

PROJECT TITLE: The Road Home	
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SCHOLARSHIP & RESEARCH

- Primary Investigative Question(s)** – Why did George Washington, who so dearly loved his home at Mount Vernon, spend so little time there?

Contextual Essay –

“First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen, he was second to none in the humble and endearing scenes of private life”

Historians have often noted that it is exceedingly difficult to divide George Washington’s life into two separate domains; the domestic arena in which he served to promote his personal interests and the public persona he portrayed throughout his life. These two sectors of Washington’s life are not, by any means, disconnected. They serve as a set of intertwined events and experiences. It is hard to divide the “commander from the politician or the politician from the farmer” (Yoder, 2003, 9). Washington is often remembered for fulfilling his duty to his country; as a statesman, soldier and president. Perhaps the aspect most often overlooked is his duty to his home and family at Mount Vernon. Ironically, during the later years of Washington’s life he spent little time at home; he chose his civil obligations over his private responsibilities.

I. In Service to Virginia

In the early years of Washington’s life, he was in service to his local government in many ways; as a mapmaker, politician, and vestryman. This is not to say, that Washington entirely devoted his time to his community, but rather that he had the capacity to serve his public passions, all while finding time to secure his personal interests. At the age of 16, he was already a surveyor for Lord Fairfax (Weems, 1996, 19). In

this role he traveled through unfamiliar lands, making maps and charting the geography. Even though this kept him away from Mount Vernon, when he returned he was eager to use his “profound knowledge of the frontier, its’ people and vegetation” (Unger, 2006, 17). Surveying provided Washington with a fair amount of money of which he used to purchase more land. Like so many men of his time, he dreamt of acquiring land and expanding his farm into an estate. Washington believed that America should become the “granary to the world”, and thus was a pioneer in improving many aspects of farming at Mount Vernon such as crop rotation, the use of fertilizers and employing innovative farming equipment (www.mountvernon.org). He, also, concentrated a great deal on increasing the prominence of his landholdings, especially Mount Vernon.

In 1758, Washington was again called away from Mount Vernon to serve in the Virginia House of Burgesses. It was there that he helped outline the idea of self government. Washington, also, supported his local parish, Pohick Church, by serving as vestryman and helped to oversee its’ construction. Washington spent a significant amount of time in service to his local church and local government, all while guaranteeing that his personal interests were intact. He had the uncanny ability to serve both his public and private interests with equal enthusiasm; although later in life he would, unmistakably, prefer one domain over another.

II. In Service through War; The French and Indian War and The Revolutionary War

Not only did George Washington’s job as a surveyor pay him quite well, it also provided him an opportunity to serve as Governor Dinwiddie’s candidate to deliver an ultimatum to the French in 1753 (Unger, 2006, 20). France alleged ownership of territories that did not belong to them, and therefore had to be prevented from making any more unsubstantiated claims. Washington traveled across northern Virginia into Pennsylvania and to the southern shores of Lake Erie. This was not the first time that Washington had ventured into uncharted territory, as his role as surveyor had provided the perfect foundation that he needed to surpass all other potential candidates in delivering this message. He was skilled in the ways of the backwoods, a talent which many men of his time lacked. Although Washington’s message was rejected, he proved how successful he could be in delivering it through weather and wilderness. This was Washington’s

stepping stone into prominent public life, in which, consequently, he continued for much of the remainder of his life. His next attempt at militaristic prowess was much less successful.

Washington continued to aid the British government in securing more permanent settlements for England. In June 1754, Washington embarked on a journey to a, paradoxically, named garrison called Fort Necessity. This settlement proved to be much more inadequate than its name conveyed. It was located near the borders of Pennsylvania and Maryland. It turned out to be catastrophic failure for Washington. He imagined that its' ridges would serve as protection for his men, but unfortunately the rocky crags became roosts for his enemies. His soldiers were forced to fight, sorely fatigued, grossly outnumbered and in the driving rain. Washington warily surrendered (Ferling, 1988, 29). Feeling defeated, Washington returned home to Mount Vernon to "resume life as a private citizen...still craving wealth, influence, and position among Virginia's landed aristocracy (Unger, 2006, 24). Just a few months later, Washington officially inherited Mount Vernon from his older half brother, Lawrence. With the death of Lawrence's daughter and the sale of Ann Washington's tenancy, George became the master of a property consisting of a twenty-three-hundred acre plantation with it's lovely thirteen-hundred-square-foot house and five bedroom attic—in addition to a contingent of slaves and servants (Unger, 2006, 25).

Less than 6 months later, Washington was, again, called away to serve his nation. He offered to follow Edward Braddock, to Fort Duquesne, in order "to serve my King & Country...as a Volunteer" (Unger, 2006, 25). Washington would only agree to go after he had taught his brother, Jack, how to manage Mount Vernon. Washington's intentions were clear; he aimed to serve his country, but not before he protected his private interests.

Washington returned home to Mount Vernon after yet another, "shameful defeat," (Unger, 2006, 26) alongside Braddock. He remained for only about a year, as he is called to command the Virginia regiment in Winchester. However, he contracted dysentery and is ordered home under a physician's care. After several months of sickness, he decides to travel to Williamsburg to visit Virginia's more prominent physicians. Upon hearing of the death of Daniel Parke Custis in 1757, Washington realized that his widow, Martha Dandridge Custis, was receiving suitors, and therefore paid her a visit on his return from Williamsburg.

After being alone in the wilderness, among rough, grimy men, Washington found Martha, her children and the family setting, an inviting engagement (Unger, 2006, 34). Within a week, Washington asked Martha to marry him and she agreed. He, almost immediately, ordered the beginning, of what will be, a string of transformations to the Mount Vernon he inherited. He directed carpenters to add a second story, gave a “rusticated” look to the outside, and created separate facilities for the kitchen and laundry (Unger, 2006, 35).

In 1775, Washington would again be separated from Mount Vernon to serve his new country, The United States of America. He wrote home to Martha in June 1775, stressing his inability to avoid the calling of the “American Cause” (Yoder, 2006, 40). Only 3 years later, in 1778, Washington is put to the test, as a leader, while commanding a large coalition of soldiers at Valley Forge. The soldiers are dying from dysentery, contracting small pox and had no food and clothing. Washington enlisted the help of ex-German soldier, Frederick Steube (better known as Baron von Steuben). He taught the men how to separate the latrines from the kitchens, as well as, all of the soldiers how to march in the fields (Ferling, 1988, 232).

Although he expected to be home before the fall, Washington only returned to Mount Vernon for a short period of ten days (during the Yorktown Campaign) in 9 years. The battle of Yorktown offered Washington an opportunity to align with the French, who he had, paradoxically, fought against in his younger years. In 1778, the king of France recognized American independence and signed two treaties, one for amity and one establishing military alliance (Unger, 2006, 123). This alliance proves to be most beneficial at Yorktown. When the French Naval fleet commanded by Admiral De Grasse arrives, Washington marched south from New York with joint American and French armies to attack Cornwallis, successfully, at Yorktown.

During George’s absence from Mount Vernon, it is his third cousin, Lund Washington, who oversaw the estate. Even in the midst of battle, he wrote to Lund detailing his instructions for planting trees around the mansion, which was then being enlarged with a library on the south end and a bedroom above it, and a two-story banquet room at the north end (Unger, 2006, 86). He wrote in December of 1776, Ten Miles above the Falls [of Delaware], “If I never did, in any of my Letters, desire you to Plant locusts across from the New Garden to the Spinning House...I must request it now in this Letter. let them be tall and strait bodyed...”

(Johnson & Wall, 1953, 83) It is clear that Washington remained focused on the upkeep of his residence, even while serving his country.

III. In Service to a New Nation

When the Revolutionary War ends in 1783, Washington quickly resigned his post from the military and “begins on the road home to private life at Mount Vernon” (Unger, 2006, 152). He writes to the Marquis de Lafayette, “I am become a private citizen on the banks of the Potomac, & under the shadow of my own Vine & Fig tree, free from the bustle of camp & and the busy scenes of public life...” (Unger, 2006, 155) In response, and upon seeing Washington at Mount Vernon, Lafayette writes, “...his simplicity is truly sublime...deeply involved in the details of managing his lands and home... During this time, Washington focused a great deal on experimenting with his crops (cash, fruit and vegetable), breeding livestock, and improving his fisheries.

In 1787, Washington, reluctantly, answered the call to attend the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. While away he continued to manage Mount Vernon. He would write to his nephew, George Augustine, more detailed instructions about the care of the farm, “...if you tried both fresh, and Salt fish as manure...I have no objection to putting the ground...in Buckwheat... (Unger, 2006, 178). After being unanimously elected president in 1789, he “bades adieu to Mount Vernon, to private life, and to domestic felicity” (Unger, 2006, 186). In other words, he sets out, again, in service to his country, and relinquished his role as caretaker of his estate.

In all of Washington’s later correspondences, he, plainly, described his hesitance to assume another private role and indicated his preference to remain at home. Unlike many of his previous attempts at withdrawing from the public, he intended to return home. He was old, lost his teeth, had arthritis and was in dire need of retreating privately to do what he loved most “planting, farming, and riding...at Mount Vernon” (Unger, 2006, 207). Martha was beside herself with George’s decision to return home, however she was alone with this fervor. Both Madison and Jefferson refused to support his choice, as Jefferson stated that “the confidence of the union is centered in you. You being at the helm...North and South will hang together if they have you to hang on” (Unger, 2006, 208). Washington was resolved to return. Not long after, he

received a letter from Alexander Hamilton that stated that it would be “deplored as the greatest evil” to not serve a second term. Hamilton knew that in order to rouse Washington, he must test his sensibilities as a dutiful citizen. For one of the few times in his life, Washington stood steadfast and disregarded the many attempts to implore him back into the political arena. In his mind, he was already drawing broad plans for new buildings and landscapes at Mount Vernon. Nonetheless, Washington had forgotten to remove his name from the presidential ballot, and was, again, elected to the office of president.

Even between sessions of Congress, Washington traveled to and from Mount Vernon. He never spent more than a few months at home, before he was called back to Philadelphia. In March of 1797, Washington delivered his final presidential address to Congress and, finally, packs his belongings to head home to Mount Vernon. At age 64, Washington, finally, found time to spend time under his “vine and fig tree” without having to revisit public life again. He continued to be a fervent caretaker of Mount Vernon; managing crops, the fishery, granary and farm animals. Despite his poor health, just six days before his death, Washington sent designs for operations on his River Farm. Undoubtedly, even on his deathbed, Washington still conveyed the significance of his private interests, of which he so longed for throughout his lifetime.

2. **Annotated Bibliography** –

Ferling, J. (1988). *The First of Men: A Life of George Washington*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press.

Summary: Ferling, professor emeritus at professor emeritus of history at the University of West Georgia is a leading historian in the American Revolution. He has appeared in television documentaries on PBS, the History Channel, C-SPAN Book TV, and the Learning Channel. This book details the life of George Washington through his roles as a frontiersman, commander of America’s armies, and his presidency. It, also, delves into Washington’s various attempts at retirement from public life. This book outlines the role of Washington as the first of a line of great men to follow suit in American history. There was focus on the chapters that dealt with his life as a young man, but especially his role as a young soldier and his duties as commander at Fort Mifflin.

Johnson, G. & Wall, C. (1953). *Mount Vernon: The Story of A Shrine*. New York: Random House.

Summary: This book is divided into two accounts. The first portion outlines the rescue of George Washington’s home, Mount Vernon, by the Mount Vernon Ladies Association. This portion is written from the perspective of the former resident director of Mount Vernon, Cecil Wall. Wall served as the director and lived on the property for almost 40 years. His writing details the preservation and restoration of the house, by looking at Mount Vernon from its inception, and care by the Washington family and finally to the purchase by Anne Pamela Cunningham and the Mount Vernon Ladies Association.

Vernon Ladies Association. With help from the University of North Carolina's first journalism professor, Gerald Johnson, the second section concentrates on Washington's own accounts of the building and furnishing of Mount Vernon and the plantings of the gardens. Washington's own writings helped to preserve and restore the home to its original glory. Specific focus was paid to letters that were written home, during Washington's time at war, which detailed his plan for new plants at Mount Vernon.

Rare Facts and Curious Truths about Our First President (2010). Retrieved March 1, 2010 from Mount

Vernon's official site: http://www.mountvernon.org/learn/meet_george/index.cfm/

Summary: This site covers some of the more unknown facts about George Washington, from his lack of wooden teeth, to the way that his wife preferred to be addressed as the president's wife to his nickname as the "American Cincinnatus". Information about his advanced farming techniques helped to demonstrate his strong desire to transform Mount Vernon from a small farm to a large and prosperous estate.

Unger, H. (2006). *The Unexpected Life of George Washington*. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Summary: A former Distinguished Visiting Fellow in American History at George Washington's Mount Vernon, Harlow Unger is a veteran journalist, broadcaster, educator, and historian. His book explores the private side of George Washington's life, from the colonial period, through the revolution, into the confederation, and his presidency and retirement. This book demonstrates how during each of these periods that Washington's public and private lives were intertwined. Special attention was paid to those chapters which discussed Washington's various public roles as surveyor, statesman, soldier and president, which required that he depart from Mount Vernon. Solid evidence is provided showing Washington's strong desire to remain in control of his residence even in his absence.

Weems, M. (1996). *The Life of Washington*. New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc.

Summary: A biography, in its original version, printed months after Washington's death by Mason Weems. He is considered to be one of the earliest biographers of Washington and is known as the source of some of the more esoteric stories about Washington's life. This book sets out to detail many of the events that transpired throughout his life, through anecdotal style. This book elevates Washington to a heightened status, reflective of his godlike position in care of a new nation. This biography is the first to include the unproven story of Washington and the proverbial cherry tree. Focus was centered on Washington's appointment as a surveyor for Lord Fairfax, and thus the beginnings of his travels away from Mount Vernon.

Yoder, C. (2003). *George Washington, The Writer: A Treasury of Letters, Diaries, and Public Documents*.

Honesdale, Pennsylvania: Boyd Mills Press, Inc.

Summary: Written by Carolyn Yoder, an editor for the New Jersey Historical Society and senior editor of history for Highlights for Children, this book is a treasury of the letters, diary entries and public documents written by Washington. George Washington was known for his love of writing; personal journals, diaries, and speeches. The writings detail many aspects of his life including his passion for independence and a new government and love of family and Mount Vernon. Each selection is accompanied with an introduction recounting the historical background. This compilation demonstrates the impossibility of separating his public and personal lives.

