

Lesson Twenty-Two

George Washington

LESSON IDEA

To demonstrate how the courage, wisdom, and integrity of George Washington were formed in his early years.

PREPARATION

Collect pictures of George Washington from library books or textbooks, illustrating his early years and young manhood. There is, for example, an excellent portrait of young Washington on the cover of *The Making of George Washington* by William H. Wilbur.

WHEN IT CAME to washing behind his ears, wiping his feet, and bringing garter snakes into the house, George Washington was little different from other boys. He received his share of switchings from his mother, woodshed sessions with his father, and scolding and correction from both. Together, August and Mary Washington prepared their tall, muscular son to become America's first great soldier and statesman — and the Father of his Country.

The Washingtons lived a simple life on a farm in Virginia. An inventory of their household goods taken in 1743 revealed a modest and crowded dwelling. For example, three beds are listed in the parlor, along with one old table, three ancient chairs, an old desk, window curtains, and a sugar box. There were no rugs, carpets, glittering silver tea services, or niceties for social entertaining — no wines, liquors, coaches, or carriages.

Meals were simple affairs, typically consisting of cornmeal cakes with milk for breakfast; meat, fowl, or fish with vegetables for the mid-day dinner; and corn cakes, milk, and sometimes noon-time leftovers for the evening supper. Simple desserts were served on Sundays. Both August

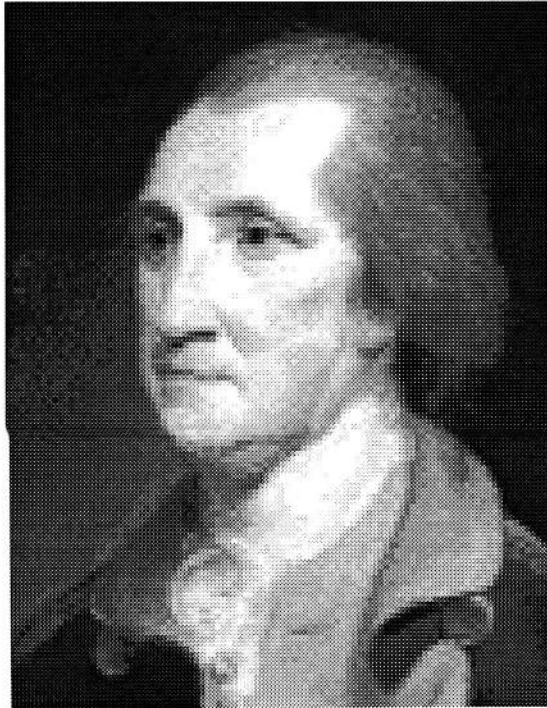
and Mary believed heavy eating dulled the mind and slowed the muscles. Hard work was a Washington standard.

AT AN EARLY AGE George was sent to the tobacco fields with the black workers to hoe weeds and kill the ugly, fat, white worms that devoured roots of the young plants. August Washington believed that one must first learn a job himself before becoming a supervisor. Time spent in the fields was also a time for lessons and conversation between father and son. As they walked about the farm or rode into town, young George solved math problems, learned geography, and discovered the meaning of Bible passages.

August Washington placed a high value on education. In his early years, he had acquired a superior basic education (especially in mathematics and history) at Appleby Grammar School in England. He also developed sound study habits which enabled him, after returning to Virginia, to build on the Appleby foundation. August Washington was considered to be a well-educated man. George's two older stepbrothers (August's sons by an earlier marriage) were also sent

to Appleby after their mother died. Upon their return, they tutored young George.

On most days, George was up by 4:00 a.m., working on his lessons for an hour or two before breakfast. Often, he studied by himself in the little hut that his father had built for a farm office. The habit of working without immediate supervision, coupled with his responsibility for daily assignments, did much to his strong, independent



George Washington

character.

BUT FACTS, FIGURES, and physical discipline were only part of the education August Washington sought for his young son. He knew that high moral standards (the rights and wrongs of daily conduct) — and good character training (responsibility, thrift, thoroughness, and self-discipline) were even more important. August, an excellent teacher, wove the moral lessons into the routine of daily living.

When, for example, friends and neighbors commented on George's extraordinary size and strength, August used the compliment to teach humility and modesty. "George," he would say, "we are all very pleased that you are big and strong. But while you also can be pleased, you should realize that you have no reason to preen yourself about it. My father was a big man. He passed on to me an unusually fine, powerful body. The Lord has seen fit to pass it on to you. You have not achieved it by your own thinking or working. It is entirely a gift from your parents and grandparents.

"But, if someone says, 'George is very well-behaved' or 'obedient' or 'thoughtful' or 'helpful' or 'considerate,' then the situation would be very different. Then you could be proud and somewhat satisfied because you, yourself, had created a situation that brought deserved praise."

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

The Making of George Washington, by William H. Wilbur, is an important book for those who want to know more about the early life of a truly great man. Parents will appreciate the philosophy and training employed by August Washington in raising his young son. Many of the chapters, which are short and simply worded, would make interesting family reading during the week.

Other scholarly works about Washington are available at most public libraries. Two of the most outstanding are the studies by Dr. Douglas Freeman and Henry Cabot Lodge, Sr.

Do you think the temptation to cheat would be a problem for some teenagers you know? Why? Is honesty stressed as much or esteemed as highly in our schools today? [Contrast teaching today — and influence of books, newspapers, magazines, television, movies, video games, the Internet, and other contemporary cultural influences — with the training Washington received.]

Have you ever thought about your own characteristics in this way? [Encourage family members to realize the physical assets that are their legacy and the character traits that are their own responsibility.]

August Washington died when George was ten years old. One of his last statements was a powerful lesson that left a permanent impression on his young son. "I thank God," the dying man said, "that in all my life I have never struck a man in anger, for if I had done so I am sure (so great is my strength) that I would have killed my antagonist. Then his blood, at this awesome moment, would lie heavily on my soul. As it is, I die at peace with all mankind."

Failure to control his temper was one of George's boyhood shortcomings, but he worked hard to overcome it, and by the time he was a teenager he was faithfully following his father's deathbed injunction. He did not mistreat or bully his associates. As a man, he did not misuse his great physical strength or abuse his enormous power as commander-in-chief of the Continental Army. Nor did he misapply his authority as president of the Constitutional Convention, nor as our nation's first President.

Imagine for a moment what a man like Benedict Arnold would likely have done in Washington's position. How do you think he might have used the power of the presidency? [Ask for examples of possible misuse of power by such a man as Arnold.]

August Washington left young George a legacy of moral character, integrity, and wisdom. By his father's example and teachings, George learned to be considerate in dealing with others, to be responsible for his own conduct in the sight both of God and man, to make deliberate decisions instead of snap judgments, and to seek additional information when uncertain what to do.

ONE CHARACTER TRAIT that August passed along to his son was judging men by their ability and moral worth instead of by their wealth or social position. This attribute was vividly demonstrated during the War for Independence as when Washington chose men for positions of trust and leadership. It mattered not to him that Daniel Morgan was a self-educated frontiersman while Alexander Hamilton knew

Greek and Latin and was considered a brilliant young aristocrat. Washington valued the unique abilities of both.

But as a boy of ten he had many lessons yet to learn before becoming a leader of men. His stepbrothers, Lawrence and Austin, filled the gap left by the death of his father.

Lawrence had married and settled at Little Hunting Creek farm, a property that August and given to him, and which later became known as Mount Vernon. Austin had inherited the other family farm at Bridge's Creek. Both brothers acted as tutors for young George, but Lawrence — being geographically closer — was George's principal teacher.

By age 13, George completed the study of geometry and trigonometry began applying his mathematical skills to surveying. Lawrence's neighbors, the Fairfaxes, were one of the largest landholders in Virginia, and George's talents as a surveyor soon brought his first opportunity for frontier adventure. He was 16 when Colonel William Fairfax suggested that he accompany the oldest Fairfax son, George William, to the wilderness lands of the Shenandoah Valley. Young Fairfax was to represent his family's interests, but George had no particular duties.

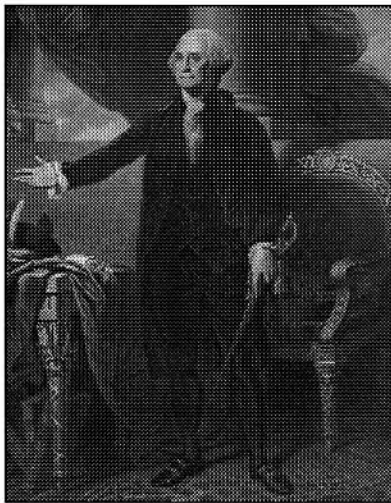
Washington's diary for the trip reveals that the two Georges rode 40 miles the first day, evidence that both were physically tough. But misadventures abounded. One night, a very powerful wind blew down their tent. On another, the straw beds on which they slept caught fire. Before the journey's end, provisions were exhausted and, at one point, they lost their way so completely that a 20-mile backtrack was necessary. It became clear that the two were less than experienced as woodsmen.

From then on, George earned money and supported himself as a surveyor. He also assisted his mother. He was a fast and careful worker. His knowledge of soils, drainage, plants, and trees alone would have placed his services in much demand. Yet his reputation for honesty was even more important, as most of the small farmers whose property he surveyed could neither read

nor write. Many could not sign their names. They were completely dependent on the integrity of the surveyor they selected. Resisting the temptation to cheat such helpless customers might have been a problem for some 16-year-olds, but not for a young man who had been schooled in honesty from his earliest years.

Do you think the temptation to cheat would be a problem to some teenagers you know? Why? Is honesty stressed as much or esteemed as highly in our schools today? [Contrast the teaching today and influence of books and television with the training Washington received.]

LIFE WAS NOT all labor for young George Washington. The winter season was a time for dinners, dances, and indoor games. In colonial Virginia, girls began attending social functions around age 14, and most married by the time they were 17. Mary Cary, the sister of Sally Cary (who was to marry his friend, George William Fairfax), caught young Washington's eye at an early age. But it became a disappointing experience. Mary's father emphatically disapproved of the penniless son of a middle-class family. To George's marriage proposal, he responded: "My daughter is accustomed to ride in her own coach."



Washington

Betsy Fauntleroy, daughter of a respected Virginia family, was another young lady to whom George was attracted. The feeling was not mutual, however, and both of his proposals of marriage were rejected. [If there are teenagers in your family, discuss the effects that such rejection might have had on a young man like Washington.]

Brooding about loves lost was not, however, a part of George's character. Work and study occupied most of his time. By age 18 he had earned enough money to purchase three valuable properties (totaling 1,459 acres) in the Shenandoah Valley. He also continued his education, and, because his brother Lawrence had fallen ill, also supervised the farm workers at Mount Vernon.

At the neighboring Fairfax estate, Colonel

William Fairfax had one of the best libraries of his day. George had free access to the books and received good advice regarding the ones he should study.

Many matters could not, however, be dealt with by mere reading. Thorough study required another valuable ingredient: frequent discussions with men of experience and proven judgment. It was primarily provided by three devoted tutors: Colonel Fairfax, George's stepbrother Lawrence, and his friend George William Fairfax. George studied for five years under the guidance of these three instructors. The course easily surpassed most university education in substance. It earned him a place of preeminence among the most brilliant minds of his day.

What character traits did young Washington exhibit by continuing to acquire an education on his own? [Self-discipline, good organization of time, and hard work, among others.] Would a 17-year-old of equal intelligence be likely to follow the same rigorous course of self-education today?

By the time he was 20, George Washington had every prospect of a comfortable life among Virginia's social elite. His stepbrother Lawrence, master of Mount Vernon, had passed away. His widow was in precarious health. George could easily have settled down as the master of the estate and, with added income from his work as a surveyor and his land holdings in the rich Shenandoah Valley, had an easy life.

The alternative was an arduous frontier adventure that would include fighting Indians and Frenchmen to push the boundaries of the colonies westward. Other prominent men of the time — such as John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and George Mason — recognized the need for the colonies to expand. They were united in the belief that the French must be ousted. They wrote and spoke about protecting the settlers who were courageously pushing West. They were willing to give support, but none volunteered to do the fighting. Washington did, knowing that it would be a rough, tough ordeal that would require courage, stamina, and a willingness to forego the luxury of life on the plantation. Far from discouraging him, such challenges only fueled his imagination and determination. They also led to invaluable experience as a military strategist and leader of men — lessons he never forgot while leading his

country through eight grueling years of struggle to win independence and nationhood.

Concluding Thought

From his earliest years on the family farm, George Washington's character and intelligence were forged to make wise choices and take courageous actions. His career as a soldier and statesman are well known, but many of the people who molded — and the events that shaped — his life and thought are not. They were, however, crucial to the development of a boy of promise into a man of greatness.

Looking Ahead

This ends our study of the Revolutionary War. Next week we will begin a new series of lessons on the Constitution and the formation of the new American nation. Months of study could have been devoted to the War and Washington's actions as the commander-in-chief of the Continental Army. Hopefully, these lessons have given new insight into the character of the men who secured freedom for our nation. It will take citizens possessing the same honesty, loyalty, courage, and determination to preserve our liberties.

DURING THE WEEK

If your family did not start the Patriot Scrapbook suggested last week, begin now with pictures and quotes of George Washington, or arrange a display on poster board of materials gathered during the week.