



If we are to believe traditional history, George Washington was the greatest moralist since Christ, the greatest warrior since Alexander the Great, and the wisest ruler since Solomon. Something less than the legend that overshadows him was the man himself.

In reality, George Washington was subject to the same human frailties inherent in all men. Far from the wooden icon portrayed by history, he was a complex personality who could be warm and friendly or aloof and unyieldingly stubborn. Fortunately, those negative traits proved to be an asset in dealing with an equally arrogant Continental Congress; and a less stubborn man might have given up after suffering as many battlefield defeats as Washington experienced in the darkest days of the nation's struggle for independence. Through it all, he was plagued by personal problems—most of them rising from a strained relationship with a domineering, emotionally troubled mother.

Many of the myths attached to Washington flowed from the pen of Mason Locke Weems, author of *The Life of George Washington*. Unfortunately, Weems's flawed biography became a source for subsequent works. His cherry tree story is an example of an innocent tale that became mythical history.

According to the yarn, young Washington decided to try out his new hatchet by felling a cherry tree. When confronted by his father, the future president confessed: "I cannot tell a lie. It was I who chopped down the cherry tree." It was a nice little morality anecdote that fit comfortably into school textbooks, the lesson being that we should all be as forthcoming with the truth as was the father of our country. Regrettably, the story has no basis in fact.

Weems had a proclivity for making up stories to spice up his biographies. Although he never recanted this particular story, he did

as well as parts of his book, *The Life of William Penn*, including a very detailed—and fictitious—description of Penn signing his famous treaty with the Indians. Somewhat ironic is the fact that Weems was a clergyman.

And the *real* George Washington? Physically, he stood six feet tall and weighed a little over 200 pounds. He was big-boned and had large hands. Under a powdered wig was a shock of reddish-brown hair. Blue eyes looked out from beneath drooping lids. His cheeks were pocked, the result of a childhood bout with smallpox.

According to legend, he never smiled because he did not want to show his wooden false teeth. If truth be known, he did not smile in those old portraits because he probably was distraught at having to sit still for the artist. In fact, Washington was a social animal who enjoyed the adulation heaped upon him. Indeed, he had false teeth; but they were not wooden. They were carved from ivory by an accomplished dentist named John Greenwood, who implanted several animal teeth in the plates for practical chewing purposes.

Washington was gracious and charming. He enjoyed dancing and flirting with the adoring women who flocked around him at social events. It was rumored that he engaged in extramarital affairs. He loved to play cards, go fox hunting, and fish. He was a social drinker who preferred wine and beer to hard liquor. He had his own whiskey still, a winery, and brewed his own beer. Although he grew tons of tobacco, he did not smoke.

He exuded strength and inspired confidence. He had an ability to remain calm in the most trying circumstances, but also possessed an unpredictable temper that might manifest itself at the most unexpected times—a trait that, no doubt, was effective in keeping his political enemies off guard.

Washington was born on February 11, 1732, not February 22 as noted on modern calendars, because he was born when the Julian calendar was still in use. His parents were Augustus and Mary Ball Washington, and young Washington grew up on a farm near Fredericksburg, Virginia. Although well off, his father was not exceedingly wealthy. Augustus Washington died when George was eleven years old. George's mother, who was self-centered and demanding, would have a contentious relationship with her son until the day she died. Unable to get along with his mother, 16-year-old George went to live with his half-brother, Lawrence. He accompanied Lawrence to Barbados in the West Indies on a business trip and contracted the smallpox that left his face scarred for life.



When Lawrence died in 1752, he left Mount Vernon and his land holdings to George, then only twenty years old. Contrary to common belief, it was Lawrence, not George, who built Mount Vernon.

Washington joined the Virginia Militia when he was twenty-one. He did so against the wishes of his mother, who wanted him to stay at home and take care of her. At twenty-two, he was placed in command of an army sent deep into the Ohio wilderness to engage the French. In his first major battle, he was defeated and had to surrender Fort Necessity. However, he later distinguished himself in a successful assault on Fort Duquesne in 1758.

With the conclusion of the French and Indian War, Washington returned to Mount Vernon and, at age twenty-nine, married Martha Dandridge Custis, a wealthy widow who could not tolerate his mother's strange behavior. Washington became obsessed with acquiring land and eventually would own 110,000 acres. He raised vast fields of tobacco, worked by slaves, and his stables produced some of the finest racehorses in Virginia.

Washington was not one of the firebrands of the American Revolution. He argued against Colonial separation from Great Britain in the Virginia House of Commons and the Continental Congress until it became apparent that armed conflict was inevitable. His support of the Crown cost him an election in 1775, when he was soundly defeated in a bid for the Virginia House of Burgesses.

When the revolution became a shooting war, Washington accepted command of the Continental Army. He was chosen not for his military expertise, but because of his name. The Congress correctly assumed his popularity and status would help with recruiting. He was a good organizer and leader of men. A good strategist, Washington possessed an ability to see the broad overview; but he was only adequate as a battlefield commander. In his first major engagement against the British, he almost lost his entire 10,500-man army on Long Island. He was saved by a rainstorm that left a heavy fog cloaking the island, allowing him to evacuate 9,000 men. Gen. William Howe might have captured Washington's entire force and ended the rebellion by landing troops from nearby ships but, inexplicably, failed to do so.

In the early stages of the war, General Howe and his crack British troops outmaneuvered and defeated Washington's poorly



quarter of his 16,000-man army dead, wounded, or captured. In the bittercold winter of 1778, Washington lost 2,000 troops to desertion, many of whom went to Philadelphia to join the British Army. On several occasions, the Congress came close to firing him.

In the darkest days of the revolution, Washington held his small army together by the sheer force of his will. However, his most important decision of the war might have been to hire a German military expert named Friedrich von Steuben to train his troops and assist him with battlefield strategy.

Most of Washington's victories resulted from carefully selected engagements in which he had superior forces in the field. They were battles fought to boost the morale of his troops and that of the Continental Congress, rather than for strategic gain.

In October of 1781, at the head of an army of 15,000 (including 8,000 French troops), Washington finally trapped 7,500 redcoats under General Cornwallis at Yorktown, ending the war. He had lost almost every major battle in which he participated—but he won the war.

Washington was always pragmatic when it came to business matters, a trait that became apparent following the war. Upon accepting the job of commander in chief, he graciously offered to



Father of Our Country George Washington holds such a lofty position in American history that

forgo a \$500-per-month salary and work for expenses. With the end of the war he turned in some \$400,000 worth of expenses. (Later, when he became president, Washington offered to forgo his \$25,000-per-year salary and work for expenses, prompting the Congress to say thanks, but no thanks, George.)

Although Washington eventually was paid, many of his officers and men were not. In 1883, the unpaid troops staged a rebellion at Newburgh, New York, threatening to take over the government. Addressing them, Washington demonstrated a flair for theatrics. Using a pair of spectacles for his prop, he told the troops: "I have not only grown gray but also blind in the service of my country," gaining immediate support from the men. He then read a communication promising that all wages would be paid—which, if not technically a lie, certainly was not the truth. Most of the men were never paid.

Seldom acknowledged by historians is Washington's troubled personal life. He and his mother were estranged for most of his adult life. She did not attend his wedding and never visited his home, probably at the insistence of his wife, Martha. There are indications his mother suffered bouts of mental illness. Although she was wealthy, she would wear the same dress day after day for months on end, until the garment was virtually in tatters. In spite of her wealth, she constantly harrassed her son for money. On one occasion, she even wrote a letter to the Virginia assembly complaining that George would not give her enough money to live on, and accusing him of neglecting her. Mary Washington never expressed pride in the accomplishments of her famous son.

Washington was sixty-seven when he contracted a throat virus. He died not from the virus but at the hands of his doctors, who drained half of the blood from his body in less than twelve hours. At the end, he pleaded with his doctors to, "Let me go off quickly, I cannot last long."

What would last was the legend that cloaked the man who became known as "The Father of Our Country."

