

Show 1 George and Martha: The Washingtons



A more unlikely pair would be hard to find. Martha was barely 5 feet tall, a slightly-built woman at ease with her fellow aristocrats and possessed of the social skills and manners of a born hostess. George, on the other hand, towered over everyone he met, including Martha, at 6 feet 3 inches of weather-hardened muscle.

He was rarely at ease among people, self-conscious about his lack of formal education and the limited prospects a family's second son could expect in those days. He frequently lived in the frontier campsites that went with his work as a land surveyor in those days when most of America consisted of a strip of settled land along the Atlantic seaboard of the vast, unknown bulk of the interior of the continent.

George had worked his way up to membership in Virginia's landed gentry and an officer's commission in the local militia when war broke out between the French and the English in Europe. The fighting spilled over into the two nations' colonies in North America. George was commissioned as a colonel in the colonial troops which functioned as auxiliary soldiers for the British regulars. He was home on leave when induced to call on Martha Custis by mutual friends.

Martha had married into the wealthy Custis family at age 18 and dutifully set about the expected tasks of acting as hostess and producing children. When her husband died

unexpectedly, she was all of 26 years old – a mother of two children. Martha had inherited a sizeable estate to add to the various properties belonging to her from her birth family, including a black half-sister who was born into slavery as chattel.

Two years after death of her husband, Martha received Colonel Washington on a visit and must have wondered what to make of this tall, silent man who was so different than her. His low, indistinct voice and painful shyness when speaking work against him, but his physical stature, natural dignity and hard-earned maturity apparently won the day for he proposed to her less than 3 weeks after meeting her. The widow Custis accepted and they were married at her home shortly afterward. History records that at their marriage, Martha wore a yellow brocade dress that was trimmed with lace at the neck and sleeves. Underneath her gown she wore a white silk petticoat trimmed with silver thread. Her shoes were purple satin and trimmed in silver metallic lace and sequins. She wore pearls in her hair. The groom, it can be assumed, wore his best suit and a quiet, unruffled dignity.

Spurned by the British army as a mere colonial unfit for command, George leaves the service shortly after his marriage to become a farmer at an estate he has inherited called Mount Vernon. He has been assiduously fixing and improving on this estate and he moves Martha and his two adopted children into it.

This was probably the happiest time of their lives together, though they had no clue of that at the time. A picture of their domestic life emerges of Martha helping further George's ambitions by entertaining dinner parties of legislators and other leaders in Virginia's government.

Privately, she adored her dogs and her horses, her children and her piano and, apparently, her husband. By all accounts, the two were well-paired, the deaths of Martha's first husband and two children producing a stoic demeanor which appealed to the stolid and self-made George.

An image of Martha, and a marriage of equals, peeks out at us from across the years as we consider the interesting fact that at dinner, she sat at the head of the table with George content to occupy the chair to her right, usually reserved for honored guests of the household.

Little is recorded of Martha's personal foibles, but a glimpse of her emerges through the details of George's temperament since human beings often tend to resemble that which they live with. Silent and reticent by nature, George largely remains an enigma to the woman and children he has married.

Not even Martha knows all there is to know about the shrewd giant who prefers farming to politics and loses money on both; the expansive host who spends every penny of his salary and complains that servants are drinking his Madeira; the iron-willed leader who has intractable ideas of personal honor and justice; the Spartan eater who favors pineapples, Brazil nuts he cracks with his teeth, and Saturday dinners of salt cod. According to his secretary, few sounds on earth could compare with that of George Washington swearing a blue streak. He enjoys a good game of cricket, going over the plantation's account books and, according to his journal entries, smoking a pipe of hemp by the fireside at night after a long day's work.

By all accounts, these years are filled with peace, family life and George's lifelong task of expanding and improving on Mount Vernon.

War between England and her colonies shatters this idyllic time for the Washingtons. As one of Virginia's most experienced military men, George is quickly drafted to become the commander of the combined armies of the colonies, who call themselves "These United States" in their declaration of independence from the British Empire.

George is reluctant to leave their life at Mount Vernon, but hears a call to duty on behalf of their native land which Martha supports wholeheartedly. George leaves their beloved Virginia home for Boston and New York, where he will organize the fight for the independence of the United States. In a rare, surviving letter, George writes to Martha "I retain an unalterable affection for you, which neither time or distance can change." One of the new Continental Army's generals observed at the time "Mrs. Washington is excessively fond of the General and he of her. They are very happy in each other."

The combined might of the British Empire's army and navy inflict defeat after defeat on the beleaguered Americans, who are soon driven into retreat. Martha comes to stay with George at his army's harsh and dismal winter camps, generally traveling back to Virginia during the campaigns of the summer months. She joins him on campaigns in New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, and Maryland. She is present at Valley Forge during the low point of the fortunes of her husband's ragged and starving army. She actively involves herself in the welfare of her husband's soldiers, caring for the wounded, helping feed the hungry and working to keep morale up among soldiers and officers alike.

We get a brief glimpse of her needing to be inoculated against smallpox in 1776 at a time when it was sweeping through the army, a sign that she was working among the ill and not sequestered at some remote headquarters. We get another glimpse of her at Christmas of 1778 when she and George actually get to spend the holidays together for the first time in four years.

She is so widely and well-regarded by the soldiery that a small warship is named for her, the only naval ship in American history named for a woman during her lifetime and the only ship named for a woman in the tiny Continental navy.

The end of the war brought George's long-awaited return to Mount Vernon, where Martha is quoted as saying "The General and I feel like children just released from school." George and Martha are, by this time, well into old age and hoping for nothing more than quiet lives at Mount Vernon. They even have small children in the house again, the offspring of Martha's son John who died at the siege of Yorktown as a member of George's military staff.

The war won, the peace is in danger of being lost as political tensions threaten to dismember the new nation. There is, at this time, no country on earth experimenting with the radical notion that human beings could govern themselves without hereditary royalty or a theocracy except the United States. This idea, this noble cause is what George, Martha and so many others gave blood and treasure to bring into being and is in danger of being lost amid partisan squabbles and foreign intrigue. The nation that the Washingtons midwived into birth calls them again as George is beseeched to become the first President of the new nation. Realizing that he is the only man capable of exerting the moral authority to

pull the factions together, George and Martha reluctantly make the trip north from Mount Vernon to serve their country yet again. Martha writes to a nephew that "I am truly sorry to tell that the General is gone to New York...I think it was much too late for him to go in to public life again, but it was not to be avoided."

Abigail Adams, wife of the future second President, writes at the time that Washington "Has a dignity which forbids familiarity mixed with an easy affability which creates love and reverence." He is, in modern terms, the equivalent of 80 years of age at the start of his Presidency, his once-chestnut hair turning to white, his teeth replaced by ivory dentures. Martha is content to live in her husband's shadow at this point, living in rented accommodations in New York and Philadelphia and generally acting as the professional soldier's wife in entertaining her husband's dinner guests and providing some measure of comfort in unfamiliar surroundings. She is polite, she is diligent, but she is hardly enthusiastic about the role she and George are forced to play in the new country's political life.

George Washington is, by this time, a prisoner of the majestic, aloof persona he has had to create to manage the fractious partisans who are always ready to place self-interest before that of their country. As a result, the man called Great Washington by now has few intimates besides Martha. We get another small glimpse of their personal life in a recorded incident from these years. At the end of a long day, the old man liked nothing better than to slip into a room where children were playing; their antics seemed to relax him. Yet no sooner did the youngsters realize they were in the presence of the looming and unapproachable figure than they froze. After a while, a visibly upset Washington turned on his heel and stalked out of the room.

During this period, the strain of governing the new country and keeping it out of Europe's endless bloody conflicts took their toll on both George and Martha's health with the result that they were ready to return to Mount Vernon long before their country finally allowed it.

In the middle of a cold and snowy December, George contracts an infection in his throat which soon kills him. He dies at home surrounded by friends and family. Martha was ever at his side during this illness and is quoted as saying after his death "'Tis well....All is now over[.] I shall soon follow him! I have no more trials to pass through!" She was too distraught to attend the funeral four days later. Martha, after his death, never again enters their bedroom during her lifetime and moves her sleeping quarters to a small room on the third floor of Mount Vernon. George's study is also closed off by her and, sometime during the next two years, Martha methodically burns all of their correspondence to protect their privacy. The few surviving letters of theirs exist only because they slipped behind a desk drawer where the otherwise-meticulous Mrs. Washington overlooked them.

When she finally passed away less than three years later, she was interred with her husband in the family cemetery at Mount Vernon. We will conclude their story with an appropriate quote from one of Martha's letters to a contemporary:

"I am only fond of what comes from the heart. I know too much of the vanity of human affairs to expect felicity from the splendid scenes of public life. I am still determined to be cheerful and happy, in whatever situation I may be; for I have also learned from experience that the greater part of our happiness or misery depends upon our dispositions, and

not upon our circumstances. We carry the seeds of the one or the other about with us, in our minds, wherever we go."

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