. Floride Cuninghame Burney, and the Ann Pamela Cuninghame Chapter of Columbia, South Carolina. The spread is completely quilted in a hearts-and-flowers design and is edged with a handmade fringe on three sides. It is a prized possession of our DAR Museum.

Cordially,

(MRS. ROBERT V. H. DUNCAN)  
President General, NSDAR



## Myths and Misconceptions

This editorial explained a great many current misconceptions about George Washington. A nation prefers that its heroes be men of great physical stature and prowess. Washington fulfilled these qualifications rather adequately, but he wasn't 6 feet, 6. He did not throw a silver dollar across the Rappahannock, or the Potomac. I am no longer troubled by exaggerations of his physical proportions or his exploits; they are not harmful or significant. It is relevant that great physical stamina has been a characteristic of most great men, and it is fortunate for us that George Washington was so endowed.

Nor am I troubled by the cherry tree story. Myth though it probably is, it takes the form of a parable, reflecting the image that Parson Weems, the itinerant clergyman and bookseller, saw and wished to impress upon the youth of America. It reflects a basic fact about George Washington, and there is no harm in it.

The numerous misstatements about Washington's religion can also be dismissed as unimportant. Our personal belief is important to each of us, and we would like to think that George Washington shared our faith. Many have looked into a wistfully fogged mirror and determined, to their own satisfaction, that George Washington was a fellow atheist, Baptist, or Catholic. The essential truth of his belief in a Divine Providence and his tolerance of all creeds is well established. These individual whimsies can easily be recognized and discounted.

Our heritage is impaired by the misconception of George Washington as a wealthy man. It arises, I think, from the fact that we pay homage to material success. By a process of oversimplification, or fogging the mirror of history, George Washington, the Revolutionist, becomes a conservative—the patron saint of financiers and captains of industry. This clouded image is difficult to deal with because it contains a half-truth. George Washington was a man of large estate, but to equate a non-productive estate with wealth is to obscure the fact that the owner neglected his private affairs to serve his country and in consequence was fi-



Photograph, courtesy, Mount Vernon Ladies Association of the Union

### Dining Room.

For in truth it [his house] may be compared to a well-restored tavern, as scarcely any strangers who are going from north to south, or from south to north, do not spend a day or two at it.

*George Washington to his mother, February 15, 1787.*

nancially embarrassed throughout the last 25 years of his life.

There are certain libelous slanders that cannot be so lightly dismissed. They are unfounded, and they have been disproved, but they persist. Here again, the mirror concept applies. The philanderer, actual or frustrated, salves his conscience by attributing his own lack of inhibition to George Washington. He looks into the mirror and sees an image that satisfies his willful preconception. These people and their beliefs are important only as they create skepticism in healthy minds. They are easily diagnosed and best ignored. When, as so often happens, a new acquaintance identifies me with Mount Vernon and flashes his image of George Washington by saying, "The old boy got around," I can classify him offhand. He is an unreconciled captive of the state of monogamy.

### Washington—the Typical Englishman

When we look into the mirror of history with a clear and healthy eye, what manner of man do we discover George Washington to have been? He was not an easy man to know, as Dr. Freeman, the author

of his definitive biography, discovered. He was an Englishman, with the reticence and gift for understatement which characterize that breed of men. He drew a sharp distinction between his public and his private life. In the former he assumed the dignity he thought proper to the office he held; hence, in his most conspicuous and best recorded roles, he has left an impression of formidableness, of a man without a sense of humor. In his private life he commanded what the word denotes, privacy, to a much greater degree than is possible today. His personal letters reveal more of the writer's true self, his tastes, and his philosophy than do his official papers, but they partake of the general literary style of the period—formal, oftentimes to the point of seeming stilted by present-day standards. Unfortunately, his portraits also follow the prevailing mode; they portray the official personage, stern of visage.

It was one of his few intimates, Henry Lee—Lighthorse Harry Lee of Revolutionary fame—who characterized Washington as "First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen." This, you will note, is not a full sentence. Let



me quote it for you in full: "First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen, he was second to none in the humble and endearing scenes of private life." The three "firsts" were so apt and so captured the public imagination as to eclipse what Lee here intended to emphasize and what he was so well qualified to affirm—"he was second to none in the humble and endearing scenes of private life." This private George Washington is the man we should know if we are to derive personal inspiration from his life.

### Evolution From His Local Setting

Washington's career evolved outward and upward from the local setting in which he was "second to none." Although not a father, he was a devoted stepfather to Mrs. Washington's two children, and his position with his numerous nephews and nieces was patriarchal. In his parish he was a vestryman. He represented his community in the House of Burgesses; and there, by 1774, without eloquence or effort to aggrandize himself, he stood among the highest in the esteem of his colleagues. He would have been characterized by his friends as "disinterested," a man of integrity, devoid of ambition for position, power, or fame. He had no desire other than to be numbered among those who "live genteelly and hospitably on clear estates," as he expressed it in a letter to his neighbor, George Mason.

If we could probe deeper into the mind and motivations of this colonial Englishman, what would we find? An occasional note of belligerence appears in his writings as he comments on the encroachments of King and Parliament. He was jealous of his liberties. There is no inkling of the Rubicon he was so soon to cross, no indication that he would think himself equal to the crossing, no evidence of that tenacity of purpose without which all his other virtues would have been futile. Yet, as we read his correspondence on the eve of the Revolution we encounter a prophetic passage in a letter to a dying neighbor who had asked him to be his executor and the guardian of his only son. In reply, Washington wrote of time-consuming services to others that denied him any

leisure. He declined the executorship but offered to become the boy's guardian. In this letter there is a single sentence more significant in the context of events, more revealing of the writer's deepest motivations, than can be found elsewhere in all the volumes of his writings. The sentence reads, . . . . . "I never deny, or even hesitate in granting any request that is made to me (especially by persons I esteem, and in matters of moment) without feeling inexpressible uneasiness." Five months later, to avoid a feeling of "inexpressible uneasiness" he did not deny the request of the Continental Congress that he assume command of its army. On his own testimony and that of his close friends, it can be affirmed that he did not want this

command, that he felt himself unequal to it. He had never held a military command above the regimental level. At that level his reputation was established. He could return to Virginia, assured of top command there, and lead men he knew over familiar terrain, with a fair prospect of enhancing his reputation. The request of Congress, he knew, was prompted by political considerations, not by any opinion of his military abilities higher than his own modest estimate. His decision is foretold in his letter to the dying neighbor 5 months earlier. This time it was "a matter of moment." He may have hesitated, but he did not deny. Though "domestic ease," as he termed it, must be put aside and reputa-

*(Continued on page 162)*



*Photograph, courtesy, Mount Vernon Ladies Association of the Union*

### General Washington's Desk and Chair.

I shall be able to go but little out of the house this winter having appropriated it to the sorting, and arranging my voluminous papers.

*George Washington to James Anderson, December 21, 1797.*





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George Washington

(Continued from page 118)

tion, estate, and life itself be hazard-  
 ed, he turned northward to lead a  
 motley militia against the most potent  
 military power in the world, his  
 mother country.

### Development to Meet Challenges as They Came

Is there inspiration for us in  
 George Washington's decision? We  
 have no expectation of facing a simi-  
 lar personal dilemma in such an ex-  
 alted historical setting. Our opportu-  
 nities and our obligations are more  
 likely to confront us within our own  
 more local communities. But I sub-  
 mit most earnestly that the health and  
 the survival of an open society such  
 as ours depend on our willingness to  
 emulate the man whose inner compul-  
 sion would allow him to deny neither  
 his neighbor nor his fellow men at  
 large.

We may premise that our op-  
 portunities are likely to be more  
 local and less demanding, but George

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Washington's career suggests that this  
 need not be so. Dr. Freeman empha-  
 sizes that his life, from youth to  
 old age, is a remarkable example of  
 developing abilities that were equal  
 to the ever greater challenges he  
 faced. It is permissible to reflect that,  
 in less trying times, Washington might  
 have lived out his life in obscurity,  
 his potentialities unrealized; but, hap-  
 pily for us, the man and the crisis  
 coincided. While I do not suggest  
 that we are all potential George  
 Washingtons, I do insist that the  
 times are no less perilous than they  
 were in 1775 and that our individual  
 potentials surpass our performances.  
 We hesitate and deny when the times  
 call for sacrifice of present ease.

The institutions created by our  
 founding fathers were never more  
 gravely threatened, from the left and  
 the right, from within and without.  
 The ideals that inspired these men  
 have lost nothing of their dynamic  
 content. They were never more rele-  
 vant. They are our finest heritage.  
 The free world looks anxiously to us  
 for leadership. "Let us raise a stand-  
 ard to which the wise and the honest  
 can repair," George Washington said.  
 Will we fatalistically accept a state  
 of "inexpressable uneasiness" or will  
 we rise to the challenge? Our an-

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swers might be decisive—for our-  
 selves, our society, and our posterity.  
 If the mirror of history can inspire  
 us and guide us to correct decisions  
 and timely actions, we may look  
 with confidence to a faithful image  
 of the man who was "second to none  
 in the humble and endearing scenes  
 of private life."

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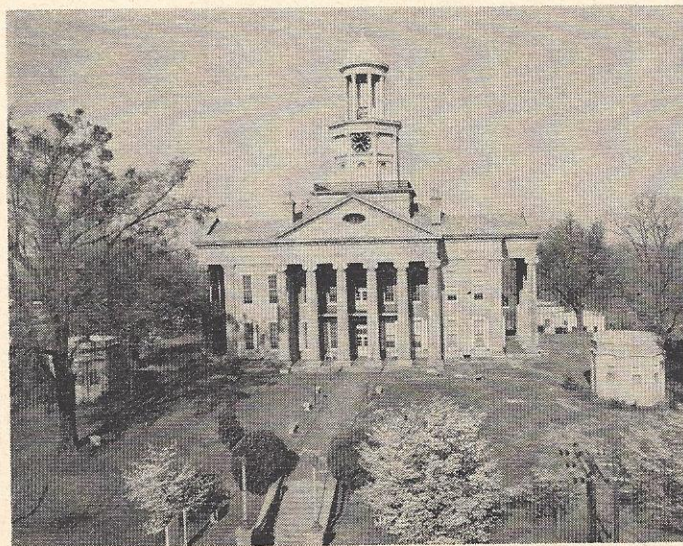
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