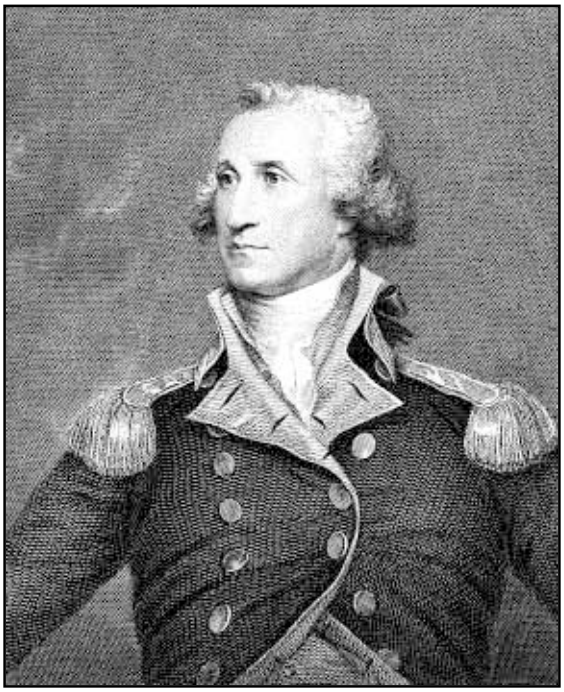
The Great Experiment

George Washington and the American Republic

A Unit of Study for Grades 8–12



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The Huntington
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TEACHER'S BACKGROUND

I. UNIT OVERVIEW

For two centuries George Washington has been revered as the preeminent Founding Father. Although Washington met many defeats during his life time, and he has had detractors, the record of his extraordinary achievements as a leader remains unparalleled in our national memory. Thus, long before his death on December 14, 1799, Washington's heroic legacy was already firmly fixed in the story of America. Henry Lee eulogized him with the following epitaph, "first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen."

Perhaps Washington's greatest legacy wasn't his brilliant leadership as a Revolutionary War hero or as first President, but rather his reluctance to abuse the power bestowed upon him in an age of absolute power. Washington's biographer, James Thomas Flexner, captured Washington's complexity in his book Washington: The Indispensable Man Flexner wrote that Washington was "a fallible human being made of flesh and blood and spirit—not a statue of marble and wood. And inevitably—for that was the fact—I found a great and good man. In all history few men who possessed unassailable power have used that power so gently and self-effacingly for what their best instincts told them was the welfare of their neighbors and all mankind."

Separating Washington the man from Washington the legend is difficult for historians and students alike, because his fame complicates historical scrutiny. Washington owned slaves and ambitiously sought power, yet he freed his slaves upon his death and he used his power to forge a democratic nation. Abigail Adams was aware of Washington's legendary status and offered the following advice to those who would try to understand him: "Simple truth is his best and his greatest eulogy. She alone can render his fame immortal." Through this unit, students will examine Washington's letters, public papers, and addresses that reveal some of his personal traits and leadership qualities which characterized the man rather than the legend.

The unit consists of six lessons that have students work with primary source documents to investigate Washington's life and achievements. Lessons 1–3 examine his early life, military leadership in the American Revolution, and his role in the Federal Convention of 1787. Lesson 4 uses Washington's Farewell Address to provide a retrospective of his presidential administration. Lessons 5 and 6 delve into Washington's dealings with Native Americans from his first venture into the Virginia frontier through his presidency and his changing attitudes toward the institution of slavery.

II. Unit Context

This unit, as a whole, may be used to supplement a study of the American Revolution and the early years of the Republic or can be taken as an in-depth study of George Washington and his role and influence on the development of the American nation. Individual lessons can be used to supplement a study of the Seven Years War, the Revolutionary War, making of the Constitution, or of Washington's presidency.

III. Correlation to National Standards for United States History

The Great Experiment: George Washington and the American Republic provides teaching materials to support the National Standards for History, Basic Edition (National Center for History in the Schools, 1996). Lessons within this unit assist students in attaining Standard 1B of Era 2, the European struggle for control of North America by focusing on the causes, character and outcome of the Seven Years War and analyzing Native American involvement in the war and evaluating the consequences for their societies. The unit likewise supports Standards 1, 2, and 3 of Unit 3 "Revolution and the New Nation" by examining the ideas and interests involved in forging the American Revolution, the Revolution's effects on different social groups, the issues involved in the creation of the United States Constitution, the development of the first American party system, and the influence of the French Revolution on American politics.

The unit integrates a number of Historical Thinking Standards such as analyzing cause-and-effect relationships; assess the importance of the individual in history; explain the influences of ideas, human interests, and beliefs; and, support interpretations with historical evidence.

IV. Unit Objectives

- To analyze a variety of primary source materials.
- To evaluate the impact of Washington's military leadership in forging the American victory during the Revolutionary War.
- To examine evidence from letters and public papers that reveal Washington's character traits.
- To assess Washington's leadership in fashioning the office of the presidency.
- To examine Washington's attitude towards Native Americans and explain his position on the institution of slavery.

V. Lesson Plans

1. The Making of a Leader
2. George Washington as Military Leader
3. George Washington and the Constitution
4. George Washington as President
5. George Washington and Native Americans
6. George Washington and Slavery

VI. Using Primary Source Documents

Before beginning the unit you may wish to duplicate copies of the Document Analysis Worksheet(Student Handout 1) as a means of assisting students in working with the numerous documents that are included in the six lessons in this unit. Encourage students to examine the documents carefully. Caution students not to accept without question evidence presented in documents and to always examine documents in the context of the time in which they were written. Students should make a habit of testing the data presented in primary source materials with evidence gleaned from their study of history.

LESSON ONE
THE MAKING OF A LEADER

A. LESSON OBJECTIVES

- To examine the "Rules of Civility" and explain what can be determined from them regarding accepted behavior in eighteenth-century America.
- To explain the character traits that Parson Mason Weems wished to promote in his biography of George Washington
- To delineate the character traits that became Washington's hallmark.

B. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

George Washington was a physically imposing man—tall and strong—and ambitious from an early age. For many of us, he is an abstract figure, more legendary than real. Washington holds a cherished position in our national memory as Revolutionary War hero and first President. However, Washington's mythological status rests on distinctive qualities that many historians feel were essential to his extraordinary leadership.

Washington, born on February 11, 1732 (the calendar was changed during his lifetime pushing his birthday ahead to February 22), was the eldest of five children of Augustine Washington and his second wife, Mary Ball. Augustine Washington had two sons from his first marriage, Lawrence and Augustine. His father died in 1743 leaving the eleven-year-old a portion of his estate including the 280-acre farm on the Rappahannock River where the family had once lived. George's half-brother, Lawrence, inherited the plantation which Lawrence later named Mount Vernon after Admiral Edward Vernon, his commander in an expedition against the Spanish during King George's War (War of the Austrian Succession, 1740–48).

After his father's death, George had no hope of an education abroad as had been afforded his older half-brothers. Not only was an English education expensive, but his protective mother desired to keep her eldest son at home. His education stressed practical skills rather than training typical for an eighteenth-century gentleman. As a teenager Washington showed an obsession with self-improvement and was conscious of cultivating manners. Sometime before his sixteenth birthday, he meticulously copied the 110 "Rules of Civility and Decent Behaviour in Company and Conversation" from a English translation of the maxims originally written by a fifteenth-century French Jesuit.

The social position of the young George Washington was further enhanced by the marriage of his step-brother Lawrence to Ann Fairfax, whose cousin Thomas, Lord Fairfax, was the proprietor of five million acres in the Northern Neck of Virginia. While the marriage gave him access to the aristocracy, it was his willingness to survey the wilderness (beginning at age 16)

that built his reputation as brave and adventurous. This experience coupled with his connections to the influential Fairfax family, brought the 21 year-old Washington to the attention of Governor Robert Dinwiddie who, in 1753, appointed him Adjutant for the Southern District of Virginia. A few months later Dinwiddie appointed Washington as a special envoy to deliver an ultimatum to the French in the Ohio Valley. When the summary of his expedition, The Journal of Major George Washington, was published in Williamsburg, Virginia and London in 1754, his reputation was assured on both sides of the Atlantic.

Another event advanced Washington's reputation was his near-miraculous survival of a battle with the French and their Indian allies near Fort Duquesne in July 1755. Washington had two horses shot from under him and four bullets piercing his uniform during the battle in which the British commander, General Edward Braddock, was mortally wounded. Washington helped command the troops in their withdrawal after the French victory. Although his military skills had been questionable, his providential survival and courage during the retreat were publicly lauded.

After three further years of frustrating efforts to protect the frontier with inadequate resources, he retired to his home and agricultural studies and attempted to make the western lands he had gained from military service more accessible. Fifteen years later, when the crisis over the Intolerable Acts dragged him back into the public arena, Washington's standing was still intact. The boy, whose father's death might have remanded him to anonymity as a gentleman farmer scraping a living out of too few acres, had fashioned himself into a public figure.

There is a curious symmetry to Washington's life. As a young man, he had remade himself to achieve personal goals; later in life, he remade himself to achieve political goals. Yet another remaking occurred after his death in 1799, this time at the hands of Parson Mason Locke Weems, Washington's first biographer. By the late 1790s, Washington had become identified with the Federalists, then locked in ideological battle with the Democratic-Republicans. However, his personal character remained unassailable. It was on this aspect of Washington's life that Weems focused his encomium to "Columbia's first and greatest son."

C. Lesson Activities

1. Have the students consider what traits—personal, political, and professional—Washington would have needed to fill the unprecedented role that marked the beginning of the end of Europe's colonization of the New World. Keeping in mind the era in which Washington lived, students should make a list that includes timeless characteristics of leaders as well as skills need in eighteenth-century society. This can be done as a class activity or in small groups. Items on the list can be checked off as the lessons and readings confirm that Washington possessed those qualities.

2. Use the excerpts from the 'Rules of Civility' (Student Handout 2) to deduce for whom they were intended and what categories of behavior Washington felt needed polishing if one were to succeed in polite society. Again this can be done with the whole class, in small groups, or as individual homework assignments. [Note that

the entire list of 110 rules is available in George Washington, Writings, selected by John H. Rhodehamel (New York: Library of America).]

The students will easily find general categories such as cleanliness (#13, 51 . . .), modesty (#40, 54 . . .), self-control (#45, 105 . . .) and so on. With younger students you may want to give them categories and have them find appropriate examples. Have students list which rules are still taught and which are now dated (for example, #9, which applies if meat is being cooked in the fireplace and #13, which deals with removal of vermin), then compare their own lives to Washington's.

3. Have the students read the excerpts from Weems (Student Handout 3) and decide what his purposes were. Students will find that Weems focuses on the personal side of Washington, unsullied by the on-going political conflicts, and that he sees a divine plan in the events of Washington's life.

4. Students should then note the success Weems had in idealizing the personal Washington. The persistence of the cherry tree legend shows Weems's wide influence, and the image of Washington as a remote icon, while hardly what Weems had in mind, indicates that Washington's image was effectively separated from the partisan political associations surrounding him at his death. Also, Weems had produced an early best-seller; people of the time were apparently so hungry for the honored portrait of their first president that updated editions continued to be sold until twenty-five years after Washington's death, when Weems died.

D. Extended Lesson Ideas

1. Consider what Washington might have thought of Weems's biography. Keep in mind Washington's own efforts to ensure that he made a favorable impression.

2. Research the public perception of the character of George Washington over time. Examine formal representations of Washington in paintings and sculpture, popular art, and literature. How have writers and artists used Washington to arouse patriotic fervor? How has he been portrayed as a model of virtue?

"Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation"

At the age of fifteen, George Washington practiced his penmanship by copying the 110 maxims of decent conduct from Francis Hawkins's Youth's Behaviour, or Decency in Conversation Among Men In his book, Hawkins included an English translation of the rules originally written by a French Jesuit in the fifteenth century. These rules that Washington meticulously copied became far more than a writing exercise; they formed a code of conduct to which the young man aspired.

1st Every Action done in Company, ought to be with Some Sign of Respect, to those that are Present.

2nd When in Company, put not your Hands to any Part of the Body, not usually Discovered.

3rd Shew Nothing to your Friend that may affright him.

4th In the Presence of Others Sing not to yourself with a humming Noise, nor Drum with your Fingers or Feet.

5th If You Cough, Sneeze, Sigh, or Yawn, do it not Loud but Privately; and Speak not in your Yawning, but put Your handkerchief or Hand before your face and turn aside.

6th Sleep not when others Speak, Sit not when others stand, Speak not when you Should hold your Peace, walk not on when others Stop.

7th Put not off your Cloths in the presence of Others, nor go out your Chamber half Drest.

* * *

9th Spit not in the Fire, nor Stoop low before it neither Put your Hands into the Flames to warm them, nor Set your Feet upon the Fire especially if there be meat before it.

10th When you Sit down, Keep your Feet firm and Even, without putting one on the other or Crossing them.

11th Shift not yourself in the Sight of others nor Gnaw your nails.

12th Shake not the head, Feet, or Legs rowl not the Eys lift not one eyebrow higher than the other wry not the mouth, and bedew no mans face with your Spittle, by approaching too near him when you Speak.

13th Kill no Vermin as Fleas, lice ticks &c in the Sight of Others, if you See any filth or thick Spittle put your foot Dexteriously upon it if it be upon the Cloths of your Companions, Put it off privately, and if it be upon your own Clothes return Thanks to him who puts it off.

28th If any one come to Speak to you while you are Sitting Stand up tho he be your Inferiour, and when you Present Seats let it be to every one according to his Degree 29th When you meet with one of Greater Quality than yourself, Stop, and retire especially if it be at a Door or any Straight place to give way for him to Pass.

* * *

40th Strive not with your Superiers in argument, but always Submit your Judgment to others with Modesty.

* * *

45th Being to advise or reprehend any one, consider whether it ought to be in publick or in Private; presently, or at Some other time in what terms to do it & in reproving Shew no Sign of Cholar but do it with all Sweetness and Mildness.

* * *

49th Use no Reproachfull Language against any one neither Curse nor Revile.

50th Be not hasty to believe flying Reports to the Disparagment of any.

51st Wear not your Cloths, foul, unript or Dusty but See they be Brush'd once every day at least and take heed that you approach not to any uncleaness.

* * *

54th Play not the Peacock, looking every where about you, to See if you be well Deck't, if your Shoes fit well if your Stokings Sit neatly, and Cloths handsomely.

* * *

72nd Speak not in an unknown Tongue in Company but in your own Language and that as those of Quality do and not as ye Vulgar; Sublime matters treat Seriously.

* * *

76th While you are talking, Point not with your Finger at him of Whom you Discourse nor Approach too near him to whom you talk especially to his face.

77th Treat with men at fit Times about Business & Whisper not in the Company of Others.

* * *

79th Be not apt to relate News if you know not the truth thereof. In Discoursing of things you Have heard Name not your Author always A Secret Discover not.

* * *

91st Make no Shew of taking great Delight in your Victuals, Feed not with Greediness; cut your Bread with a knife, lean not on the Table neither find fault with what you Eat.

92nd Take no Salt or cut Bread with your Knife Greasy.

* * *

95th Put not your meat to your Mouth with your Knife in your hand neither Spit forth the Stones of any fruit Pye upon a Dish nor Cast anything under the table.

* * *

97th Put not another bit into your Mouth til the former be Swallowed let not your Morsels be too big for the Gowls.

* * *

105th Be not Angry at Table whatever happens & if you have reason to be so, Shew it not but on a Chearfull Countenance especially if there be Strangers for Good Humour makes one Dish of Meat a Feast.

* * *

107th If others talk at Table be attentive but talk not with Meat in your Mouth.

108th When you Speak of God or his Atributes, let it be Seriously & with Reverence. Honour & Obey your Natural Parents altho they be Poor.

109th Let your Recreations be Manfull not Sinfull.

110th Labour to keep alive in your Breast that Little Spark of Celestial fire Called Conscience.

THE LIFE OF WASHINGTON

Mason Locke Weems

Mason Locke Weems was an Anglican minister who left the ministry to become a book peddler and writer. His biography of Washington, The Life of George Washington: With Curious Anecdotes, Equally Honorable to Himself, and Exemplary to His Young Countrymen, published in 1799, was extremely popular. The myth of the cherry tree first appeared in the fifth edition, published in 1806.

Mason Locke Weems
Dictionary of American Portraits
Dover Publications, 1967

. . . One day, in the garden, where he often amused himself hacking his mother's pea-sticks, he unluckily tried the edge of his hatchet on the body of a beautiful young English cherry-tree, which he barked so terribly, that I don't believe the tree ever got the better of it. The next morning the old gentleman finding out what had befallen his tree, which, by the by, was a great favourite, came into the house, and with much warmth asked for the mischievous author, declaring at the same time, that he would not have taken five guineas for his tree. Nobody could tell him any thing about it.

Presently George and his hatchet made their appearance. George, said his father, do you know who killed that beautiful little cherry-tree yonder in the garden? This was a tough question and George staggered under it for a moment; but quickly recovered himself: and looking at his father, with the sweet face of youth brightened with the inexpressible charm of all conquering truth, he bravely cried out, "I can't tell a lie, Pa; you know I can't tell a lie. I did cut it with my hatchet."—Run to my arms, you dearest boy, cried his father in transports, run to my arms; glad am I, George, that you killed my tree for you have paid me for it a thousand fold. Such an act of heroism in my son, is more worth than a thousand trees, though blossomed with silver, and their fruits of purest gold.

* * *

George did not reach home until a few hours before his father's death, and then he was speechless! The moment he alighted, he ran into the chamber where he lay. But oh! what were his feelings when he saw the sad change that had passed upon him! when he beheld those eyes, late so bright and fond, now reft of all their lustre, faintly looking on him from their hollow sockets, and through swelling tears, in mute but melting language,

bidding him a LAST, LAST FAREWELL! . . . Rushing with sobs and cries, he fell upon his father's neck . . . he kissed him a thousand and a thousand times, and bathed his clay-cold face with scalding tears. O happiest youth! Happiest in that love, which thus, to its enamoured soul strained an aged an[d] expiring sire. O worthiest to be the founder of a JUST and EQUAL GOVERNMENT, lasting as thy own deathless name! And O! happiest old man! thus luxuriously expiring in the arms of such a child!

* * *

About five years after the death of his father, he quitted school for ever, leaving the boys in tears for his departure: for he had ever lived among them, in the spirit of a brother. He was never guilty of so brutish a practice as that of fighting them himself, nor would he, when able to prevent it, allow them to fight one another. If he could not disarm their savage passions by his arguments, he would instantly go to the master, and inform him of their barbarous intentions.

* * *

The rank of midshipman was procured for him on board a British ship of war, then lying in our waters, and his trunk and clothes were actually sent on board. But when he came to take leave of his mother, she wept bitterly, and told him she felt her heart would break if he left her. George immediately got his trunk ashore! as he could not, for a moment, bear the idea of inflicting a wound on that dear life which had so long and so fondly sustained his own.

* * *

Braddock had fallen—his aides and officers, to a man, killed or wounded—and his troops, in hopeless, helpless despair, flying backwards and forwards from the fire of the Indians, like flocks of crowding sheep from the presence of their butchers. Washington, alone, remained unhurt! Horse after horse had been killed under him. Showers of bullets had lifted his locks or pierced his regimentals. But still protected by Heaven; still supported by a strength not his own, he had continued to fly from quarter to quarter, where his presence was most needed, sometimes animating his rangers; sometimes striving, but in vain, to rally the regulars.

* * *

When the children of the years to come, hearing his great name re-echoed from every lip, shall say to their fathers, "what was it that raised Washington to such height of glory?" let them be told that it was HIS GREAT TALENTS, CONSTANTLY GUIDED AND GUAR[D]ED BY RELIGION. For how shall man, frail man, prone to inglorious ease and pleasure, ever ascend the arduous steps of virtue, unless animated by the mighty hopes of religion? Or what shall stop him in his swift descent to infamy and vice, if unawed by that dread power which proclaims to the guilty that their secret crimes are seen, and shall not go unpunished? Hence the wise, in all ages, have pronounced, that "there never was a truly great man without religion."