



Portrait by Edward Savage (1761-1817)

## AT HOME WITH GEORGE WASHINGTON

*Among the earliest and most noteworthy accounts of the life of George Washington are those by David Humphreys (in 1789), Parson Weems (1800), David Ramsay (1807), and John Marshall (1805-1807). These were followed later in the mid 19th century with works by two of America's most acclaimed literary lights, James Kirke Paulding (1835), and Paulding's Salmagundi (1807-1808) collaborator and long-time friend Washington Irving (1855-1859). Of all these Washington biographies, Paulding's is one of the least familiar; possibly because his, as he described it himself, was "principally prepared for the use of the More Youthful class of readers." Yet despite its expressly juvenile character, the book is still valuable on a number of other levels, including, among other reasons that might be adduced, some little known private anecdotes and vignettes about the General furnished Paulding by some of Washington's intimate family and closest associates; some of which then are presented here.*

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[Washington's] marriage took place in the winter of 1759, but at what precise date is not to be found in any record, nor is it, I believe, within the recollection of any person living. I have in my possession a manuscript containing the particulars of various conversations with old Jeremy, Washington's black servant, who was with him at Braddock's defeat, and accompanied him on his wedding expedition to the White House. Old Jeremy is still living, while I am now writing, and in full possession of his faculties. His memory is most especially preserved, and, as might be expected, he delights to talk of Massa George. The whole series of conversations was taken down verbatim, in the peculiar phraseology of the old man, and it is quite impossible to read the record of this living chronicle of the early days of Washington, without receiving the full conviction of its perfect truth.

From this period Washington resided constantly at Mount Vernon, one of the most beautiful situations in the world. A wood-crowned bluff of considerable height projects out into the Potomac, here one of the most capacious and noble of rivers, affording an extensive view both above and below. A fine lawn slopes gracefully from the piazza in front of the house to the brow of the hill, where, high above the wave, you stand and view a wide prospect of great variety and interest. The house was at the time of his marriage of indifferent size and convenience, but was shortly improved into a capacious and imposing mansion. The place is worthy of him with whose memory it is inseparably associated, and long may it appertain to the family and name of Washington.

He here put in practice that system of regularity and of temperance in every species of indulgence and of labour, which he persevered in, as far as was consistent with his circumstances and situation, during the remainder of his life. His moments were numbered, and divided, and devoted to his various objects and pursuits. His hours of rising and going to bed were the same throughout every season of the year. He always shaved, dressed himself, and answered his letters by candle-light in summer and winter; and his time for retiring to rest was nine o'clock, whether he had company or not. He breakfasted at seven o'clock in summer, and eight in winter; dined at two, and drank his tea, of which he was very fond, early in the

evening, never taking any supper. His breakfast always consisted of four small corn-cakes, split, buttered, and divided into quarters, with two small- sized cups of tea. At dinner he ate with a good appetite, but was not choice of his food; drank small-beer at his meals, and two glasses of old Madeira after the cloth was removed. He scarcely ever exceeded that quantity. The kernels of two or three black-walnuts completed the repast. He was very kind, affectionate, and attentive to his family, scrupulously observant of every thing relating to the comfort, as well as the deportment and manners, of the younger members.

His habits of military command produced a similar system with regard to his servants, of whom he exacted prompt attention and obedience. These conditions complied with, and they were sure of never being subjected to caprice or passion. Neglect or ill-conduct was promptly noticed, for the eye of the master was everywhere, and nothing connected with the economy of his estate escaped him. He knew the value of independence, and the mode by which it is obtained and preserved. With him idleness was an object of contempt, and prodigality of aversion. He never murdered an hour in wilful indolence, or wasted a dollar in worthless enjoyment. He was as free from extravagance as from meanness or parsimony, and never in the whole course of his life did he turn his back on a friend, or trifle with a creditor.

In an old Virginia almanack of 1762, belonging to Washington, and now before me, interleaved with blank sheets, are various memoranda relating to rural affairs, all in his own hand-writing, a few of which I shall extract, for the purpose of showing my youthful readers that an attention to his private affairs was not considered beneath the dignity of the man destined to wield the fortunes of his country.

“April 5. Sowed timothy-seed in the old apple-orchard below the hill.  
7[th]. Sowed, or rather sprinkled a little of ditto on the oats.  
26[th]. Began to plant corn at all my plantations.  
May 4. Finished planting corn at all my plantations.”

Thus, in the dignified simplicity of usefulness did this great and good man employ himself during the years which elapsed between the period of his retirement after the expulsion of the French from the Ohio, until the commencement of the troubles which preceded the Revolution. His occupation was husbandry the noblest of all others; his principal amusement was hunting the deer, which at that time abounded in the forests of the Potomac. Here his skill in horsemanship rendered him conspicuous above all his competitors. He also read much, and his hour was early in the morning.

His custom was to retire to a private room, where no one was permitted to interrupt him. Much curiosity prevailed among the servants to know what he was about, and old Jeremy relates that, in order to gratify it, he one morning entered the room under pretence of bringing a pair of boots. Washington, who was reading, raised his eyes from the book, and getting quietly up “I tell you,” said Jeremy, “I go out of de room faster dan I come in!”

[*Life of Washington*, ch. V, pp.62-64]

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During the period which elapsed between his retirement from the presidency, and the lamented death of Washington, his days were happily and usefully occupied in rural pursuits and domestic enjoyments. Influenced by those great motives of patriotism which governed all his public acts, he indeed accepted the command of the army of the United States, in a season when it was believed the authority of his name would operate beneficially to his country. But he was never again called into action, and the few remaining years of his life were passed away in peaceful occupations, and in the bosom of repose. Mount Vernon was, of course, thronged with visitors; it was the shrine where his countrymen came to pay their devotions, and where distinguished foreigners thronged from all parts of Europe, to behold and to converse with the man who, after delivering a nation from foreign oppression, had left it in possession of the freedom he had won; the man who twice abdicated a power for which thousands and tens of thousands of vulgar heroes had sacrificed themselves and their country.

He exhibited the same wise economy of time, that same attention to his domestic affairs and rural occupations, the same cheerfulness in hours of relaxation, and the same attention to the happiness of those around him. He always rose at, or before dawn, lighted his candle, and entered his study, where he remained a considerable time, as was supposed, at his devotions. But no one ever knew, for none ever intruded on his sacred privacy. When his occupation was finished, he rung for his boots, and walked or rode out to pursue his morning exercise and avocations. Visitors did not interfere in the least with his course of life; they were made welcome, by permission to do as they pleased, and being convinced by all they saw that they interfered not in the least with the economy of the household, or the pleasures of others.

Like all truly great men, the manners of Washington, though eminently dignified, were adorned by the most unaffected simplicity. He relished the innocent gaiety of youth, the sprightly gambols of children, and enjoyed a decorous jest or humorous anecdote with a peculiar relish. If, while perusing a book or newspaper in the domestic circle, he met with any thing amusing or remarkable, he would read it aloud for their entertainment, and never failed to participate in every innocent or sportive frolic that was going on around him. His dignity was not that of pride or moroseness, but of intellect and virtue; and among those he loved, he laughed and joked like others. He was accustomed sometimes to tell the following story:

On one occasion, during a visit he paid to Mount Vernon, while president, he had invited the company of two distinguished lawyers, each of whom afterwards attained to the highest judicial situations in this country. They came on horseback, and, for convenience, or some other purpose, had bestowed their ward-robe in the same pair of saddle-bags, each one occupying his side. On their arrival, wet to the skin by a shower of rain, they were shown into a chamber to change their garments. One unlocked his side of the bag, and the first thing he drew forth was a black bottle of whiskey. He insisted that this was his companion's repository; but on unlocking the other, there was found a huge twist of tobacco, a few pieces of corn-bread, and the complete equipment of a waggoner's pack-saddle. They had exchanged saddle-bags with some traveller by the way, and finally made their appearance in borrowed clothes, which fitted them most ludicrously. The general was highly diverted, and amused him self with anticipating the dismay of the waggoner, when he discovered this oversight of the men of law. It was during this visit that Washington prevailed on one his guests to enter into public life, and thus secured to his country the services of one of the most distinguished magistrates of this or any other age.

Another anecdote, of a more touching character, is derived from a source which, if I were permitted to mention, would not only vouch for its truth, but give it additional value and interest. When Washington retired from public life, his name and fame excited in the hearts of the people at large, and most especially the more youthful portion, a degree of reverence which, by checking their vivacity or awing them into silence, often gave him great pain. Being once on a visit to Colonel Blackburn, ancestor to the exemplary matron who now possesses Mount Vernon, a large company of young-people were assembled to welcome his arrival, or on some other festive occasion. The general was unusually cheerful and animated, but he observed that whenever he made his appearance, the dance lost its vivacity, the little gossipings [sic] in corners ceased, and a solemn silence prevailed, as at the presence of one they either feared or revered too much to permit them to enjoy themselves. He strove to remove this restraint by mixing familiarly among them, and chatting with unaffected hilarity. But it was all in vain; there was a spell on the little circle, and he retired among the elders in an adjoining room, appearing to be much pained at the restraint his presence inspired. When, however, the young people had again become animated, he arose cautiously from his seat, walked on tip-toe to the door, which was ajar, and stood contemplating the scene for nearly a quarter of an hour, with a look of genuine and benevolent pleasure, that went to the hearts of the parents who were observing.

As illustrating his character and affording an example of his great self-command, the following anecdote is appropriate to my purpose. It is derived from Judge Breckenridge [Hugh Henry Brackenridge (1748–1816), Pennsylvania jurist and author of *Modern Chivalry* (1792 & 1815)] himself, who used often to tell the story. The judge was an inimitable humourist, and, on a particular occasion, fell in with Washington at a public house, where a large company had gathered together for the purpose of discussing the subject of improving the navigation of the Potomac. They supped at the same table, and Mr. Breckenridge essayed all his powers of humour to divert the general; but in vain. He seemed aware of his purpose, and listened with a smile. However, it so happened that the chambers of Washington and

Breckenridge adjoined, and were only separated from each other by a thin partition of pine boards. The general had retired first, and when the judge entered his own room, he was delighted to hear Washington, who was already in bed, laughing to himself with infinite glee, no doubt at the recollection of his stories.

The constitution of Washington was naturally strong, and though a life of labour, anxieties, and hardships had occasionally impaired his health, still his equanimity, his temperance, and his constant exercise on horseback promised a green and vigorous old age. But it would appear that this great and good man, great in what he performed, but still greater in what he resisted, having finished the work for which he seems to have been expressly designed, was to be suddenly called away, lest, in the weakness of old age, he might possibly do something that would diminish the force of his own invaluable example, and thus deprive posterity of its most perfect model. He enjoyed his last retirement but two or three years, when he was called away to heaven.

I shall describe the last parting with one of his favourite nephews, as received from his own mouth.

“During this, my last visit to the general, we walked together about the grounds, and talked of various improvements he had in contemplation. The lawn was to be extended down to the river in the direction of the old vault, which was to be removed on account of the inroads made by the roots of the trees, with which it is crowned, which caused it to leak. I intend to place it there, said he, pointing to the spot where the new vault now stands. First of all, I shall make this change; for, after all, I may require it before the rest.

“When I parted from him, he stood on the steps of the front door, where he took leave of myself and another, and wished us a pleasant journey, as I was going to Westmoreland on business. It was a bright frosty morning, he had taken his usual ride, and the clear healthy flush on his cheek, and his sprightly manner, brought the remark from both of us that we had never seen the general look so well. I have sometimes thought him decidedly the handsomest man I ever saw; and when in a lively mood, so full of pleasantry, so agreeable to all with whom he associated, that I could hardly realize that he was the same Washington whose dignity awed all who approached him.

“A few days afterwards, being on my way home in company with others, while we were conversing about Washington, I saw a servant rapidly riding towards us. On his near approach, I recognized him as belonging to Mount Vernon. He rode up his countenance told the story he handed me a letter. Washington was dead!”

The old gentleman, for he is now very aged, was overcome by the recollection of that moment. Every circumstance connected with the departure of him whose life was one series of virtuous usefulness, and whose death was mourned by the tears of a whole nation, must be interesting to my young readers. They may learn from the example of Washington, that he whose conscience is void of reproach will always die without fear.

[*Ibid*, ch. XI, pp. 259-264]

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William Thomas Sherman

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