

IV. History

Washington's Birthday in the Year 2025

by Leslie Vaughan

Feb. 6—As the United States of America comes closer every day to the great 250th anniversary of Independence Day, which will occur on July 4, 2026, let her citizens, and all world-citizens, look now at crucial events which transpired in 1775, and reflect on these living expressions of the principles that would define the new republic. For some, this will be an inspiring review, for others, a new and important discovery, of what really happened to achieve victory over the oligarchical principle.

This year's commemoration of George Washington (Feb. 22, 1732–Dec. 14, 1799) on his birthday, provides a special moment in that process of review. His birthday was made a Federal holiday in 1879 for government offices in Washington, D.C., then for all Federal offices nationwide in 1885, and for the whole nation in 1971, to be observed on the third Monday in February. Though some speak of "Presidents' Day," the Federal holiday remains officially Washington's Birthday; and the outpourings of gratitude and respect for his contributions to independence, which began during his lifetime, are remarkable, and themselves worthy of reflection.

Right around the corner, on April 18, 2025, comes the 250th anniversary of the Battle of Lexington and Concord, the "shot heard 'round the world," which rang out as the intensely building conflict between the colonists and Great Britain, at one decisive moment, became an armed conflict. Washington was to arrive on the scene weeks later, to lead the nation to independence as Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army.

In his Mount Vernon home on the Potomac River in Virginia, Washington heard news of the battle as he was preparing to attend the 2nd Continental Congress in Philadelphia, a Congress that had first been formed in September of 1774 as a continental "one" among the colonies to defend colonials' rights. The various colonies had already begun to support one another in the face of economic oppression and repeated dissolutions of their assemblies by the royal governors, boycotting British goods yet hopefully petitioning for the restoration of their rights. Washington's thinking, and sense of identity, as British policies became ever-increasingly insufferable, had been profoundly changing almost day to day.

As events unfolded, Washington's thinking and actions, until the end of his life, became the story of the great issues of the Revolutionary War and beyond. What was his evolution in thinking, in this revolutionary era, which resonated among colonists destined to become, in a short time, American citizens?

This can be described as the shift, from thinking that oppressive British policies could be remedied and respect for colonists' rights restored, to the realization that reconciliation was not possible, and independence the only solution. This revolutionary transformation changed Washington and other leaders, as it did the population.

Prospect of Independence

It must be noted that the idea of independence existed long before Washington emerged as a young adult and subsequently took necessary actions in response to



George Washington by Gilbert Stuart.

events he experienced. As revealed in historian Graham Lowry's book, *How the Nation Was Won, America's Untold Story, Volume 1, 1630-1754* (Executive Intelligence Review, 1988), the very idea of freedom and building a great nation had existed since Pilgrims and Puritans set foot on the continent. This involved developing the continent west of the Blue Ridge and Allegheny Mountains, eluding oligarchical reach from Great Britain, France, or any other European country. In the decades before Washington was born, his family acted on behalf of this design, in collaboration with the Fairfax and Spotswood families and other international figures. Lowry writes:

When Washington took command of his forces, consisting almost entirely of New England militia units, he had worked in collaboration with Benjamin Franklin for nearly a quarter of a century. And for nearly a quarter of a century before that, Franklin had been in Philadelphia building a republican movement on the model of Cotton Mather... Franklin was Mather's own protege, and the son of one of Mather's leading republican organizers in Boston. The evidence for an hypothesis of continuity is irrefutable. The proof lies in determining the singularities which account for the fact, that the idea for a continental republic, was transformed into a concrete prospect, before America's direct challenges to British authority during the 1760s.

Washington's sharp mind and courage led him to leadership positions repeatedly. In 1752, at the age of 19, he was appointed to be an Adjutant in his Virginia military district, with the rank of major, responsible for organizing and equipping the militia. Having spent the past three summers surveying for Lord Fairfax west of the Blue Ridge Mountains, the young man's competence and trustworthiness had become well noticed among Virginia leaders. In these years leading up to the declared French and Indian War (1754-1763), Brit-

ish claims to the territory known as the Ohio Valley were challenged by French intentions. A clash with the French was expected.

In 1753, Royal Governor Robert Dinwiddie (or Lieutenant Governor, as London saw it) chose Washington to lead a mission to Fort LeBoeuf, just below Lake Erie, to confront the French on their intentions through a sealed letter on behalf of British claims, demanding that they cease and desist their occupation, and then to return with a sealed response. While waiting for the response, he was to observe the fort, and assess its strength. The entire mission took more than two months of travelling through wilderness, navigat-



At the Battle of the Monongahela in the French and Indian War, Major George Washington, on a white horse, witnesses the agony of mortally wounded British General Edward Braddock, July 9, 1755. Lithograph after a painting by Junius Brutus Stearns.

ing icy rivers in severe winter conditions, and negotiating with Indians. After successfully dealing with all aspects of his mission, Washington, not quite twenty-two years old, was viewed as the rising hope of Virginia by both the Governor and the public at large.

In 1754, as the French and Indian War increased in intensity, Governor Dinwiddie promoted Washington to the rank of lieutenant colonel and sent him on a mission to counter French activity by completing a fort at the fork of the Ohio River. Second-in-command to Colonel James Frye, Washington captured some French forces, but the danger from the larger French numbers remained constant as Washington's forces struggled with logistics while making roads and await-

ing supplies. The mission was ultimately unsuccessful.

Washington became the commander when Colonel Frye was killed. He acted with great skill in battlefield conditions, added to which was the arrival of additional troops under command of a Captain James Mackay, who, because he held a commission from the Crown, would not accept a provincial as his superior, even though Washington held the rank of lieutenant colonel.

Soon after this battle, a new regulation made all colonial commissions inferior to those of the Crown, causing widespread disaffection and contributing toward the later Declaration of Independence. Washington was driven to resign his commission and retire to private life.

However, he could not stand by as the conflict with the French escalated, and was moved by commitment to the mission to volunteer as an aide to the famously ill-fated British General Edward Braddock, who would die in a terrible rout in a battle close to Fort Duquesne. At every point during this campaign, Braddock haughtily refused to take Washington's advice, despite his extensive wilderness experience, as in rejecting the deployment of sharpshooters, accustomed to the country and Indian warfare. After a European-style and very cumbersome arrival at the battlefield, Braddock's forces were set upon, resulting in chaos and confusion. Despite the desperate situation, Washington acted courageously and with a very clear head throughout the day, as four bullets passed through his coat and two horses were shot from under him. After Braddock died, he led the retreat, energetically interacting with the disappointed troops.

As quoted in Washington Irving's *Life of George Washington* (1975), "This whole transaction," observed Benjamin Franklin, "gave us the first suspicion that our exalted ideas of the prowess of British regular troops had not been well-founded."

Washington continued in the Western Front campaigns, including finally capturing Fort Duquesne, and even while in action, he ran for a seat in the Virginia House of Burgesses, winning in July of 1758. He served 15 years in Williamsburg, among other colonials, exercising their responsibilities of government, including the right to levy taxes.

By the 1760s, assemblies in all the colonies were sending petitions to the British Parliament in the face of a constant barrage of taxes, duties, and restrictions on commerce. The former colonial identification with the mother country was rapidly eroding as the population became outraged at these arbitrary measures,

an outrage based not on pecuniary interest, but on the principle that their chartered rights as free men were being violated.

In Virginia, shortly after London's Stamp Tax in March 1765, the Colonial Assembly passed a resolution declaring that they held the exclusive right to tax, and whoever maintained the contrary view should be deemed an enemy to the colony. The Lieutenant Governor then dissolved the assembly, and Washington returned to Mount Vernon with heavy heart and thoughts.

Events continued in the same direction, and in 1769, Washington resolved to support the suspension of the importation of all articles subject to taxation which had been declared by the merchants of Boston, Salem, Connecticut, New York and Philadelphia. Irving quotes his forceful letter to a friend:

At a time ... when our lordly masters in Great Britain will be satisfied with nothing less than the deprivation of American freedom, it seems highly necessary that something should be done to avert the stroke, and maintain the liberty which we have derived from our ancestors.... That no man should scruple, or hesitate a moment in defense of so valuable a blessing, is clearly my opinion; yet arms should be the last resource—the *dernier ressort*.

Committees of Correspondence

Yet the "long train of abuses and usurpations" continued to grow. Especially concerning was the stationing of British troops in Boston and the demand that they be quartered in people's homes. Coordination among the colonies increased rapidly. In 1773, the Virginia House established a committee to gather intelligence on British designs, extending the Massachusetts Committees of Correspondence interaction among the other colonies. In the following year, when the British closed the port of Boston, there was an intensity of resolutions throughout the colonies. The same year, Washington was moved to exclaim that he was willing to raise 1,000 troops at his own expense. As royal governors repeatedly dissolved assemblies, the colonies resolved to convene together in a Continental Congress in September 1774. Washington participated in this 1st Continental Congress as one of the delegates from Virginia.

Even before the 1st Continental Congress had convened, the Provincial Congress in Massachusetts, upon being dissolved, continued to convene, assuming their

rightful authority, and set forth to raise a militia. In Virginia, Washington enthusiastically set to work to do the same. "It is my full intention, if needful," he wrote to his brother, "to devote my life and fortune to the cause."

By 1775, British General Thomas Gage in Boston resolved to destroy the military stores of the militia in Concord. Execution of this plan on the night of April 18 sparked the Battle of Lexington and Concord, the "shot heard 'round the world."

The news of Lexington reached Washington in Mount Vernon, just as he was preparing to set out for Philadelphia as a delegate to the 2nd Continental Congress. His forebodings were expressed in a letter to George William Fairfax, then in England, in which he said, "that the once happy and peaceful plains of America are either to be drenched with blood or inhabited by slaves. Sad alternative! But can a virtuous man hesitate in his choice?"

Birthday Celebrations

On June 16, 1775, George Washington was chosen by Congress to be Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army, and on July 3, one year and a day before the Declaration of Independence, arrived in Cambridge to take command. Washington was now the rising hope of all the colonies, and over the course of the American Revolution (1775-1783) and beyond, into the later years of his life as Father of the Country, his birthday began to be celebrated. Poems, songs, marches, and stories commemorated him.

William S. Walsh (1854-1919), in an available work entitled "[Curiosities of Popular Customs](#)," created an entry "Washington's Birthday" which traces the earliest celebrations. He notes that when independence was declared, royal birthdays, once enthusiastically celebrated, were rejected in favor of celebrating Washington's:

But the people did not wait until Washington was raised to the highest position his country could give him before honoring his birthday.

The first recorded mention of the celebration is said to be the one in *The Virginia Gazette* or *The American Advertiser of Richmond*: "Tuesday last being the birthday of his Excellency, General Washington, our illustrious Commander in Chief, the same was commemorated here with the utmost demonstrations of joy." The day thus celebrated was February 11, 1782, the Old Style in the calendar not having been everywhere and for every purpose abandoned....

Twelve months later the 11th was commemorated at Talbot Court-House in Maryland. On



The Currier and Ives depiction of Washington accepting his Continental Army commission from the Second Continental Congress.

the same day a number of gentlemen met in a tavern in New York. One had written an ode. Another brought a list of toasts. All, before they went reeling and singing home, agreed to assemble in future on the same anniversary and make merry over the birth of Washington.

Next year they had an ampler opportunity. In the previous October the British troops had evacuated New York City, which was gradually recovering from the distresses of the long war. The demonstrations were not very elaborate, but they were intensely patriotic ... we find an interesting account ... "a discharge of thirteen cannon was fired on this joyful occasion."

A club called a “Select Club of Whigs” assembled in New York on the evening of February 11, and a brief account of the proceedings was sent to the *New York Gazette*, with an amusing song, written, it was stated, especially for this occasion:

Fill the glass to the brink,
Washington’s health we’ll drink,
'Tis his birthday.
Glorious deeds he has
done,
By him our cause is won,
Long live great
Washington!
Huzza! Huzza!

The following is an interesting example provided by Walsh, of newspaper editorial patriotism which appeared in the *New York Gazette* at the same time:

After the Almighty Author of our existence and happiness, to whom, as a people, are we under the greatest obligations? I know you will answer “To Washington.” That great, that gloriously disinterested man has, without the idea of pecuniary reward, on the contrary, much to his private danger, borne the greatest and most distinguished part in our political salvation. He is now retired from public service, with, I trust, the approbation of God, his country, and his own heart. But shall we forget him? No, rather let our hearts cease to beat than an ungrateful forgetfulness shall sully the part any of us have taken in the redemption of our country. ... Let us call our children around us and tell them the many blessings they owe to him and to those illustrious characters who have assisted him in the great work of the emancipation of our country,

and urge them by such examples to transmit the delights of freedom and independence to their posterity.

Walsh notes that a grand entertainment and ball was held in the Capitol Building in Richmond, Virginia on that same day in 1784. He quotes others, including celebrations and toasts in New York and Philadelphia.

The foregoing examples reveal a conceptual and eloquent expression of the regard for Washington and the new nation. But, following the earliest days of the republic, there was a period of diminished enthusiasm for his birthday, with one writer observing, “In the reaction that came in the next generation against ‘the old soldiers,’ who for thirty years had assumed all the honors and enjoyed all the fruits of the victory that they had won, accelerated by the division in American sentiment for or against the French Revolution, it came to be felt that the achievements of the veterans had been greatly over-rated....”

As reported in *Washington’s Birthday* (Dodd, Mead and Company, 1939), the fierce attacks of the Jeffersonian democracy on Washington exercised a potent influence in diminishing the general respect for his abilities felt by the preceding generation; and Washington came to be regarded as a worthy, honest, well-meaning gentleman, but with no capacity for military

and only mediocre ability in civil affairs.

In more recent times, although Washington’s birthday remains a legal holiday, the principles of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution have been understood by fewer and fewer citizens. Does the present Presidents’ Day, enabling a three-day weekend, celebrated instead by a trip to the shopping mall, need comment?



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Sculpture of George Washington by John Quincy Adams Ward, installed on the front steps of Federal Hall National Memorial on Wall Street, New York City, in 1883.

Despite an image of a virtuous yet unreal Washington over the years, a profound re-appreciation and enthusiasm for this true historic individual has occurred, even if not as universally as in the early days. Countless poems and essays have been written in his honor, as well as historical researches, elaborate pageants composed for schoolchildren, speeches, orations, dedications, commemorations, and more, and tributes such as the address of President William McKinley on February 22, 1898, titled “Washington’s Religious Character,” excerpted here:

And how reverent always was this great man, how prompt and generous his recognition of the guiding hand of Divine Providence in establishing and controlling the destinies of the colonies and the republic!...

Washington states the reasons of his belief in language so exalted that it should be graven deep in the mind of every patriot:

“No people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the invisible hand which conducts the affairs of man more than the people of the United States. Every step by which they have advanced to the character of an independent nation seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency; and in the important revolution just accomplished in the system of their united government the tranquil deliberations and voluntary consents of so many distinguished communities from which the events resulted cannot be compared by the means by which most governments have been established, without some return of pious gratitude, along with an humble anticipation of the future blessings which the same seems to presage. The reflec-



An equestrian statue of George Washington by Daniel Chester French in Paris, France, unveiled in 1900.

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tions arising out of the present crisis have forced themselves strongly upon my mind. You will join me, I trust, in thinking that there are none under the influence of which the proceedings of a new and free government are more auspiciously commenced. ...”

In that address [Washington’s Farewell Address] he contends in part: (1) For the promotion of institutions of learning; (2) for cherishing the public credit; (3) for the observance of good faith and justice toward all nations....

At no point in his administration does Washington appear in grander proportions than when he enunciates his ideas in regard to the foreign policy of the government:

“Observe good faith and justice toward all nations;

cultivate peace and harmony with all; religion and morality enjoin this conduct. Can it be that a good policy does not equally enjoin it? It will be worthy of a free, enlightened, and, at no distant period, a great nation, to give to mankind the magnanimous and too novel example of a people always guided by an exalted justice and benevolence.”

Washington’s 293rd birthday, in 2025, as the 250th birthday celebration of the United States of America commences, is the time to prepare a fitting and still defiant commemoration, by removing the obstacles to realizing the true nature of the American Republic. As was the fight to establish a new nation on the North American continent, a restoration of the true American principles in the realm of policy is naturally an international project. Let the entire world as well, break the power of the “British Empire,” the fatal oligarchical principle, in the year 2025!