

**GEORGE
WASHINGTON AS
MAN OF LETTERS**

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George Washington as Man of Letters by James Hosmer Penninam

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JAMES HOSMER PENNINGTON

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TO GIVE A CLEARER IDEA OF THE CHARACTER
OF WASHINGTON IS TO SET A HIGHER
STANDARD FOR AMERICAN
PATRIOTISM

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1918

GEORGE WASHINGTON

AS MAN OF LETTERS

George Washington had an extraordinary respect for higher education, and was always inclined to overestimate what he considered his own deficiencies in this regard; but, though he never went to college, Washington's education was so comprehensive that Patrick Henry said of the First Continental Congress, "If you speak of solid information and sound judgment, Colonel Washington is unquestionably the greatest man on the floor."

The delegates who attended this Congress were the ablest body of men who up to that time had met in America; among them were John and Samuel Adams, Roger Sherman, John Jay, Richard Henry Lee and Patrick Henry. It was of this Congress that Chatham said in his speech in the House of Lords, January 20, 1775, "For myself, I must declare and avow that in all my reading and observation—and history has been my favorite study—I have read Thucydides, and have studied and admired the master States of the world—that for solidity of reasoning, force of sagacity, and wisdom of conclusion, under such a complication of difficult circumstances, no nation or body of men can stand in preference to the general Congress at Philadelphia." Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, who speaks with authority about Washington, says "of all the fiction and of all the calumnies about this man, the most singularly without foundation is the belief early held by many that he was uneducated."

When George Washington was sixteen his school days were over and he was earning his living as a surveyor. He had then received a common school education that was particularly thorough in mathematics, for which he showed remarkable aptitude. He also had been well trained in that greatest of all English classics, the Bible, the study of which began at his mother's knee and continued throughout his life. I have seen, in the Library of Congress, Bible references which young Washington entered in a pocket notebook. With the exception of an interlined note, all the entries in the family Bible are in his writing. Washington read the funeral services over General Braddock, and as a young officer frequently read prayers and the Scriptures to his men. He read the Bible to his family with reverence and with distinct enunciation.

March 5, 1794, Washington wrote Charles Thompson that he had finished reading the first part of his translation of the Septuagint. Washington spent many hours of his life in church, where he was an attentive listener and where he obtained a great deal of knowledge of the Bible. His nephew, Robert Lewis, said that he had accidentally witnessed Washington's private devotions in his library both morning and evening, and had seen him kneeling with an open Bible before him, and that this was his daily habit. Washington went to his library at four in the morning, and, after his devotions, spent the time till breakfast in writing and study. He also spent an hour in his library before retiring at night. When he died, the open Bible from which Mrs. Washington had been reading to him lay on a chair by the bedside.

A large part of Washington's education he gave himself, for he was always learning. He was edu-

cated in the school of adversity, by his heroic efforts to make the most of the desperate circumstances in which he was placed, by the great operations in which he was the leading actor, by his association with the cultivated and influential men and women of his time, beginning with his father and mother, his brother Lawrence and Lord Fairfax, and including Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton. As he rode about the country he talked with the farmers, and persons of intelligence everywhere found him an attentive listener. Such was his skill in recognizing natural ability that he learned much from plain men like the bookseller Knox, the blacksmith Greene, the farmer Putnam and the teamster Morgan. Though Washington's only journey beyond the limits of what is now the United States was a voyage to Barbados when he was nineteen, few men of his time traveled more extensively in our own country and none observed more accurately and intelligently. The most useful lessons that Washington learned were not contained in books. He developed sharp eyes, well-trained muscles and keen wits. He learned how to take care of himself and of those who were with him in the forest and in the camp. He learned the ways of wild and domestic animals. Horses and dogs recognized in him their master. He learned how to treat their ailments, and even how to set their broken limbs. He became skilled in outdoor sports, hunting, fishing, swimming and woodcraft. He learned how to manage canoes, how to swim horses across swollen streams, how to blaze trails and how to make fires and camps in the open. The acquisition of knowledge was with Washington always the acquisition of power, and he constantly admired the best things of his time, which in itself is culture. A man is distinguished by what he takes

an interest in. It is not so much what he knows as what he really wishes to know and the practical use that he makes of his knowledge that determines his usefulness in the world. When George Washington took an interest in anything, it was an active interest. For example, he delivered the most eloquent speech made at the Virginia Convention in 1774. It was, "I will raise one thousand men, enlist them at my own expense, and march, myself at their head, for the relief of Boston." Washington made a point of knowing how to do useful things, and the range of the subjects to which his thought was directed extended over a wide field. His character was based on an enormous capacity for hard work and for taking pains. He was able to accomplish great results with small means, because method and system were ingrained in his nature. He was exact because he was truthful.

The various matters that he had in charge were arranged in separate compartments of his mind. Nothing was confused, everything was in order and could be referred to promptly. He had such control over his thoughts that he could turn from the building of a plow to the building of the Constitution without the loss of time or energy. He was a thinker, trained to focus his mind and concentrate his attention until he had worked out a subject in all its possibilities. His lifelong habit of writing out his ideas in exact language was a great aid to his clear thinking. With a constant attention to details, unusual except in little men dealing with petty affairs, his life moved along broad lines, and his iron will held him steadfast to the things of permanent value for the advancement of his country.

Except its letters, no property throws such light upon the spiritual life of a family as its books.

Judged by this test the moral and intellectual standard of the Washingtons was very high. Most of the Washington books are preserved in the Boston Athenaeum, though a number are in other collections. They are not only of a superior character, but they contain autograph inscriptions which repay careful study.

The nature of the parental training which young George received may be understood when we see on the title page of a volume of sermons by the Bishop of Exeter what is probably the earliest specimen of Washington's penmanship, his name written twice, when he was eight or nine years old. In Short Discourses upon the whole Common Prayer by the Dean of Durham, George Washington, at the age of thirteen, wrote his own name and that of his mother; and years before, his father, Augustine Washington, had written his name with the date 1727, to this after his marriage was added "and Mary Washington." Next to the Bible, Mary Washington valued Sir Matthew Hale's Contemplations and Hervey's Meditations, and her copies of these pious works, in which she has written her name, are still preserved. George Washington when a boy read and reread the Contemplations to his mother, and it had a great influence in forming his character.

In the Athenaeum are the first and second volumes of Steel's Guardian, with Washington's autographs at the age of seventeen.

Washington's autograph, written also at the age of seventeen in a Latin Testament, is one of several indications that as a boy he had studied Latin. On the flyleaf of a Latin Lexicon of Homer published in 1742 is written:

Hunc mihi quaeso (bone Vir) Libellum
Redde, si forsan tenues repertum,