George Washington



1st President of the United States,
1789 – 1797
"Father of his Country"

George Washington, the oldest of six children from his father's second marriage, was born into a prosperous family in 1732 at Wakefield plantation, Virginia. He lived there and at other plantations along the Potomac and Rappahannock Rivers until he was 16 years old.

George spent much of his boyhood outdoors, growing tall and lean with pale skin that sunburned easily. He became an excellent horseman. George was home schooled through elementary school, then he started taking classes at a small church school near his home. George's father died when George was 11, so he wasn't able to continue his education past middle school. George's half-brother Lawrence became his mentor and father figure. Lawrence was 14 years older than George.

At 15 George accompanied a party of surveyors to the Shenandoah Valley. He later worked as a public surveyor of Fairfax county, Virginia. When he was 21 years old, he started his military career when the Royal Governor of Virginia appointed him to lead a small group of militia to fight in the French and Indian War. The governor told Washington to go to Fort Le Boeuf in the Ohio Valley and tell the French soldiers that they had to leave.

Washington had to help the British General Edward Braddock, who was leading a small army to oust the French from the Ohio river valley. The British general knew very little about fighting in the wilderness, marching his troops straight into an ambush. However, during the defeat Washington's cool courageousness demonstrated the qualities of a first-rate officer. He was not hurt, but two horses were killed from under him and his uniform was slashed by four bullets. It was largely due to Washington's leadership that part of the British Army escaped. As a reward for his bravery, Washington was made a colonel and placed in command of the Virginia militia forces. For the next several years, he led his troops in small frontier fights against the French and the Indians.

In 1759 Washington married Martha Dandridge Custis, a wealthy widow and mother of two children. The couple had no children of their own, but Washington adopted Martha's children and raised them as his own. Over the next 15 years, he managed his plantations, which grew tobacco, apples, pears, and peaches and raised horses and cattle. He also sat in the Virginia House of Burgesses, where he supported the initial protests against British policies toward the colonists.

Washington represented Virginia at the First and Second Continental Congresses. In 1755, after the fighting broke out in Lexington and Concord, he was appointed Commander in Chief of the Continental Army. Overcoming severe obstacles, he eventually put together a well-trained and disciplined fighting force.

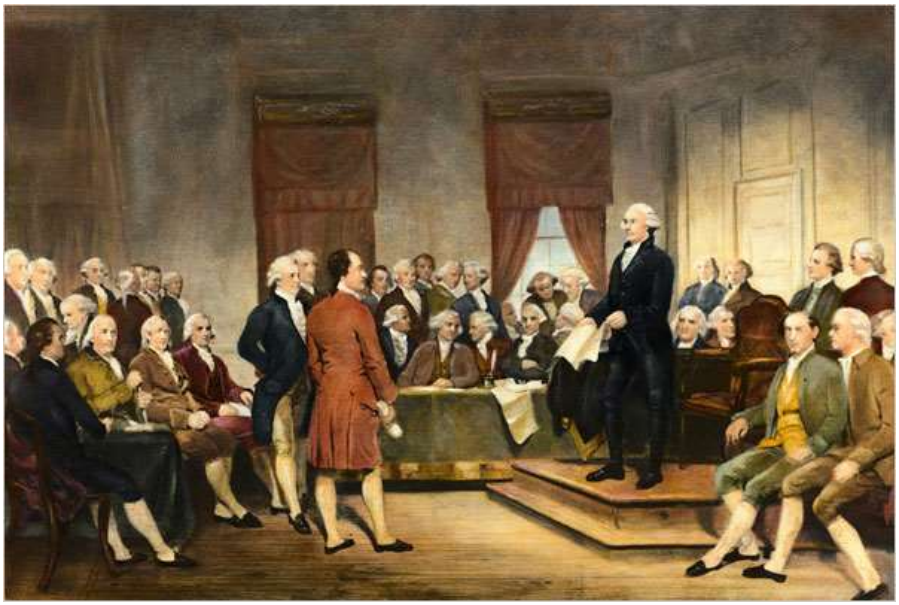
While Washington served as the Commander in Chief of the Army, an attempt was made to kidnap or kill him. Tory Governor of New York, William Tyron, and the Tory mayor of New York City, David Matthews, and many others were involved in the conspiracy. One of the conspirators was Washington's personal bodyguard, Thomas Hickey. Hickey was tried and found guilty and executed on June 28, 1776.


Washington Crossing the Delaware

Although the Continental army lost many battles, it was never destroyed, and it was never captured. Washington always claimed that as long as the Americans could keep an army in the field, the British could not defeat them. Somehow Washington kept his army in the field, persevering even during the dark and bitter cold winters at Valley Forge and Morristown. He had an unusual ability to inspire men, making them feel that as long as he led them, they could not lose. Finally, with the help of the French fleet and army, he won a climactic victory at the Battle of Yorktown in 1781, which ended the American Revolutionary war.

Take a virtual tour through George Washington's home, Mount Vernon.
http://www.mountvernon.org/

After signing the treaty of Paris (1783), Washington resigned his commission and returned to Mount Vernon. His retirement, however, was very short. In 1786, he served as the president of the Constitutional Convention. The Constitutional Convention was a meeting of 55 of the smartest men of the country – lawyers, doctors, professors, businessmen. They were going to write a plan for the new United States government. The convention met for three months, and eventually produced the Constitution – a document that describes how the United States government should be organized and run. The Constitution also includes a list of rights that are guaranteed to all US citizens, the Bill of Rights.



The Constitutional Congress met in 1786 to write the United States Constitution. George Washington was the President of the Congress.

All of the thirteen states had to sign, or ratify, the Constitution. As soon as it was ratified, the electoral college unanimously chose George Washington to be the nation's first President. Washington traveled the 235 miles from Mount Vernon to New York City for his inauguration. The trip took eight days because along the way people in the towns he passed through wanted to stop and congratulate him. On April 30, 1789, Washington took the oath of office. The President believed that as the Chief Officer of a new nation, he should present a dignified appearance. Accordingly, Washington dressed in formal attire, an American-made suit with gold eagle buttons, and he traveled in a yellow handsome carriage pulled by six white horses. Washington even had the groomsmen brush the horses' teeth before the parade!

During his two terms, Washington displayed the belief that the government should not be divided and run by political parties. He thought his job was to be President of all the people. Thus, he set about getting competing sides within the Government and his administration to compromise and come to agreement.

During Washington's tenure, the government moved from New York to Philadelphia in 1790, and he supervised the planning for relocation to the District of Columbia. Washington laid the cornerstone of the Capitol building in 1793.



Although the public encouraged Washington seek a third term, he had grown tired of politics and refused to run again. In his farewell address, he urged his fellow countrymen to renounce political parties and avoid involvement in the wars and domestic problems of other nations.

On December 12, 1799, Washington became sick when he was caught in a snowstorm while riding a horse around his farm. Two days later he died at the aged of 67.

On December 26, 1799, General Henry Lee, father of General Robert E. Lee, gave a funeral oration for George Washington before the houses of Congress. During this speech, Lee claimed that Washington was “a citizen first in war, first in peace, first in the hearts of his countrymen.”

George Washington suffered from poor dental health throughout his adulthood; beginning in his twenties he experienced regular toothaches, decay, and tooth loss. These problems were likely due to factors common during Washington's era, including a poorly balanced diet and disease. As a result, he spent his life in frequent pain and employed a variety of tooth cleaners, dental medicines, and dentures.





These dentures are in the collection at Mount Vernon.

Contrary to later legend, none of Washington's false teeth were made of wood. Prior to Washington's service in the Revolutionary War, Dr. John Baker, the first dentist to fashion false teeth for Washington, fabricated a partial denture with ivory that was wired to Washington's remaining real teeth.

When Washington was inaugurated President in 1789, only one real tooth remained in his mouth. Dr. John Greenwood—a New York dentist, former soldier in the Revolution, and a true pioneer in American dentistry—fashioned a technologically advanced set of dentures carved out of hippopotamus ivory and employing gold wire springs and brass screws holding human teeth. Greenwood even left a hole in the dentures to accommodate Washington's single tooth as he believed a dentist should "never extract a tooth...[when] there is a possibility of saving it."