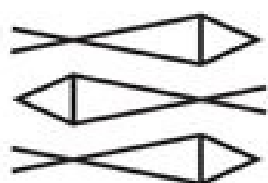


AN IMPERFECT GOD

GEORGE WASHINGTON, HIS SLAVES,
AND THE CREATION OF AMERICA

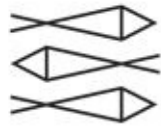
HENRY WIENCEK



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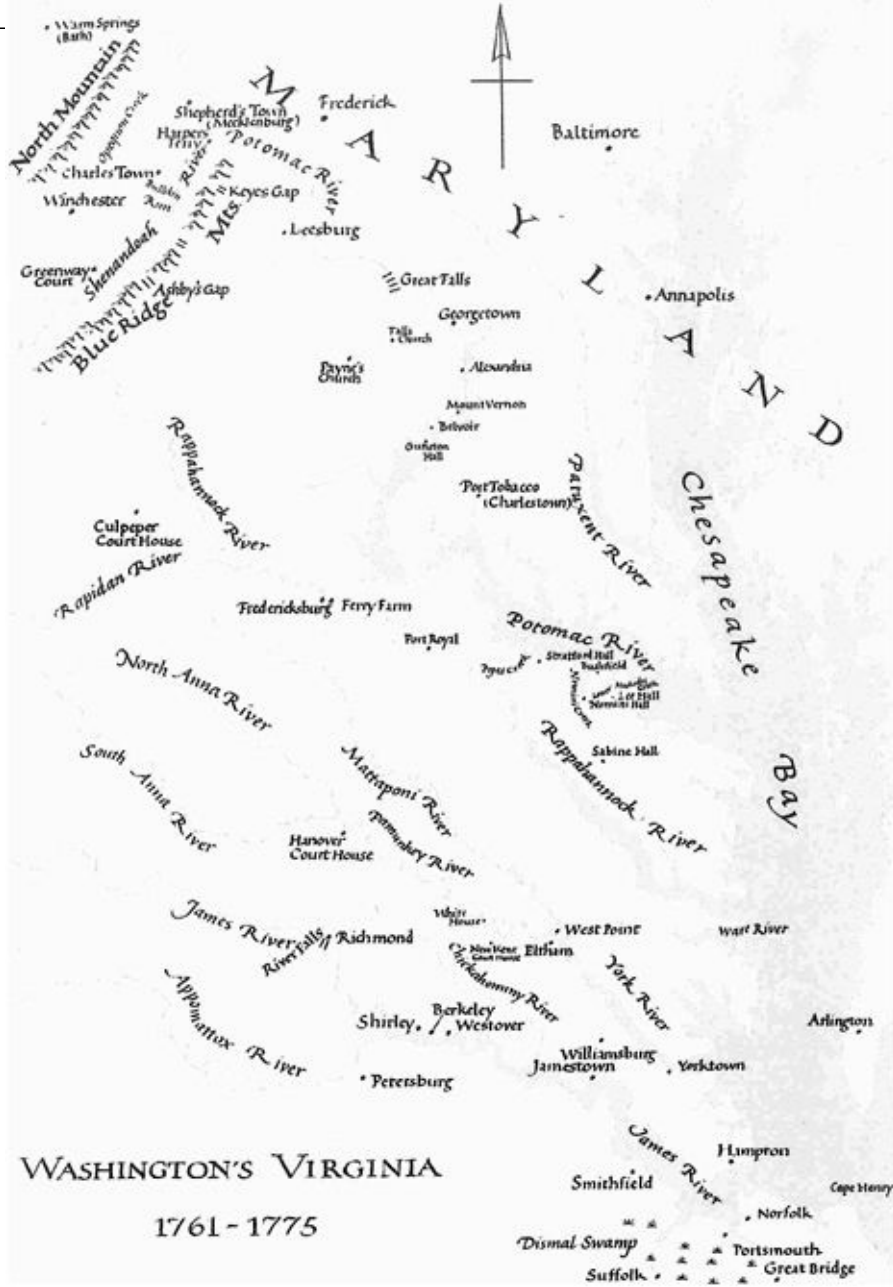
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Also by Henry Wiencek

Copyright

For my son



WASHINGTON'S VIRGINIA

1761 - 1775

The General's Dream

BEFORE DAWN one summer morning at Mount Vernon, George Washington awoke from a troubling dream. It was 1799, the last year of the general's life, and he was finally savoring the fruits of retirement. But the serenity of that summer was abruptly shaken by the dream.

Martha had awakened first, and had just risen from the bed when Washington stirred and spoke to her. She could tell at a glance that an uncharacteristic sadness had settled upon her husband in the night.

He had dreamed, he told her, that they were sitting and talking about the happy life they had spent together and the many more years they would have in each other's company. In the dream "a great light" suddenly surrounded them; and from the light there emerged the barely visible figure of an angel, who stood at Martha's side and whispered in her ear. As the angel spoke, Martha "suddenly turned pale and then began to vanish from his sight and he was left alone."

The dream seemed to foretell that Martha would be taken from him, but Washington grasped a different meaning: he said to her, "You know, a contrary result indicated by dreams may be expected. I may soon leave you."¹

Alarmed, Martha tried to comfort him by forcing a laugh at "the absurdity of being disturbed by an idle dream," but her efforts were in vain. The dream became "so deeply impressed on his mind that he could not shake it off for several days."

Washington was a fatalist; he feared nothing, not even death. If his time had come, then it had to come. The grimness Martha discerned arose not from fear but from a seriousness of purpose. He took the dream as a sign that he had to settle certain accounts before time ran out. From some scraps of paper she came across in his study, Martha soon discovered that, in the wake of his troubling dream, her husband had begun to write his last will.*

"In the name of God amen I George Washington of Mount Vernon—a citizen of the United States and lately President of the same, do make, ordain and declare this Instrument; which is written with my own hand and every page thereof subscribed with my name, to be my last Will & Testament, revoking all others." The document was eventually to run to twenty-nine pages and would carefully enumerate bequests to some fifty relatives—a tangled family tree that Washington, like all Southern patriachs, kept committed to memory.²

In the first, one-sentence item, he provided for the needs of "my dearly beloved wife Martha Washington" for as long as she might live. But after this customary clause, Washington turned to the subject that clearly was uppermost in his mind, to which he had given a great deal of thought for a long time. With his next words George Washington renounced the system that had nurtured him and

given him wealth: “Upon the decease of my wife, it is my Will & desire that all the Slaves which hold in my *own right*, shall receive their freedom.” After writing that plain declaration, Washington filled almost three pages with explicit instructions for the manner in which his slaves should be freed. He specified that the children should be educated and trained so that they could support themselves as free people.

It was an astounding decision. As he sat in his study—a room that one visitor called “the focus of political intelligence for the new world”—Washington felt the isolation of the man who can see what others cannot or will not. He was a man who had discovered that his moral system was wrong. He had helped to create a new world but had allowed into it an infection that he feared would eventually destroy it.³

No other Founding Father would set his slaves free, and certainly none of them contemplated educating slaves as Washington did. The traditional planter’s definition of benevolence presumed holding the slaves in humane but firm bondage, and the schooling that some favored slaves received was intended not to fit them for independence but to make them more useful to the master. To understand how extraordinary Washington’s decision was, one has only to look at the pronouncements of other Southern Founding Fathers on the subject of slavery. A fellow Virginian, Patrick Henry, wrote of the slaves, “let us treat the unhappy Victims with lenity, it is the furthest advance we can make towards Justice.” Thomas Jefferson scoffed at the very notion of emancipation: “To give liberty to, rather, to abandon persons whose habits have been formed in slavery is like abandoning children.” Washington thought otherwise.⁴

In his last months, Washington struggled with the paradox that continues to vex us today: how is it that the nation—conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal—preserved slavery? The word “paradox” suggests abstraction, a debate in a gathering of bewigged white gentlemen. But Washington’s will reveals that, in the stately chambers of Mount Vernon, his struggle over slavery was played out in a sharp family conflict.⁵

The emancipation clause stands out from the rest of Washington’s will in the unique forcefulness of its language. Elsewhere in it Washington used the standard legal expressions—“I give and bequeath,” “it is my will and direction.” In one instance he politely wrote, “by way of advice, I recommend it to my Executors...” But the emancipation clause rings with the voice of command; it has the iron firmness of a field order: “I do hereby expressly forbid the Sale ... of any Slave I may be possessed of, under any pretence whatsoever.” This plainly implies that Washington expected that pretenses would be made and slaves would be sold once he was gone. Furthermore, Washington commanded his family “to see that *this* clause respecting Slaves, and every part thereof be religiously fulfilled ... without evasion, neglect or delay” (the emphasis is Washington’s). Nowhere else in the document did he speak with such vehemence. The force of his commands makes it clear that within his own family Washington was entirely alone in his thinking about slavery. He expected that the emancipation would come as a shock to his family and, moreover, he expected them to resist it. Washington was positioning himself as the protector of his slaves.*

Washington's emancipation of his slaves at Mount Vernon has long been dismissed as a meretricious parting grace note, of little significance except as a mark of his inherent benevolence. But the hints at a profound moral struggle; indeed, his decision to free his slaves represented a repudiation of a lifetime of mastery. For his entire life he had been conditioned to be indifferent to the aspirations and humanity of African-Americans. Something happened to change him and to set him radically apart from his peers and his family.

* * *

Crossing the barrier into the past is treacherous, but the journey is doubly difficult if one is seeking to understand a man as elusive, as contradictory, but as critically important as George Washington. "As to the inner man we are strangely ignorant," one historian wrote, "no more elusive personality exists in history." A French visitor remarked, "an atmosphere of silence envelops the deeds of Washington. Even in his own time, Washington's achievement surrounded him with a blinding, almost divine radiance that made the man himself seem unapproachable. Watching him as he merely walked down the street, Abigail Adams could almost feel the ground tremble under the shoe of the man who appeared "as awful as a god." Once when he entered a room full of his step-granddaughter's friends, apparently eager for an informal chat, all conversation instantly ceased. The step-granddaughter recalled that because of "the awe and respect he inspired ... his own near relatives feared to speak or laugh before him." On the occasions when his presence chilled a social event, "he would sit a short time and then retire, quite provoked and disappointed." Then and now his unique eminence arises from his sterling personal qualities, from the inescapable fact that we Americans owe everything we have to him, and from the eerie sense that, in him, some fragment of divine Providence did indeed touch this ground.⁶

Washington's home on the Potomac, Mount Vernon, has been a place of pilgrimage since his lifetime. More than a million people come to Mount Vernon every year, seeking some clue to understanding the character of the distant figure at the core of the American endeavor. Washington designed Mount Vernon himself. The house and every foot of its gardens and grounds present a view of the inner man and the workings of his mind. (One visitor of Washington's time said as much, remarking that "the good Order of its Masters Mind appears extended to every Thing around it.") The house is the perfect mirror of the man: it presents one puzzle after another. And it embodies a basic contradiction—Mount Vernon is not the humble abode of a democrat, but the manor house of a colonial potentate. Washington lived privately in some grandeur and rural pomp, with a decidedly British flavor; and yet he was the man who refused to be king, who infused the ceremonies of republican government with plainness, who left a legacy of presidential modesty.

When you approach Mount Vernon from its gate today you are seeing it as a visitor would have seen it in 1799. You are also seeing it the way Washington wanted you to—from a distance, set back behind a long greensward, the whole view framed by groves, which a visitor described as a "labyrinth of evergreens where the sun cannot ... penetrate." The first view of the house was designed to impre-

the onlooker, and it surely does. The numerous outbuildings that surround the mansion call to mind the variety of labors that maintained this estate—kitchen, storehouse, smokehouse, washhouse, stable, coachhouse, overseer's quarters, ice house, greenhouse, and, farther off from the house, a gristmill and even a distillery. In itself this scene reveals the power of the occupant, who commanded so much work. Even in colonial times the scope of a planter's ownership could surprise outsiders, as it did a Frenchman who visited a Virginia plantation and remarked, "When I reached his place I thought I was entering a rather large village, but later was told that all of it belonged to him."⁷

The exterior surface of the house strangely has the texture of sandpaper. Washington ordered wooden weatherboarding to be cut, painted, and dusted with sand so that the boards would look exactly like blocks of stone. Stone was what British potentates used. He could not afford stone, but he wanted the look, and he got it, even if the monumental effect fades on close inspection and if the scheme is surprisingly un-American in its taste. One modern historian rather unkindly describes the house as "pretentious" and opines, "when Mount Vernon was seen in a haze of nostalgia after a bottle or two of Madeira, the woodwork turned to stone in the eyes of homesick Englishmen." Washington never visited England, but British style did form his frame of reference.⁸

The requirements of modern tourism compel visitors to enter the house in an apparently unusual but historically correct way, not through the front door but through a side door into a large dining room. This is just how guests at a semipublic event would have entered the house in Washington's time. The dining room is two stories in height, with an impressive Palladian window dominating one wall of the room. Washington chose to adorn the ceiling of this public room not with some heroic relief or constellation of classical symbols, but with images of tools. One looks up at his ceiling and finds plaster scythes, shovels, and picks. The size of the room tells something about the owner's social station, but the room's real significance is that it symbolizes his unshakable optimism. Work had begun on the dining room, along with other improvements and enlargements around the house, just before Washington rode off to command the Revolutionary army. Like many, he hoped the war would be a short one; but even as the conflict dragged on year after dreary year, he sent orders for the work on his house to be kept up. He expected to see it again, larger and more handsome than it was when he left it. It was six years before he laid eyes on it again.

From the dining room one gets only a peek at a jewel-box chamber painted, at Washington's own choice, in an eye-popping shade called "Prussian blue." Now closed off by a velvet rope, this room was the family's West Parlor, where with special guests they sipped tea and played cards under the frowning brows of heavily carved paneling. Washington chose the patterns from British architectural books; the paneling added historical heft to his colonial outpost and created a room-sized frame for his gallery of family portraits. Here he placed the portrait of himself—done at Martha's earnest request—by Charles Willson Peale. This is the face which should, by rights, be on the dollar—shows Washington in the uniform he wore as frontier commander in the French and Indian War, with marching orders stuffed in his pocket and a look of jaunty courage. Here he is every inch the man who wrote to his brother, "I heard Bullets whistle and believe me there was something charming in the

sound.” On another wall is a portrait of Martha at the age of twenty-six, done in dowdy fashion by the society painter John Wollaston, the favorite of the Virginia gentry for his ability to render in oils the importance, though their charm eluded him. Here also are the Custis children, Jacky and Patsy, whom Martha brought to Mount Vernon and whom Washington adopted as his own. Despite its museumlike atmosphere, Mount Vernon in its day was always home to young children—first the Custis children and then the grandchildren.⁹

This room neatly encapsulates Washington’s social history—one might call it his Virginia Genealogy Room, though the grandest family connections belonged not to him but to Martha. As Virginia historian wrote, “not even retroactively, not even after George became the absolute number one citizen of Virginia and the new nation, were the Washingtons ever included in the aristocracy.” His forebears were middling planters, but Washington’s architectural tastes show his yearning to gain entry to the top tier for himself. His wife and her children, however, were already at the top. Martha’s first husband was a Custis, whose mother had been a Parke: two names at the peak of colonial Virginia society. Martha’s children and grandchildren carried the middle name Parke as a badge of the lineage and, no less important, to qualify them as heirs to an old Parke estate.* George Washington presided over a household of wealthy aristocrats, inheritors of a tradition that excluded Washington himself, no matter how grand his mansion might be. Another aspect of his life revealed in this room is the absence of portraits of Washington’s own children. He and Martha were childless, and that failure saddened him.

Mount Vernon occupies two landscapes and straddles, as far as that is possible, two realms of time. The key to grasping the vision behind Washington’s plan is the enormous view that unfolds from the piazza at the rear of the house. The land falls away below you into a massive landscape, with the Potomac River winding to infinity and forests stretching to the horizon. This was Washington’s favorite spot, where he sat every afternoon, and this was the place one visitor, Abigail Adams, called Mount Vernon’s “greatest adornment.”¹¹ Behind you, forgotten now, is the clipped and calculated paradise of the colonial Virginia gentleman. Before you stretches an open and endless prospect encompassing anything the world could send it—a view not of the past but of the future. The genius of the house and of its builder is most fully felt here; this eighteenth-century artifact, and its creator, still speak so powerfully today because they frame this view of the future.

The future Washington envisioned for this house, after he was gone, was one without slavery. That is the ultimate contradiction of Mount Vernon. The place we see today, beautifully restored, is a place Washington wished to see, in part, dismantled. Of course he wished that it would endure, but on a different foundation.

There is a spot at Mount Vernon where one can stand today and see a revealing remnant of the system that Washington rejected. I had passed the place many times without realizing what I was looking at. Like so much about slavery, something important was carefully concealed while standing in plain sight, because it had been disguised. While strolling through the elegant garden at Mount Vernon, I paused to admire the majestic Greenhouse that Washington designed himself. Here

Washington grew oranges, so exotic and precious they were regarded as “the fruit of kings.” In his time, “possession of a greenhouse [implied] that we have scaled the heights of power ... that we have almost allegorical control over the natural universe,” as the garden historian Mac Griswold has written.¹² On one side, the Greenhouse faces the Upper Garden, where Washington liked to take guests for a stroll down paths bordered with boxwood and flowerbeds. Then and now, someone walking through the elegant garden and admiring the majestic Greenhouse would not know that the wings extending from the sides of the building, providing architectural balance and harmony, were slave barracks.

The barracks opened to the rear, and on the garden side there were no doors nor windows large enough to afford a glimpse at the interior. So when Washington’s guests strolled past the Greenhouse they saw no sign that these long, handsome brick wings housed the plantation’s slaves. Washington had devised an architecture that rendered slavery invisible, while at the same time weaving slaves into the fabric of his grand design. It was a brilliant, chilling stroke of architectural inspiration.

Built of brick and attached to one of the most prominent buildings on the estate, the barracks signify the permanence of slavery. At one time Washington envisioned that slavery would be part of the fabric of Mount Vernon’s future and America’s future. Slavery would be not merely accommodated but embraced and transformed into a beautiful, imposing symbol of status and “control over the natural universe.” The Greenhouse is a vestige of the system Washington eventually rejected. He built it and then he emptied it.

* * *

In our time Mount Vernon has felt the reverberations of the thunder-clap that struck Monticello. Thomas Jefferson’s mountaintop home to the south, when DNA testing of Jefferson’s descendants and descendants of his slave Sally Hemings indicated that Jefferson was most likely the father of Hemings’s children. To many people, that revelation in 1998 came with as much shock as the discovery of a new continent. If we thought we had fully mapped our world, we were wrong. In the wake of the Jefferson-Hemings revelation, descendants of Washington’s slaves came forward to ask for their own DNA testing. Their oral tradition, they said, had long held that their black forebear, a slave named West Ford, was the son of George Washington and a slave named Venus. While this information was not exactly new—it had long been known to the Ford descendants and to some scholars—it emerged forcefully into public view at a moment when it seemed that a single new nugget of information could, overnight, completely change our view of a major historical figure.

Oral history is very difficult to interpret, and while a story may contain obvious errors, that does not mean that it can be summarily dismissed. In the matter of West Ford, the documentary evidence is ambiguous, but there is virtually no doubt he was kin to the first president.

George and Martha Washington had other relatives in their slave community as well. A few months into my research on Washington I came across information that Martha had a half sister who was black, whose family remained close to the Washington and Custis families at least until the

1850s. The relationship was hardly secret—it was described in detail in a Congressional document published in 1871. Some might see such revelations as scandalous; I see them as windows into a part of the country we are struggling to understand.

To consider Washington in connection with slavery challenges the myth of Washington as the perfect secular god. The biographer Douglas Southall Freeman wrestled with this issue when he wrote in 1948, “The integrity of the United States was assumed, for some reason, to presuppose the flawlessness of Washington’s character. Complete faith in him was part of the creed of loyalty.”¹³ On the one hand, the myth of Washington hides a great deal—his pride, his ambition, his acquisitiveness (some might call it greed), and his willingness to subordinate the weak to his ambition. But on the other hand, the myth does not do him justice, for he transformed himself, shedding his ambition and his self-seeking, to bring liberty to a people who were exasperatingly indifferent and reluctant to share sacrifice. It has been said that he was bedeviled by feelings of inadequacy, perhaps resulting from his difficult relationship with his mother and the absence of a father. Certainly he was keenly aware of his lack of education. But against this he threw a relentless drive for attainment and a habit of discipline. In his young adulthood this drive had no other object beyond his own aggrandizement. When he committed himself to the patriot cause, this drive, this discipline, this single-mindedness helped win the nation its independence. Toward the end of his life he grappled with the problem of slavery. His wrenching private conflict over race and slavery was a microcosm of the national struggle—one that is not yet over.

Home Ground

HARDLY HAD I BEGUN my research when I discovered that collateral descendants of Washington still live in Virginia. There is almost always something to be learned from meeting descendants of your subject—they have fragments of lore to pass on, documents bypassed by other researchers, echoes of old mannerisms. So when this family extended an invitation to visit I leaped at the opportunity. Like many ancient Virginia families, this branch of the Washington clan remains rooted to the soil. They live on an estate called Blenheim adjacent to the spot where George Washington was born. The birthplace is a National Monument, a weighty designation that lies like a tombstone over the past, but almost within shouting distance Washington's relatives are still there, doing what he would be doing, farming the land.

George Washington is so firmly associated with Mount Vernon that many people assume he was born there. In fact his birthplace lies some sixty-five miles downriver in a part of Virginia known as the Northern Neck, a finger of land fifty-two miles long and ten miles wide between the Potomac and Rappahannock rivers. At the time of Washington's birth in 1732 the Neck was one of the most important regions in the colony—home to some of its richest and most influential families—but it began to lose population in midcentury as its tobacco fields became depleted. By the late 1700s the population of Westmoreland County, where Washington was born, had dwindled to about half of what it had been at the end of the 1600s. As in so many parts of the South, economic decline preserved the world of long ago. Today the land is still rural, the houses of the colonial tobacco barons still stand, and descendants of the original families still live on the ancestral acres.

As I drove east from Fredericksburg toward Blenheim, the suburbs dwindled and the road shrank to a two-lane blacktop fringed with fields and forests, the landscape of Washington's time. Today we travel alone, at high speed, encapsulated in vehicles that take us to our destinations with minimal interaction with anything outside the glass. Not so in Washington's time. Travelers, if they seemed of a decent sort, were eagerly welcomed at private homes as bearers of news or, at least, breakers of the rural monotony. Virginia hospitality was such, said one visitor, that it was "possible to travel through the whole country without money." If one offered to pay one's hosts for the night's stay, they were "rather angry, asking whether one did not know the custom of the country." An eighteenth-century English traveler named Andrew Burnaby described the effect that the heat and lushness of the American southland had on his former countrymen: "the climate and external appearance of the country conspire to make them indolent, easy, and good-natured: extremely fond of society, and much given to convivial pleasures."¹

In the 1700s a traveler of the common sort would doff his hat and bow if he encountered a well-

born gentleman on horseback. Such gentlemen stood out not only because of their fine clothes but because of their peculiar, damn-you-get-out-of-the-way gallop. There were many such potentates on the Neck, but none could match Robert Carter, who bounced along the road in a gilded carriage. The possessor of a thousand slaves and 300,000 acres of land, Carter was easily the wealthiest man in Virginia. His power earned him the appellation “King” Carter. Though Carter’s enormous house on the Northern Neck, Corotoman, is long gone, he did leave behind one of Virginia’s most enigmatic architectural treasures: the jewel-like Christ Church near the eastern end of the Neck. No one knows who designed it, but the anonymous architect created a profoundly spiritual structure—an apparently simple brick construct whose soaring interior makes the mind leap toward the eternal.*²

Churches such as this one also served as the focus of temporal power. Attendance at Sunday services was required of all by law, and all heads of households were taxed to support the church. The church’s governing body, the vestry, had quasi-public functions, including unusual police powers. The churchwardens, naturally, kept an eye out for those who neglected to attend services. These miscreants were reported to the county court (reporting was simple because vestrymen usually served as the county justices as well) and fined, with the proceeds going to the support of the church. Since churches provided support for orphans and abandoned children, churchwardens were always alert for the births of illegitimate children who might become an expense for the church. The wardens hauled the mothers into court, where they were duly fined. The churches, formally and informally, were depots of local gossip, news, and official pronouncements. Runaway slaves could be “outlawed,” meaning that they were thenceforth outside the protection of the law and could legally be killed with impunity, because they had ceased to exist as far as the law was concerned. Notices identifying outlaws were customarily nailed to the door of the church where all would see them, and where they became a sharp symbol of the distinction between the saved and the damned.³

One aspect of Christ Church’s design is deeply symbolic of the era. The seating does not consist of rows of pews, but of twenty-two rectangular, high-backed stalls, each designated for a particular family, with the Carters having the largest one. Families came in with their servants and slaves and sat together in isolation from the other congregants. The minister preached from a raised pulpit that allowed him to look down on his flock while they gazed up at him. In Washington’s Virginia, family determined one’s place and one’s identity, even in relation to the Creator. The family was the engine of wealth and power. The Carters had their stall enclosed in a curtain so that ordinary folk could not even lay eyes on them as they worshiped.

In Washington’s time Virginians were already obsessed with what we might call practical genealogy. This grew out of the need for keeping mental track of distant cousins for legal purposes. All these people had to be kept in mind when one was drawing up a deed or a will, or dividing slaves (recall that Washington made mention of more than fifty relatives in his will). Kinship with an old-line family of substance and influence conferred prestige on the lesser relations. Thus, as one historian wrote, “the gentry of Virginia studied one another’s genealogies as closely as a stockman would scrutinize his stud books.” When an English visitor asked for advice on getting along in the colony,

Virginian strongly cautioned him against offending any “person of note.” By way of explanation he added, “either by blood or marriage, we are almost all related, and so connected in our interests, that whoever of a stranger presumes to offend any one of us will infallibly find an enemy of the whole. Nor, right or wrong, do we forsake him, till by one means or other his ruin is accomplished.” At the top level of Virginia society and government the entanglements were almost incestuous: in 1724 a dozen twelve members of Virginia’s Royal Council were related by blood or marriage.⁴

King Carter founded a dynasty numbered among the “FFVs”—First Families of Virginia. (Carter’s son Landon became George Washington’s political mentor.) His children intermarried with other leading families and established Carter outposts across the Tidewater. Alongside the Carters, the other pillar of the Northern Neck in Washington’s time was the Lee family. The Lees lived in Stratford Hall, just a few miles east of the Washingtons. Their massive brick mansion, with the look of a fortress, still stands on its magnificent site atop bluffs over the Potomac. (The Lees’ earlier home was burned to the ground in 1729 by convicts sent from England to be American servants.) Despite its formidable appearance, the house was designed for the lavish, large-scale entertainments of which Virginians were so fond. Parties lasted for days, featuring horse races, boat races, music, dancing, and reckless gambling.

The builder of Stratford was Thomas Lee (1690–1750), whose position as head of the colony’s Royal Council allowed Lee to style himself “President of Virginia.” With a sharp nose, high forehead, and piercing eyes, he possessed a visage that was both exceedingly handsome—he may have been one of the few men of the eighteenth century who actually looked good wearing the flowing wig of his office—and unbearably proud. He passed the Lee pride in abundance to one of his sons, who was said to possess “a haughtiness peculiar to himself ... being in the superlative degree to any I had ever beheld, even in this Country,” by which the speaker meant Virginia.⁵

In 1744 Lee journeyed from Stratford to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, to negotiate with the Iroquois for the purchase of an enormous inland empire—territory that would form the future states of Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Michigan, and part of Minnesota—all for about \$400,000 in cash and gifts. With a group of other Virginians Lee founded the Ohio Company to settle and explore this tract. Thereafter, Ohio Valley land speculation became the dream and the bane of Virginians, including George Washington. His half brother Lawrence served as president of the Ohio Company, and as a Virginia militia officer young George went into the wilderness to bully the French into leaving the territory that Lee had purchased, and ended up starting the French and Indian War. Two of Thomas Lee’s sons signed the Declaration of Independence (the only brothers to do so).

For generations the Lees did business with the Washingtons, competed with them for land, and intermarried with them. The Lee-Washington relationship is fraught with historical ironies. During the Revolution, Henry “Light-Horse Harry” Lee caught George Washington’s eye with a dashing victory over British forces in New Jersey. The two became close friends, and Henry Lee delivered the famous eulogy of Washington before Congress: “First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen.” Lee and Washington shared a commitment to a strong national union and centrality.

government. After the Revolution Lee invested rashly in real estate and fell so catastrophically in debt that he chained shut the doors of Stratford Hall to keep out the creditors. At Stratford on January 19, 1807, Lee's wife, Ann, gave birth to their fifth child, Robert E. Lee, in an atmosphere of financial gloom—she left the house to reside with her relations. Ann was a Carter, a great-granddaughter of King Carter. Robert E. Lee connected the Lee and Carter lines with the Washington and Custis lineages when he married George and Martha Washington's great-granddaughter, Mary Custis.

* * *

Blenheim was hard to find. The only landmark I had to go on was a mailbox by the side of the road and I sailed right past it. When I corrected my mistake I ended up on what seemed a road to nowhere—a narrow graveled trace that burrowed through a tunnel of trees and vines, curving this way and that as it followed the course of a stream. The outlines of a house reared up on the left. This was not the historic Washington house but a newer one (newer being nineteenth-century) occupied by the younger generation. Blenheim lay somewhere farther down the twisting road.

A man emerged from this house, and I watched closely as he approached. It was said by Ralph Waldo Emerson that “every man is a quotation from all his ancestors”; I wondered if this man quoted any inherited Washingtonian vestiges.⁶ I was braced for a dose of the haughtiness I had experienced at other Southern ancestral homes. His family was descended in a female line from George's half brother Augustine “Austin” Washington, whose son William Augustine had built Blenheim (and was bequeathed a sword by George Washington). This property had passed into a female Washington line when William Augustine's great-granddaughter married a Latané. My host was Larry Washington Latané.

A trim, soft-spoken man in his thirties, Larry displayed no godlike traits at first glance or aristocratic airs, but he quickly reverted to ancestral form by inviting me to have a look at his garden. George Washington's guests at Mount Vernon were invariably taken to see the general's garden; special guests were taken to the outlying farms. Likewise, Larry gave me a tour of his plantings. He wrote for the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* but also cultivated a large organic garden, selling his vegetables to restaurants in Washington, D.C. Like his collateral ancestor, he could not separate himself from agriculture and had chosen the purest way of pursuing it. Unlike his ancestor, who depended on the labor of slaves, this Washington planted and tended the land himself.

Three generations of the Latané family, counting Larry's children, resided on the Blenheim property. In short order Larry's parents drove up from the Blenheim house down the road. A grizzled stocky man, Lawrence Sr. spoke with the old Virginia accent, which has a Scottish tone that makes “outside the house” sound like “outside the hoose.” He outlined a Virginian's plan for a visit: we would go to see the family cemetery.

The Washington family cemetery was on a farm that had once been owned by another branch of the family, who had sold it some time ago while retaining title to the cemetery and the right to visit it. As we approached the graveyard, Lawrence Sr. told how they had almost lost it. The farm had been

purchased by a family from up North who didn't like the idea that a patch of useful land was being taken up with a graveyard. He got wind of the new owner's intentions from a workman: "A man came to me and said, 'That new man that bought the place wants to bulldoze the cemetery.' So I had to go up there and get him straight." Having failed to bulldoze the Washington cemetery, the new owner then asked if he could be buried in it. Lawrence declined to extend him that honor and made a point of visiting the cemetery more often just to keep his eye on it.

An iron fence surrounded the graves, at the end of a large field. A house called Campbellton once stood just a short distance away, but it had burned down in the 1920s. A line of trees screened the field and the cemetery from view, so the gravestones had escaped the vandalism that often befalls isolated country burial grounds. Lawrence tugged open the iron gate. As he took me through the place I was struck by its evidence that the family of the Founding Father had firmly embraced the cause of the rebellion in the Civil War.

"Here is a son who lived at Blenheim," Lawrence said as we paused at the stone for Richard Washington, who died July 6, 1863. When we scraped some dirt from the bottom of the stone we unearthed the inscription: *Killed in Action at Hagerstown in the Retreat from Gettysburg*. Lawrence pointed to the next stone: "Here's another Civil War man, the son of Sarah Tayloe Washington. He was a lieutenant colonel, I think, in the Ninth Virginia Cavalry." Nearby was the stone for John Tayloe, whose story Lawrence also knew. "He was a prisoner held on a gunboat. They were coming down the Rappahannock and the captain saw that he was nearly dead, so they put him ashore opposite his house, which is a mile inland, and he died after he got home. Now here's a man who was a cadet at VMI in the Battle of New Market. And then he joined Mosby and stayed with him the whole war. Those Mosby men—they put up with something; it was tough." Mosby's cavalry was a legendary Confederate guerrilla unit. Mosby himself became known as the Grey Ghost, because the Union army could never figure out how to catch him after his devastating raids.

William Latané, a cavalryman killed heroically in 1863, also ascended into Confederate legend. His kinsman William D. Washington painted a sentimental scene of his funeral, titled *The Burial of William Latané*. Engravings of the painting graced the walls of parlors throughout the postbellum South: its depiction of faithful slaves laying the fallen hero to rest perfectly expressed Lost Cause nostalgia for plantation life. It was not, however, painted from reality, but from a fantasy. William Washington depicted the scene in a Richmond studio during the war, recruiting a number of Richmond's society women to serve as his models. The completed canvas was displayed in the state capitol, becoming such an inspiration for Confederate patriotism that a receptacle was placed in front of it for people who wished to contribute to the war effort.

We stopped at the grave of a Washington who lived to be ninety. Lawrence remembered him from his childhood. "He was a real strong man, very powerful. All these old Washingtons were six feet four and weighed over two hundred pounds. They were tall and real powerful." That was a fair description of George Washington himself, who boasted that he had tossed a stone to the top of Natural Bridge, a stone arch in the Blue Ridge Mountains that is 215 feet above the ground. Washington was s

enthralled by the bridge that he cut his initials into it, a manly G. W. still visible today.

But there were also graves of children. We found one who lived to the age of six, two others to the age of one. “They came down with typhoid and died,” Lawrence said. “They died young in those days.”

On the way back from the cemetery Lawrence Sr. abruptly began talking about something he had recently discovered. It was the kind of story one would expect the family to keep private, but looking at the grave markers seemed to have put him in a mood to bring certain things into the open. He had a conversation with a black man from the area, he said, someone he had known almost all his life. The man told Lawrence that he had inherited land given to his father by Lawrence’s grandmother. Lawrence said the only conclusion he could draw was that one of his forebears had fathered a black child and that the family had given him land to help get him established. The black man, who had long been an acquaintance, was actually his relative. In Lawrence’s mind there was no other explanation for the gift. No explanation was needed for Lawrence’s belated discovery of his connection to a black family—such matters were seldom if ever spoken about in white families, though the black family knew the whole story and plain evidence of the connection could be found in the public land records at the courthouse, if one cared to look. As he related the story Lawrence betrayed no hint of resentment that this part of his family history had been revealed to him by a black man, and he obviously thought it important that I should know about this: he brought up the subject unasked.

We left the cemetery and drove to Blenheim, a plain two-story house in the common Virginia style of the Revolutionary era, but with large historic resonance. It was built from the bricks of the house where George Washington was born. His birth home burned on Christmas Day, 1779, when sparks from the chimney set fire to cotton stored in the attic. The owner at the time, George’s nephew William Augustine Washington, had his slaves gather up the bricks from the ruined house and build a new home on this spot, farther inland. William Augustine built Blenheim a good mile from the Potomac, which seemed odd, since almost all their commerce and communication depended on the river. But as Lawrence Sr. explained, “they built it back in here because the British were shelling the houses along the river.”

Blenheim went up at the same time George Washington was expanding Mount Vernon. When I saw the unadorned brick structure I realized just how far George Washington had come to be able to build Mount Vernon so lavishly. I was also struck by the rootedness of these old families. The Latané had at one point sold this land and this house, but then Lawrence Sr. wanted it back, and when he acquired the house in the 1960s it had been reduced almost to a wreck. The walls still stood but the previous owners had left the interior in tatters. Latané went to work slowly rebuilding it all, though he carefully left one wall along a staircase unfinished so that he could always see the original beams put up by his ancestors. As we walked around the place we came upon a brick that bore a date, 1726, the year Washington’s father expanded his house at Popes Creek in anticipation of the birth of more children.

“There was a slave house up in here, but it’s long gone, all rotted away,” Lawrence said. Lar

pointed out a distant hedgerow where the cabin had once stood. Lightning had struck near this spot twice, Lawrence said, first blowing a chimney to bits and then splintering a walnut tree.

Inside, we were looking at family photographs when Mrs. Latané pulled out an old book. “Here’s something I thought you might be interested in. See, they list some of the slaves.”

We laid it out flat on the dining-room table and carefully turned the pages. It was the plantation ledger from the 1850s. There were accounts of payments made to slaves for doing extra work, reports of the weather and of struggles with drought, notes on crop sales. One strange item stood alone. As we turned the pages we came to a sheet that was blank except for a few words written upside down at the bottom. We slid the book around and saw that it was a brief notation of a slave woman’s giving birth. It was the only such record in the book. Records of African-American births and marriages had often been written that way by whites even after emancipation and even by public officials. They seemed to file black records upside down quite deliberately: they would keep the records in the same books as the white records but would not mix the two. It was as if they inhabited the same place, but existed in different dimensions.

Larry had another document he wanted to show me. Some years ago he had gone to the Westmoreland County courthouse in Montross to look at some of the old deeds and wills of the Washington family. All these records, which document the continuity of titles to land and property, are written into enormous books stored in the courthouse basement. Larry found the “Inventory and Appraisal of the personal Estate of William A. Washington deceased,” submitted to the Westmoreland County Court in October 1811. It listed all his property, from a \$100 cherry bedstead to a coffee pot worth 25 cents. The combined value of his personal property and livestock came to a little over \$5,000. Then the assessors counted the slaves. They listed ninety-five people by name, giving their ages and values. In some cases the assessors listed the people by family units, such as Spencer, age 25, his wife Charity, age 30, and their two children Warner, age 6, and Billy, 2. The most valuable slave was the plantation’s blacksmith, named Daniel, who was worth \$600. The value of all the slaves came to about \$21,800.

All of this was perfectly ordinary—the legal confirmation of the transfer of slaves and other personal property from one generation to another. I had seen many such documents in the papers of old Southern families. But in the margin the executor had scribbled an explanatory note about two of the slaves, and as I read it I began to understand the undertone of panic in George Washington’s will.

James & Cary were exhibited for sale at Port Royal on 15th Jan~y 1811 but ... no bidder could be found—James died 12th Feb~y at Haywood

I looked in the inventory for the names of James and Cary. I found that they were husband and wife, valued at \$60 each, and that Cary was fifty-five years old and James was sixty. What the executor had done was to bring an elderly couple, who had given a lifetime of labor to the Washingtons, to the auction block. They were so old as to be worthless—“no bidder could be found”—and James was so feeble he died less than a month later. This was precisely the kind of act that George Washington s

strenuously forbade in his will. I could begin to see that Washington had been so emphatic because he knew the hard-heartedness of the planters—even the people of his own family. He knew the flinching indifference that would allow someone to display two elderly people on the auction block in the hope of netting \$120.

* * *

George Washington was indeed a quotation of his ancestors. The outlines of his early life bear a remarkable resemblance to those of his earliest American forebear, John Washington. George was a fourth-generation American whose family had built up a middling plantation enterprise on the Northern Neck with modest slaveholdings. His first American forebear was delivered to these shores in story-book fashion—washed up by a sudden squall on the Potomac. Washington's great-grandfather John was serving as a mate on the ketch *Sea Horse of London*, which plied a tobacco route from England to northern European ports (Danzig and Copenhagen) and thence to Virginia. After delivering cargoes to planters along the Potomac, the *Sea Horse* was heavily laden with tobacco for the voyage home when it grounded on a sandbar early in 1657. A storm blew in, capsizing the little vessel. John Washington set to work with the crew on the long task of righting and repairing the ship. In the meantime he made the acquaintance of Nathaniel Pope, who owned the spectacular cliffs on the Potomac's southern shore. John impressed both Nathaniel and his daughter Ann, so when the ketch was again seaworthy it left without its mate, who married Ann Pope a year or so later.

The young couple may have been smitten with one another, but the marriage choice of a wealthy Virginian's daughter was, at that time, not determined by love. The evidence points to a business arrangement advantageous to all the interested parties. John Washington could read and write; Nathaniel Pope could not. Washington knew the international tobacco trade firsthand; Pope was eager to increase his share in this commerce. As a wedding gift, Nathaniel bestowed 700 acres of land on his daughter, and he advanced John a loan of £80 to get him started. In this fashion, the Washington line planted its roots in Virginia.⁷

The machinery of English law was well established in colonial Virginia, and the records of the county courts present some of the richest documents we have for understanding the era. The proceedings of these local courts occasionally read like a racy crime blotter—especially since the courts often hauled in couples caught in fornication—but for the most part a county's judicial *Orders* are a mind-numbing catalog of real-estate transactions and suits for debt.

The profuse litigations over debt reveal a tight web of obligation among people high and low. No one could plant a crop without credit. Commoners went to the homes of their betters to obtain tools, seed, livestock, and other supplies, promising to pay in tobacco notes or wheat at harvest. The gentleman planters did the same thing on a larger scale with their London merchants. Year by year they grew more deeply obligated to each other in a great chain of debt. If a lowly tenant displeased the planter who had extended him credit he would suddenly find his loan had been called and he would lose all he had.⁸

The keys to prosperity were the tobacco leaf and the deed of land; producing the former was the means of obtaining more of the latter. With more people coming to Virginia all the time, land speculation was the real route to riches for the next century. George Washington himself said, “the greatest estates we have in this Colony” were acquired “by taking up and purchasing at very low rates the rich back lands which were thought nothing of in those days.” Because “the rich back lands largely came into the possession of wealthy planters, the western Virginia frontier did not beckon the poor and landless as a place of opportunity.”⁹

The method of land distribution in Virginia led to striking economic inequalities. About 10 percent of the adult males controlled 50–75 percent of the colony’s productive assets. The yeomen freeholders who owned their own land and worked it with one or two servants or slaves made up only 20–30 percent of the population. The economic and social bottom was very large: 60–70 percent of Virginia’s males owned no land at all. They included tenant farmers, followed by the lowest stratum of slaves, servants, and poor white laborers. This pattern of land ownership contrasted sharply with the more equal ownership of property in New England. According to the historian David Hackett Fischer, “Throughout the Puritan colonies, the middle class of yeoman farmers and artisans made up the great majority of the population. Slaves, servants and tenants were very few.” In Virginia, however, “a large proportion of land grants ... were awarded by the Council to its own members and their kin.... In Massachusetts, access to the land was controlled by men of middling status who used it to reproduce families of their own rank. In Virginia, the distribution of land was dominated by an elite who employed it to maintain their own hegemony. The authority of Virginia’s first families rested in part on this material base.”¹⁰

John Washington combined a fortunate marriage with a head for real-estate speculation. In partnership with his brother-in-law, he imported sixty-three indentured servants. For each servant brought in, the partners could claim a “headright” of fifty acres. In this manner, and by purchasing land himself, Washington became owner of a patch-work of tracts amounting to some five thousand acres. His largest single land acquisition, in 1674, was at Hunting Creek on the Potomac. This would later be Mount Vernon.

As John Washington was amassing his landholdings, Ann died in 1668, having borne five children. At that time life spans were so short and remarriages so common that Virginians devised the term “now-wife” to designate the current wife, as opposed to former or future wives.¹¹ The Washingtons had use for the term. In keeping with the custom of the time and place, John quickly remarried. He wedded a twice-over widow, Anne Brett, and when this second Anne died, he married her sister, the already thrice-married Frances Appleton. Thus the union of John and Frances Washington represented the culmination of eight marriages altogether. From his second marriage John had harvested a significant hoard of real estate, including ownership of the prison and court house of Westmoreland County. In those days, in the choice of a spouse, property trumped propriety: the sisters whom John married in succession had both been accused in county court (in a case heard by John—he could not plead ignorance) of whorish behavior. John himself came under a more serious cloud of suspicion:

was alleged he had allowed or actually participated in the murder of five Indians.¹²

John Washington began to acquire influence quickly, gaining entry to a class of colonial gentlemen described this way by an English official: “in every river of this province there are men in number from ten to thirty, who by trade and industry have gotten very competent estates. Those gentlemen take care to supply the poorer sort with goods and necessaries, and are sure to keep them always in their debt, and consequently dependent on them. Out of this number are chosen His Majesty’s Council, the Assembly, the Justices, and Officers of Government.”¹³ John fit the pattern almost exactly: he represented Westmoreland County in the House of Burgesses, served as a lieutenant colonel in the county militia, a county justice of the peace, and a vestryman of his parish, which was named after him. All of this presaged the early career of George Washington, who held the same local posts a century later—burgess, gentleman justice, and vestryman, with a colonelcy not in the county but in the Virginia militia.

This similarity was no accident. In every generation of the family, from the arrival of John to the ascendancy of his great-grandson George, Washingtons held prominent positions in the local government and parish. There existed an interlocking directorate of local governing bodies whose members all did business with one another and were very often related. Every son learned from his father the critical importance of keeping one’s hand on the levers of local power. Whether the sons acquired this hereditary wisdom from observation or from plow-side chats, we don’t know, but we do know that they absorbed the lesson well. George was literally schooled in the mechanics of local government and plantation management in his early teen years. His exercise book from that period survives, containing “Forms of Writing.” Young George laboriously copied out twenty-eight “forms,” all of which were legal or financial documents of one kind or another. They included a “Receipt for a Hoghead of Tobacco,” “A General Release by a Minor to the Administrators on his father’s estate,” a land patent, a warrant, a bail bond, and a contract between a master and an indentured servant.¹⁴

George Washington had much in common with his ancestor John. Both were gifted, ambitious, restless young men eager to advance in the world. Both managed to improve their situation by marrying women of property from families more prominent than their own. John firmly established himself by his alliance with the Popes and then married, one after the other, the sisters who may have been “whorish” in their ways but had real estate to compensate. In his time George would catch the greatest prize in the bridal sweepstakes, the very wealthy widow Martha Dandridge Custis.

A string of tragic deaths nearly removed George Washington’s line from these shores. John died, probably of typhoid fever, in 1677 at the age of forty-six. His will bequeathed the bulk of his estate to his firstborn child, Lawrence, who died in 1698 at age thirty-eight. These two relatively early deaths set a pattern that would later haunt George Washington—he knew that he came from short-lived people. Lawrence’s widow remarried, departed for England with her three children and new husband, and promptly died, touching off a legal crisis. The new husband tried to claim his late wife’s Washington inheritance and keep everything in England, but the late Lawrence’s brother brought suit in Virginia to recover the Washington property and children. Now the Washingtons’ local connection

came into play. Undoubtedly moved by sympathy for the Washingtons, the justices of Westmoreland County set history back on its course by ordering that the three Washington orphans—including Augustine “Gus” Washington—be returned from England to Virginia. Either in 1715 or 1716 Gus married Jane Butler, daughter of a Westmoreland planter, who gave his daughter a dowry of 1,300 acres. In 1718 their first son, Lawrence, was born, followed two years later by Augustine, Jr., who would be known as Austin—both of whom would be important in George’s life. After Jane Butler Washington died in 1729, Gus married Mary Ball, also of a Westmoreland County family. George’s first child, came into the world on February 11, 1732, at Popes Creek, the family’s plantation on the Potomac.*

Gus Washington stood six feet tall and was remembered as being “of noble appearance, and more manly proportions, with the extraordinary development of muscular power for which his son was afterward so remarkable.” His strength was such that he could “raise up and place in a wagon a mass of iron that two ordinary men could barely raise from the ground,” and yet he gained a reputation “for the mildness, courtesy, and amiability of his manners.”¹⁵

The Washington family moved among three different homes by the time George was seven years old, which might explain his later intense attachment to Mount Vernon. They left Popes Creek when George was three (but retained ownership of the place), lived for a while at the future site of Mount Vernon, and then settled in Fredericksburg at Ferry Farm. Augustine Washington died when George was only eleven, in circumstances eerily predictive of his son’s death: he fell fatally ill in 1743 after catching a chill in a sudden downpour while riding his horse. The father’s sudden demise, at the age of forty-nine, fit the pattern of early deaths among male Washingtons. Later in life George had but a foggy memory of his father. He was heard to say, “that he knew little of his father, other than his remembrance of his person, and of his parental fondness.”¹⁶

Augustine’s death left Mary Ball Washington with five children to look after. At age eleven George was the oldest child in the Ferry Farm household. Lawrence and Austin, the sons of Augustine’s first wife, were off on their own. Upon George’s shoulders would have fallen the tasks of keeping the household running and of keeping up his mother’s spirits along with his own. His father’s death ended any hope George had of obtaining the English education his older half brothers had completed.

Mary Washington’s influence on her son may be seen in Washington’s strict self-discipline and abhorrence of waste—traits that might well have been drilled into him by a widowed mother suddenly left in pinched circumstances. One of the Washington cousins later gave a description of Mary and claimed that the general’s daunting manner came from her: “Whoever has seen that awe-inspiring air and manner so characteristic in the Father of his Country, will remember the matron ... the presiding genius of her well-ordered household, commanding and being obeyed.” The cousin added, “of the mother I was ten times more afraid than I ever was of my own parents.” In her presence, he said, the Washington sons, “proper tall fellows ... were all mute as mice.”¹⁷

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