

## THE MAKING OF GEORGE WASHINGTON: HIS EARLY ASPIRATIONS AND RAPID ASCENT

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### Abstract

The article maps the formation of Washington's aspirations from his youth to the late 1750s. His rapid ascent was owing to the support of Lawrence Washington, the Fairfaxes, and Governor Dinwiddie who offered him fitting opportunities for service. Washington had his first taste of international acclaim following his early military ventures in the developing French and Indian War. In the army, his popularity grew mainly because of his fearlessness and desire for military action. Washington's rise to the top crust of the Virginia gentry was solidified by his marriage to Miss Custis, one of the wealthiest widows in the province. By joining the elite group of Virginia's political leaders in the House of Burgesses, Washington's political ascent in the colony reached a significant milestone of visibility and served as a springboard for colonial and continental prominence.

**Keywords:** George Washington, aspirations, ascent, gentry, honor

### Introduction

Today, many remember Washington as the first president of the United States and visualize him as being an elderly man of wisdom and honesty with his characteristic air of quiet dignity visible in his formal bearing and powdered hair – an image perpetuated by the brush of the famed Gilbert Stuart, now imprinted on every American one-dollar bill.

However, this traditional depiction of Washington ignores the complexities of this man's efforts to earn a membership in the pantheon of illustrious men in world history. In fact, a majority of his biographers focus on the American Revolution and later events when Washington became a virtuous leader of the military and then of a new nation. Referring to the way in which this Founding

Father has been remembered, Samuel Eliot Morison noted that he “is the last person you would ever suspect of having been a young man.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Nathaniel Hawthorne remarked, “He had no nakedness, but I imagine he was born with his clothes on, and his hair powdered, and made a stately bow on his first appearance in the world.”<sup>2</sup>

Washington would have never achieved the high social status and respect had it not been for the crucial period of his formative years. Many of the principles Washington advocated in his later years have their roots in his quest for rules and virtues to guide his personal behavior during his adolescence. In addition to his strong desire to serve his country, Washington also wanted to rise from the lower gentry to the higher echelons of the colonial patrician families. These two aspects compliment each other extremely well, for it was primarily his developing patriotic principles and his venturesome disposition that won support from patrons that facilitated his ascent.

## The Formation of George’s Aspirations

Contrary to a common modern perception, “Washington was not born with ‘a silver spoon in his mouth.’”<sup>3</sup> At the time of his birth, Washington’s family belonged to what could be called the “second tier” of the gentry class and neither their prominence or influence was such as to be anyhow significant beyond their home county.<sup>4</sup> George was only eleven years old when his father died, leaving his modest property to be shared among the family members.<sup>5</sup>

George’s career opportunities were curtailed considerably when his widowed mother was obliged to be frugal, to budget household finances and to rely on the assistance of her sons to help with increased domestic duties. Consequently, the opportunity for George to obtain a good education at a reputable college at

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Eliot Morison, “The Young Man Washington,” in *The Great American Parade*, ed. by H. J. Duteil (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1935; Kessinger Publishing, 2005), 118.

<sup>2</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Passages from the French and Italian Note Books of Nathaniel Hawthorne* (Kessinger Publishing, 2004), 100, <http://books.google.com/books?id=iSwvOlvzCWUC>.

<sup>3</sup> Mason Locke Weems, *The Life of George Washington; With Curious Anecdotes, Equally Honourable to Himself, and Exemplary to His Young Countrymen* (Philadelphia: Joseph Allen, n.d.), 27, <http://www.archive.org/details/lifeofgeorgewashweem>.

<sup>4</sup> Mary V. Thompson, *“In the Hands of a Good Providence”: Religion in the Life of George Washington* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 16.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas Southall Freeman, *George Washington: A Biography* [hereafter as DSF], 7 vols., vol. 7 completed by John A. Carroll and Mary W. Ashworth (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1948–57), 1: 72; Worthington Chauncey Ford, ed., *Wills of George Washington and His Immediate Ancestors* (New York: Historical Printing Club, 1891), 42, <http://www.archive.org/details/wills-of-george-washington-and-his-immediate-ancestors>.

Appleby, in northern England, where his two older half brothers as well as his father had studied, was no longer realistic.<sup>6</sup> The exigency of the situation even prevented young George from attending the College of William and Mary, located within a convenient distance in his own province. His formal education did not include more than private instruction by a “domestic tutor” or attendance at some local school.<sup>7</sup> His school exercise books indicate that his training was of general scope with emphasis on mathematics and geometry.<sup>8</sup>

As to his first choice of vocation, John Ferling wrote in his recent *The Ascent of George Washington* that young George “was in a hurry, so much so that at age fourteen he sought to enter Great Britain’s Royal Navy as a commissioned officer.”<sup>9</sup> However, it is proper to note that Washington shared some of his remarks about this opportunity when commenting on a draft of David Humphreys’ biography of him.<sup>10</sup> Washington remarked that “It was rather the wish of my eldest brother [Lawrence] [...] that this should take place & the matter was contemplated by him.” George consented to the proposal of his brother but, due to mother’s objections, the plan was ultimately abandoned.<sup>11</sup> His mother’s pleadings against this venture followed the advice of her brother in England who, when he learned of George’s intentions, cautioned the lad against serving in the British Navy with the recommendation that “he must not be hasty to get rich [...] without aiming at being a fine gentleman before his time.”<sup>12</sup>

Thus, young George did not leave for abroad but remained at home and perhaps his uncle’s admonition to first learn how to become “a fine gentleman” further stirred the young boy to acquaint himself with some of the rules of personal

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<sup>6</sup> Marcus Cunliffe, *George Washington: Man and Monument* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1958), 29, <http://www.archive.org/details/georgewashington005796mbp>; Rosemarie Zagarrri, ed., *David Humphreys’ “Life of General Washington” with George Washington’s “Remarks”* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 6.

<sup>7</sup> Zagarrri, “*Life of George Washington*,” 6, 101–11; George Mason to George Washington, 12 Jun. 1756, in *The Papers of George Washington Digital Edition, The American Founding Era Collection* [hereafter as PGW], ed. Edward G. Lengel (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2007–2010), <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/GEWN.html/>. In this letter to George Washington [hereafter as GW], Mason writes “on Behalf of my Neighbour & Your old School-fellow, Mr Piper.”

<sup>8</sup> *George Washington Papers, 1592–1943 (bulk 1748–1799)*, *George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress 1741–1799* [hereafter as GWPLC], Archival Manuscript Material (Collection), Library of Congress. Washington, DC, Series 1a, School Copy Book: 2 vols., 1745, <http://lccn.loc.gov/mm78044693/>.

<sup>9</sup> John Ferling, *The Ascent of George Washington: The Hidden Political Genius of an American Icon* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009), 12.

<sup>10</sup> The only biography GW actually supervised.

<sup>11</sup> Zagarrri, “*Life of George Washington*,” 7–8.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Ball Letter Book, quoted in DSF 1: 198–99.

conduct that made one a true gentleman.<sup>13</sup> He was, of course, exposed to the rules of gentle behavior in both paper and practice. As part of his school exercises, he transcribed *Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation*.<sup>14</sup> The transcription of these 110 rules may have been intended by his teacher to polish the handwriting as well as manners of his young pupil. The origins of the *Rules* can be traced back to the sixteenth-century maxims of French Jesuits that recommended polite deportment and consideration for others that was fundamental if one wished to impress and receive favorable attention from his superiors. These precepts advise, for example, that “Every Action done in Company, ought to be with Some Sign of Respect, to those that are Present,” or “Strive not with your Superiors in argument, but always Submit your Judgment to others with Modesty.”<sup>15</sup> Washington’s lifelong conscientious efforts at self-improvement leave no doubt that these *Rules* motivated the boy to master a becoming behavior and well-bred carriage.

There may be a number of other literary sources worth evaluating, but one in particular that has perhaps escaped the attention of Washington’s biographers is H. de Luzancy’s *A Panegyrick to the Memory of His Grace Frederick Late Duke of Schonberg*.<sup>16</sup> Although the panegyric contains some apparent encomiastic hyperboles, it is still worth analyzing. When fifteen, George purchased this book from his second cousin Bailey Washington.<sup>17</sup> The Duke of Schomberg is here portrayed as a virtuous hero whose accomplishments were on a par with other great European generals such as Montecuccolli, Turenne, and Condé. Incidentally, the panegyric also referred to Schomberg’s adherence to the “Rules of Civility, Breeding, and all the Accomplishments of Men of Quality.”<sup>18</sup> This reference to Schomberg’s “Rules of Civility” served as an additional incentive for young George to emulate the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Series 1a, Forms of Writing, and The Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation, ante 1747, in *GWPLC*, images 27–36.

<sup>15</sup> Moncure Daniel Conway, *George Washington’s Rules of Civility Traced to Their Sources and Restored* (London: Chatto and Windus, Piccadilly, 1890), 55, 100.

<sup>16</sup> H. de Luzancy, *A Panegyrick to the Memory of His Grace Frederick Late Duke of Schonberg, Marquess of Harwich, Earl of Brentford, Count of the Holy Empire, State-Holder of Prussia, Grandee of Spain, & c. General of All His Majesties Land Forces, and Knight of the Most Noble Order of the Garter* (London: Garden, 1690).

<sup>17</sup> “Gen. Washington’s Memorandum Cash Account, Sept. 10, 1747 to Oct. 14, 1749,” Lloyd W. Smith Archival Collection (Morristown, [NJ]: National Historical Park). I first became aware of GW’s purchase of this panegyric in 2009 thanks to Theodore J. Crackel, the then editor of *PGW*. The earliest treatment of this topic is probably in William Hale Wilbur, *The Making of George Washington* ([s. l.: Wilbur?; DeLand], 1973).

<sup>18</sup> Luzancy, *Panegyrick*, 30.

virtues and manners befitting a chivalrous hero. The fact that George's later career, in large measure, corresponds with Schomberg's life as described in this panegyric, suggests that the book had a considerable impact on his youthful mind and aspirations.

For instance, Schomberg was praised for the fact that "The most surprising dangers, never betray'd in him any fear."<sup>19</sup> Likewise, Washington taught himself to exhibit unwavering courage in dangerous situations. One of Washington's biographers even described him to be possessed of "soldier's knack of fatalism that permitted him to ignore the bullets."<sup>20</sup>

Luzancy further advised his readers "to be as intent to overcome our Selves, as our Enemies, is the highest improvement of Vertue," which he was said to have mastered.<sup>21</sup> Gilbert Stuart reportedly said Washington's facial features were "indicative of the strongest and most ungovernable passions, and had he been born in the forests [...] he would have been born the fiercest man amongst the savage tribes."<sup>22</sup>

The panegyric also said that the European military leader "did not praise his own Actions," but was "silent, as if he had not been concern'd in the things that were said of him."<sup>23</sup> Styling himself after the duke of Schomberg in that regard, Washington learned to be modest about his own accomplishments. Brissot de Warville, an influential Girondist, once described his meeting with the American general thus: "He speaks of the American War as if he had *not* been its leader, and of his victories with a greater *indifference* than even a foreigner would."<sup>24</sup>

In a similar vein, Luzancy's description of Schomberg's alleged affability, virtue, and adherence to duty is strikingly analogous to many descriptions of Washington's character by his contemporaries. Considering such striking similarities and the impressionable age at which George read the work, it may have represented a major influence in the formation of his aspirations and behavior.

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<sup>19</sup> Luzancy, *Panegyrick*, 31.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas A. Lewis, *For King and Country: George Washington: The Early Years* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1993), 183.

<sup>21</sup> Luzancy, *Panegyrick*, 28.

<sup>22</sup> Isaac Weld, *Travels Through the States of America, and the Provinces of Upper and Lower Canada, During the Years 1795, 1796, and 1797*, 4th ed., 2 vols. (London: John Stockdale, 1799; repr., 1807), 1: 105, <http://www.archive.org/details/travelsthroughs00weldgoog>.

<sup>23</sup> Luzancy, *Panegyrick*, 29.

<sup>24</sup> J. P. Brissot de Warville, *New Travels in the United States of America, 1788*, trans. Mara Soceanu Vamos and Durand Echeverria, ed. Durand Echeverria (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1964), 344. Italics added.

## George's Precocious Acclaim and Rapid Rise

Washington's association with members of the higher echelons of Virginia society was facilitated in 1743 by his eldest half brother Lawrence's marriage with Ann Fairfax, daughter of Colonel William Fairfax. The Fairfaxes were one of the most powerful families in the province with extensive land holdings.<sup>25</sup> It was through the instrumentality of the Fairfaxes that Washington was offered a convenient opportunity to work as a surveyor, which later became his vocation. For example, one of Washington's early assignments that included surveying the town of Belhaven, known today as Alexandria, Virginia, was delegated by the Fairfaxes, who were among the trustees of the town, and Lawrence Washington, who was assigned to report on the project to the Virginia Assembly.<sup>26</sup>

When only seventeen, Washington was appointed an official surveyor of the Culpeper County. Such a position was typically given to more mature men or to those who had served in the capacity of an apprentice or a deputy county surveyor. But he may have obtained "the post because of his ties with the Fairfaxes [since] the Culpeper County lay entirely within Lord Fairfax's proprietary."<sup>27</sup>

Surveyors were typically men of good status but, at the same time, did not require a college degree.<sup>28</sup> It was also a highly opportune time for the profession. The population of Virginia was growing rapidly and new frontiers to the west were continually under exploration. An experienced surveyor's salary was often twice as much as that of a prosperous tradesman. Additionally, surveyors were often granted land in lieu of cash, which afforded them good opportunities for land speculation. They oftentimes sold or leased the lands to others and thus secured additional long-term income.<sup>29</sup> Surveying and land speculation could

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<sup>25</sup> DSF 1: 75–76.

<sup>26</sup> H. R. McIlwaine, ed., *Legislative Journals of the Council of Colonial Virginia*, 3 vols. (Richmond, VA: Colonial Press, E. Waddey, 1918), 2: 1047, <http://www.archive.org/details/cu31924031311131>. Some of GW's biographers have mistakenly claimed Lawrence Washington facilitated the job as trustee of the town. Lawrence, however, was not added to the list of trustees until at least two years later (DSF 1: 232n65).

<sup>27</sup> Henry Howe, *Historical Collections of Virginia: Containing a Collection of the Most Interesting Facts, Traditions, Biographical, Sketches, Anecdotes, &c. Relating to Its History and Antiquities, Together with Geographical and Statistical Descriptions* (Charleston, SC: WM. R. Babcock, 1852), 237, <http://www.archive.org/details/historicalcollec03howe>; Conway, *Rules of Civility*, 26, 42–43; Paul K. Longmore, *The Invention of George Washington* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988; reprinted Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 13.

<sup>28</sup> Ferling, *Ascent*, 12; Longmore, *Invention*, 13.

<sup>29</sup> Edward Redmond, "George Washington: Surveyor and Mapmaker," *Map Collections*, American Memory, Library of Congress, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/gmdhtml/gwmaps.html#5>; Ferling, *Ascent*, 12.

open the doors to substantial wealth, especially when the patron was a powerful gentleman.<sup>30</sup>

Douglas S. Freeman described the Old Dominion in the early eighteenth century to be “an ambitious landed society.”<sup>31</sup> Gentlemen of that colony were particularly proficient in obtaining vast territories by land speculation, perhaps because ownership of land was a key factor determining one’s status in society.<sup>32</sup> Thus, Washington’s surveying for and close relationship with the Fairfaxes, who controlled several million acres in the province, set the young man on a good path to seek and take advantage of land ownership, which, in fact, constituted a substantial portion of Washington’s wealth in his later life.<sup>33</sup>

Young Washington first met Robert Dinwiddie, the newly appointed governor of Virginia, on his return from Barbados, where his brother Lawrence hoped to recover from tuberculosis.<sup>34</sup> Washington was probably on an errand to deliver some letters to the governor on behalf of his brother and other men of prominence in Barbados. The unusually tall nineteen-year old Virginian was welcomed cordially by the governor; Washington recorded that he was “received Graceously” and was “enquired kindly after the health of my Br.[other] and invited me to stay and dine.”<sup>35</sup> Some discussion may have ensued about Lawrence who was no longer physically able to serve as the colony’s adjutant of the militia. William Guthrie Sayen posits that Washington “may have used this occasion to position himself as the next incumbent.” Whatever Washington’s intentions, the governor’s first impression must have been favorable, for Dinwiddie entrusted the young man with a number of major responsibilities in the following years.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Turk McCleskey, “Rich Land, Poor Prospects: Real Estate and the Formation of a Social Elite in Augusta County, Virginia, 1738–1770,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 98, no. 3 (July 1990): 451.

<sup>31</sup> DSF 1: 1.

<sup>32</sup> Richard Beale Davis, ed., “The Colonial Virginia Satirist: Mid-Eighteenth-Century Commentaries on Politics, Religion, and Society,” American Philosophical Society, *Transactions*, N. S., LVII, Pt. 1 (1967): 48, quoted in Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 1982), 118.

<sup>33</sup> William Guthrie Sayen, “‘A Compleat Gentleman’: The Making of George Washington, 1732–1775” (PhD diss., University of Connecticut, 1998), 48; Joseph J. Ellis, *His Excellency: George Washington* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 262.

<sup>34</sup> GW to Lawrence Washington, 5 May 1749, in PGW; Bernhard Knollenberg, *George Washington: The Virginia Period, 1732–1775* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1976), 8, 144n55; DSF 1: 247–248; *The Diaries of George Washington*, 6 vols., ed. Donald Jackson and Dorothy Twohig (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976–79), 1: 33–34, <http://lccn.loc.gov/75041365/>.

<sup>35</sup> 26 January 1752, in *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745–1799*, 39 vols., ed. John Clement Fitzpatrick (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Library, 1931–1944), <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/washington/>.

<sup>36</sup> Sayen, “‘A Compleat Gentleman,’” 52–53.

Several months later, when it was determined that the adjutancy would be divided into several districts, Washington actively sought one of the posts.<sup>37</sup> Washington wrote to Dinwiddie, “If I could have the Honour of obtaining that [adjutancy] [...] should take the greatest pleasure in punctually obeying from time, to time, your Honours commands.”<sup>38</sup> Although he had no military training, the governor’s council appointed the young man to the adjutancy of the Southern District, an office which included a bestowal of the title of major and a salary of £100 per annum.<sup>39</sup> Shortly after, he sought a change and desired the adjutancy in the Northern District, his home district. Washington sought advice from William Nelson, a member of the governor’s council. Nelson thought his chances reasonable and wished him success. Before long, Washington’s perseverance succeeded in having his adjutancy shifted to his home District.<sup>40</sup>

Washington’s accelerated ascent in his younger years was, in large measure, owing to a favorable disposition of his influential neighbors and friends. But I concur with Ferling that “his patrons had not gone to bat for him solely because of family ties and kindness.”<sup>41</sup> They were aware of his qualities and potential. He was blessed with an impressive figure, at least six feet tall, with large hands and feet, “penetrating eyes,” and “a pleasing, benevolent, though a commanding countenance.”<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, he appears to have been an audacious, adventurous, and promising man.

Relationships and good connections mattered greatly in enabling one’s social upward mobility in colonial America. In this respect, Washington was extremely fortunate to be connected to the wealthy Fairfaxes through his brother Lawrence’s marriage. It was probably through William Fairfax, member of the powerful

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<sup>37</sup> Wilmer L. Hall, ed., *Executive Journals of the Council of Colonial Virginia*, 6 vols., (Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1945), 5: 412, [http://www.archive.org/details/executivejournal\\_e05virg](http://www.archive.org/details/executivejournal_e05virg).

<sup>38</sup> GW to Robert Dinwiddie, 10 Jun. 1752, in *PGW*.

<sup>39</sup> Commission as adjutant for southern district, Williamsburg, 13 Dec. 1752, Spotsylvania County Order Book, 1749–55, 284, Vi Microfilm, in *PGW*; Hall, *Executive Journals of the Council*, 5: 412–13. GW’s commission is dated December 13, 1752, and he took the oath February 10, 1753, see *DGW* 1: 118n2.

<sup>40</sup> DSF 1: 268; GW to Robert Dinwiddie, 12 Jun. 1752, William Nelson to GW, 22 Feb. 1753, in *PGW*; John E. Ferling, *The First of Men: A Life of George Washington* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988), 17. Although Ferling gives no evidence, he believes GW was assigned to his home District in 1753. My research yielded no specific date, but it appears that GW’s reappointment occurred between the following two dates, see William Nelson to GW, 22 Feb. 1753, in *PGW*, and a governor’s council held Jan. 21, 1754, see Hall, *Executive Journals of the Council*, 5: 458.

<sup>41</sup> Ferling, *Ascent*, 13.

<sup>42</sup> GW to Robert Cary & Company, 30 Nov. 1759, in *PGW*; Quoted in Joseph Meredith Toner, *George Washington as an Inventor and Promoter of the Useful Arts* (Washington, DC: Gedney and Roberts, 1892), 20, <http://www.archive.org/details/georgewashington00tone>.



governor's council, that Washington was notified about the colony's plans to caution a French commandant against encroaching on British territory on the southern banks of Lake Erie.<sup>43</sup> Obviously, a messenger delivering such a warning from the British governor to the French would not receive a cordial welcome. Washington, however, sensed a unique opportunity to serve his country. He must have also been aware that a successful fulfillment of such an assignment from the governor could greatly improve his career prospects. Washington did not hesitate and went to Williamsburg to petition the governor to be entrusted with the task.<sup>44</sup> Such instances suggest that Washington did not passively rely on nepotistic advantages but actively sought opportunities for rendering service to men of influence.

Governor Dinwiddie evaluated Washington's offer and, after considering it, consented. Dinwiddie then notified the members of his council that Washington "had offered himself to go" to deliver the warning to the French commandant. Washington spared no time, for after receiving the necessary documentation, he set out on the five-hundred-mile long trek the very same day.<sup>45</sup>

Washington returned with the news that the French commandant refused to depart from the disputed territory. Asserting controversial claims was a delicate subject for both the French and British, and both parties watched the developing negotiations closely. But Washington certainly did not return empty-handed. He kept a journal in which he recorded his travels and meeting with the Indians as well as a reconnaissance of the French forces. Dinwiddie was intrigued by the account and ordered it to be set in print without delay, possibly to drum up support for British claims by acquainting the public with the French occupation of British territory. Washington's narrative appeared in several American newspapers as well as in pamphlet form in England, adding to his growing fame. Dinwiddie even dispatched a few copies to the Secretary of State for the Southern Department, to the Board of Trade, and a number of British colonial governors.<sup>46</sup> Through the use

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<sup>43</sup> Knollenberg, *George Washington*, 11. Fairfax's earlier attempts to send a messenger to caution the French is recorded in Hall, *Executive Journals of the Council*, 5: 433.

<sup>44</sup> DSF 1: 273.

<sup>45</sup> Hall, *Executive Journals*, 5: 443–44; Commission from Robert Dinwiddie, Instructions from Robert Dinwiddie, Passport from Robert Dinwiddie, 30 Oct. 1753, in *PGW*; Robert Dinwiddie to M. de St. Pierre, 31 Oct. 1753, in *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York*, 15 vols., trans. and ed. E. B. O'Callaghan (Albany, NY: Weed, Parsons, 1858), 10: 258, <http://www.archive.org/details/documentsrelativ10brod.;> DSF 1: 130.

<sup>46</sup> R. A. Brock, ed., *The Official Records of Robert Dinwiddie, Lieutenant-Governor of the Colony of Virginia, 1751–1758, Now First Printed from the Manuscript in the Collections of the Virginia Historical Society*, 2 vols. (Richmond: Virginia Historical Society, 1884), 1: 93, 98, 85–88, 91, 129, <http://www.archive.org/details/officialrecords02virg;> Jared Sparks, ed., *The Writings of George Washington; Being His Correspondence, Addresses, Messages, and Other Papers, Official and Private Selected and*

of print publishing as a channel of communication, for the first time, Washington, who was only twenty-two years old, was placed in an international spotlight.<sup>47</sup>

Amid increasing publicity, Washington was entrusted with another momentous assignment, one that would contribute to his rise in the military. Less than a week passed after Washington's return and the members of the governor's council advised that "the cheif [*sic*] Command" of a force to be raised in two Virginia counties be given to "Major Washington." He was "to use all Expedition" to erect a fort for the defense of British interests in the upper Ohio, a territory under dispute with the French.<sup>48</sup>

Of course, Washington readily accepted the assignment. Such a step by the council of Virginia signalized that the dispute would not be settled without arms. Being well-informed about the developing situation, Washington, before departing, solicited Richard Corbin, a member of the governor's council, for a promotion above the newly acquired rank of major to support his status among the soldiers. Washington was aware that Corbin's membership in the council empowered him to have a substantial influence in the ranking of officers for this expedition. Corbin's actions are not documented, but Washington's request was granted within the next few weeks, as Dinwiddie sent him a commission as lieutenant-colonel of the Virginia Regiment.<sup>49</sup>

## Seeking "Honour and Glory"

The expedition brought Washington international acclaim. On their way toward the upper Ohio, Washington's men encountered a small force headed by a French commandant named Jumonville. A skirmish ensued and the first shots of

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*Published from the Original Manuscripts; with a Life of the Author, Notes and Illustrations, 12 vols. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1847–48), 2: 431, <http://www.archive.org/details/writingsofgeorge02washuoft;Knollenberg,GeorgeWashington,15-16;GeorgeWashington,TheJournalofMajorGeorgeWashington,SentbytheHon.RobertDinwiddie,Esq;HisMajesty'sLieutenant-Governor,andCommanderinChiefofVirginia,totheCommandantoftheFrenchForcesonOhio;toWhichAreAddedtheGovernor'sLetterandaTranslationoftheFrenchOfficer'sAnswer;withaNewMapoftheCountryasFarastheMississippi> (Williamsburg, VA: Williamsburgh Printed, 1754), 3, <http://www.archive.org/details/journalofmajorge00wash>.*

<sup>47</sup> Here, the adjective "international" denotes transatlantic (i.e., both the mother country and her colony in America).

<sup>48</sup> Hall, *Executive Journals of the Council*, 5: 460; *DGW* 1: 162; Robert Dinwiddie to GW, Jan. 1754, in *PGW*. The site of the fort had been recommended by GW, see *DGW* 1: 132.

<sup>49</sup> GW to Richard Corbin, [Feb.–Mar. 1754], Robert Dinwiddie to GW, 15 Mar. 1754, in *PGW*; *DGW* 1: 174.

the French and Indian War were fired.<sup>50</sup> Describing his first military experience, Washington wrote to his younger brother Jack, “I heard Bulletts whistle and believe me there was something charming in the sound.”<sup>51</sup> That these events were closely monitored in the mother country is attested by the fact that Washington’s catchy formulation was published in the *London Magazine* and, subsequently, came to the ears of the British monarch who commented wryly, “He would not say so, if he had been used to hear many.”<sup>52</sup>

Washington’s rapid rise was made possible also as the consequence of unexpected circumstances. When Washington’s superior Colonel Joshua Fry suddenly died during the expedition, Washington was honored with a temporary commission from Dinwiddie only until the arrival of a new commander of the whole Virginia Regiment.<sup>53</sup> Regardless of the time limits of his commission, Washington found himself at the helm of the Virginia Regiment at the young age of twenty-two.

Cognizant of Dinwiddie’s favors, Washington did not forget to express gratitude for the governor’s trust in him. Mere sycophancy would have been considered opprobrious, but expression of gratitude strengthened the bonds with and increased the chances of continued favors from his superior. Gratitude did not only indicate good manners but it also invited gracious behavior from one’s patron.<sup>54</sup> Washington expressed his gratitude to his benefactor, “I want nothing but opportunity to testify my sincere regard for your Person, to whom I stand indebted for so many unmerited favour’s.” The tone of the unusually long missive was highly deferential with the word “honour” occurring impressively not less than forty times.<sup>55</sup>

That Washington’s appreciation was genuine is shown by the following account of an Indian ceremony, in which Washington participated, of bestowing an English name to the son of Queen Allaquippa, a Delaware sachem. In the ceremony, Washington presented the sachem’s son with a medal in honor of the British king and called him after Colonel Fairfax, which in their language was interpreted as “the first of the Council.” The Indians found the new name particularly pleasing inasmuch that Half-King, a Seneca chief who also participated in the

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<sup>50</sup> DGW 1: 195; GW to Robert Dinwiddie, 29 May 1754, in *PGW*.

<sup>51</sup> GW to John Augustine Washington, 31 May 1754, in *PGW*.

<sup>52</sup> *London Magazine* 23 (Aug. 1754): 370–71, quoted in Longmore, *Invention*, 20; Horace Walpole, *Memoirs of the Reign of King George the Second*, 3 vols. (London: Henry Colburn, 1846), 1: 400, <http://www.archive.org/details/memoirsreignkin01hollgoog>.

<sup>53</sup> Robert Dinwiddie to GW, 4 Jun. 1754, in *PGW*.

<sup>54</sup> Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), 75, 79–80.

<sup>55</sup> GW to Robert Dinwiddie, [10 Jun. 1754], in *PGW*.

ceremony, desired Washington to give him an English name also, “which made me presume to give him that of your Honour’s, and call him Dinwiddie – Interpreted in their Language the head of all.”<sup>56</sup> Fairfax and Dinwiddie gave Washington the needed momentum in his early rapid ascent, for which he knew he was indebted and did not forget to express sincere gratitude to them.

In Washington’s case, seeking “opportunity to testify” to the governor of his high regard for him placed him in the foreground of the kind of action where a man was most likely to achieve “Honour and Glory.”<sup>57</sup> Gordon S. Wood explains that in the eighteenth century, honor implied the existence of “public drama” where a man’s actions are evaluated. Given its element of drama, a battle was considered a particularly alluring event for an aspiring man seeking honor. Alexander Hamilton, for instance, even wished for war in 1769 so that he could place his life at risk for the sake of his country and gain honor.<sup>58</sup> John Adams admitted, “The more danger the greater glory.”<sup>59</sup>

### “Pushing My Fortune”

Vexed by incessant wrangling over the superior ranking of regular over colonial officers, Washington eventually resigned from his military commission in the fall of 1754.<sup>60</sup> His retirement from the army, however, did not last very long. With the arrival of Edward Braddock, the new British general, Washington voiced a “laudable desire” to serve his king and country again but, to avoid further disputes over rank, he entered the service as a volunteer.<sup>61</sup>

Braddock’s high regard for Washington was manifested by his offering him the post of aide-de-camp, which he readily accepted. Washington confided to his

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<sup>56</sup> Frederick Webb Hodge, ed., *Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico*, 2 vols., (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1907–10), 1: 45, 526–27, <http://www.archive.org/details/handbookamerica04unkngoog>; GW to Robert Dinwiddie, [10 Jun. 1754], Robert Dinwiddie to GW, 27 Jun. 1754, in *PGW*.

<sup>57</sup> GW to Robert Dinwiddie, [10 Jun. 1754], in *PGW*.

<sup>58</sup> Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), 39; John C. Miller, *Alexander Hamilton: Portrait In Paradox* (New York: Harper, 1959), 5, quoted in Wood, *Radicalism*, 39–40.

<sup>59</sup> John Adams to Charles Cushing, 19 Oct. 1756, John Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, 3 Jan. 1775, in *Papers of John Adams*, ed. by Robert J. Taylor et al. (Cambridge, 1977–), 1: 22, 2: 210, quoted in Wood, *Radicalism*, 40.

<sup>60</sup> DSF 1: 441.

<sup>61</sup> George II’s non-secret Instructions to Edward Braddock, in Winthrop Sargent, ed., *The History of an Expedition Against Fort Du Quesne, in 1755* (Philadelphia: J. P. Lippincott, 1856), 393, <http://www.archive.org/details/historyofexpedit00sarg>; GW to Robert Orme, 15 March 1755, in *PGW*.

younger brother that thanks to the office he had “a good opportunity” to acquaint himself with the general, which “may be serviceable hereafter, if I can find it worth while pushing my Fortune in the Military way.”<sup>62</sup>

Washington’s greatest moment of glory to date paradoxically occurred in 1755 when the British suffered a defeat on the Monongahela River before they were able to reach Fort Duquesne occupied by the French. As aide to Braddock, Washington rejoined the general’s men while still recovering from a serious illness that left him considerably enfeebled. The battle, which took place merely hours after Washington’s reuniting with the troops, was a surprise ambush and massacre of the British by French and Indian forces in the woods.<sup>63</sup> As pandemonium ensued, Washington impressively focused on his duties. He laid the mortally wounded general on a wagon and escorted him to safety “in the best order he could.” While under fire, Washington had several horses shot from under him, and four bullets pierced his clothes, yet he amazingly remained unscathed. The battle was obviously highly unfortunate for the British, but for Washington it was a prime “opportunity to testify” of his whole-hearted commitment to his duty and country.<sup>64</sup>

Episodes like this one defined Washington’s greatness and redounded to a rising esteem. After Braddock’s debacle, Washington’s popularity grew immensely. “Mr. Washington ... [was] behaving the whole Time with the greatest Courage and Resolution,” intoned the *Pennsylvania Gazette*.<sup>65</sup> A letter Washington received from his friend read, “Yor Name is more talked off in Pensylvania then any Other person of the Army.”<sup>66</sup>

Washington’s popularity now reached its apex. His name was also mentioned as a potential appointment for the chief command of Virginia forces. This high esteem was something Washington had sought but he was not carried away by it – perhaps the contrary. He no longer contacted influential men to solicit their support on his behalf. In fact, in a letter to his mother, Washington wrote, “If it is in my power to *avoid* going to the Ohio again, I shall.” He was willing to accept the command only if the office “is press’d upon me” by his colony.<sup>67</sup>

Of course, Washington had the “power to avoid” returning to the Virginia frontier but his irresistible sense of patriotic obligation “press’d” him to comply with

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<sup>62</sup> GW to John Augustine Washington, 14 May 1755, in *PGW*.

<sup>63</sup> Memorandum, 8–9 Jul. 1755, in *PGW*.

<sup>64</sup> GW to Robert Dinwiddie, [10 Jun. 1754], in *PGW*.

<sup>65</sup> “Extract of a Letter from an Officer, Dated at Fort Cumberland, July 18, 1755,” *Pennsylvania Gazette* (Philadelphia), July 31, 1755, NewsBank, <http://www.genealogybank.com>.

<sup>66</sup> Christopher Gist to GW, 15 Oct. 1755, in *PGW*.

<sup>67</sup> GW to Mary Ball Washington, 14 Aug. 1755, in *PGW*. Italics added.

the voice of his countrymen.<sup>68</sup> For Washington, patriotism constituted a major factor in his later acceptance of influential public offices. He did not seek any sort of vainglory. Rather, he hoped to prove his merit so that he could earn “the esteem and notice” of his fellow countrymen.<sup>69</sup>

As the commander in chief of the Virginia Regiment, Washington took pains to execute his duties in a methodical and orderly manner. He rode from one end of Virginia to another to supervise and train the troops stationed in various garrisons.<sup>70</sup> The dangers on the frontier were many and the situation was aggravated by a dispute over the right to command which again prompted Washington to retire from the army. When a Maryland officer claimed seniority of command over Fort Cumberland based on his royal commission, Washington was willing to leave the military once again. “I have determined to resign a Commission,” he wrote to Dinwiddie, “rather than submit to the Command of a Person who I think has not such superlative Merit to balance the Inequality of Rank.”<sup>71</sup>

Washington knew that obtaining a royal commission for himself would resolve many such issues, for having rank in the British Establishment carried high prestige and financial stability in contrast to colonial troops.<sup>72</sup> In 1756, Governors Dinwiddie, Sharpe and General Shirley were in favor of granting Washington the king’s commission, but despite Washington’s diligence and merit in the army, no favorable reply came from overseas.<sup>73</sup>

Whatever sanguine hopes Washington may have had for further promotion, they were again quelled by another change of command in the army leaving all decisions to the newly appointed General Loudoun. Making sure that Dinwiddie would not forget him, Washington reminded the governor to present his credentials to the new general.<sup>74</sup> Accordingly, Dinwiddie immediately penned a sincere recommendation of Washington to General Abercromby, who was his longtime friend and second in command. Dinwiddie wrote about Washington:

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> GW to Warner Lewis, 14 August 1755, in *PGW*.

<sup>70</sup> GW’s General Instructions for Recruiting, [1–3 Sep. 1755], GW’s Memorandum [6 Sep. 1755], GW to Robert Dinwiddie, 11 Sep. 1755, GW’s Orders, 17 Sep. 1755, GW to Peter Hog, 24 Sep. 1755, GW’s Memorandum, [ca. 2 Oct. 1755], GW’s Memoranda, 5 Oct. 1755, GW’s Memorandum, [8 Oct. 1755], GW’s Memorandum, [10 Oct. 1755], in *PGW*.

<sup>71</sup> Robert Dinwiddie to GW, 22 Jan. 1756, in *PGW*.

<sup>72</sup> George Mason to GW, 16 May 1758, in *PGW*; Knollenberg, *George Washington*, 45.

<sup>73</sup> Robert Dinwiddie to GW, 22 Jan. 1756, in *PGW*; Horatio Sharpe to William Shirley, 10 Apr. 1756, William Shirley to Horatio Sharpe, 16 May 1756, in *Archives of Maryland: Correspondence of Governor Horatio Sharpe*, ed. William Hand Browne, 3 vols. (Baltimore, 1888), 1: 389, 416, <http://aomol.net/000001/000006/html/index.html>.

<sup>74</sup> Robert Dinwiddie to GW, 27 May 1756, in *PGW*.

“He is a person much beloved here and has gone through many hardships in the Service, and I really think he has great Merit, and believe he can raise more Men here than any one present that I know. If his Lordship will be so kind as to promote him in the British Establishment I think he will answer my recommendation.”<sup>75</sup>

General Loudoun, however, received many recommendations and solicitations for recognition.<sup>76</sup> Again, Washington waited; but he waited in vain, and no royal commission was issued. Washington could have purchased such a commission, but the commander of Virginia preferred to earn it by merit.<sup>77</sup>

Washington took his responsibilities seriously. In despair he wrote to Dinwiddie, “I would be a willing offering to Savage Fury: and die by inches, to save a people!”<sup>78</sup> Thus, whenever criticism, though ill-founded, was leveled against the performance of his duties, he was in anguish and usually contemplated resignation. If he had been convinced that it would help his fellow countrymen, Washington would “resign without one hesitating moment, a command, which I never expect to reap either Honor or Benefit from [...]. While the murder of poor innocent Babes, and helpless families, may be laid to my account here!”<sup>79</sup>

### “Laudable Ambition”

Washington sought to be placed in the forefront of wartime action, but he apparently had an additional motive besides being seen. He claimed he wished to demonstrate his abilities to prove his worthiness and merit the country’s honor. So convinced was Washington of his diligence and the propriety of his conduct that to Dinwiddie he professed that “no man ever intended better, nor studied the Interest of his Country with more affectionate zeal than I have done.”<sup>80</sup> In fact, among his

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<sup>75</sup> Robert Dinwiddie to James Abercromby, 28 May 1756, in *The Official Records of Robert Dinwiddie, Lieutenant-Governor of the Colony of Virginia, 1751–1758, Now First Printed from the Manuscript in the Collections of the Virginia Historical Society*, ed. R. A. Brock, 2 vols. (Richmond: Virginia Historical Society, 1884), 2: 425, <http://www.archive.org/details/officialrecords02virg>.

<sup>76</sup> Robert Dinwiddie to James Abercromby, 28 May 1756, Brock, *Robert Dinwiddie*, 2: 425.

<sup>77</sup> For instance, William Henry Fairfax, son of William Fairfax, purchased a commission and lieutenantancy in the regular army for a total of £300 sterling, see William Henry Fairfax to GW, 9 Dec. 1757, in *PGW*.

<sup>78</sup> GW to Robert Dinwiddie, 22 Apr. 1756, in *PGW*.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* With a degree of pathos, GW emphasizes his willingness to sacrifice even himself for the welfare of his fellow citizens, if it would of any assistance to them.

<sup>80</sup> GW to Robert Dinwiddie, 19 Dec. 1756, in *PGW*.

associates he was known for his “dissinterestedness, [his] unwearied Application & Zeal for [his] Countrys good.”<sup>81</sup>

Indeed, Washington’s zeal could hardly be ignored. In 1757 and 1758, he was a staunch advocate of offensive measures against the French at Fort Duquesne. One day he even dreamed of such an attack as a “glorious undertaking.”<sup>82</sup> However, evidence suggests that his military zeal was not to boast of military rank or command as he had already resigned from the army and was always ready to do so again, but sought to gain honor by rendering service to his country and provide peace to the distressed families on the frontier.<sup>83</sup>

But if a man’s honor was either achieved or lost by the public evaluation of his actions, Washington probably regarded the time spent in service as the commander of Virginia forces with a degree of melancholy. He had hoped for battle opportunities to display his heroic valor for the benefit of his fellow countrymen, but instead his service tried his patience as he faced various challenges, including the distress of families on the frontier, the disaffection and mutinies of soldiers, the “indolence and irregularity” of garrisons, and disputes over rank and pay.<sup>84</sup>

Moreover, much of the time Washington spent in the army he had to contend not only with fighting the enemy forces and disciplining and training his own troops, but also with his own health. During the winter of 1757, including a relapse in January, Washington suffered from a prolonged illness for at least seven months.<sup>85</sup> The unusually long time he could not perform his military duties even caused some to suppose “that Colo. Washington was dead!”<sup>86</sup> Perhaps weary of his frail health and disaffected by the absence of military offensives, Washington began to contemplate resignation again, “I have some thoughts of quitting my Command & retiring from all Publick Business.”<sup>87</sup>

Like earlier, his thoughts of resignation eventually evaporated with the prospect of a new arrangement in the army. Presently, the news that another general

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<sup>81</sup> William Ramsay to GW, 22 Sep. 1756, in *PGW*.

<sup>82</sup> GW to John Robinson, 30 May 1757, in *PGW*.

<sup>83</sup> GW to John Robinson, 27 Apr. 1756, 9 Nov. 1756, in *PGW*.

<sup>84</sup> Wood, *Radicalism*, 39; GW to Robert Dinwiddie, 18 Apr. 1756, GW to Robert Dinwiddie, 9 Nov. 1756, Robert Stewart to GW, 31 Dec. 1758, Robert Stewart to GW, 20 Dec. 1758, GW to John Stanwix, 28 May 1757, in *PGW*.

<sup>85</sup> Robert Stewart to Robert Dinwiddie, 9 Nov. 1757, Enclosure III: Robert Stewart to John Stanwix, 24 Nov. 1757, Robert Carter Nicholas to GW, 5 Jan. 1758, GW to John Blair, 30 Jan. 1758, GW to John Blair, 20 Feb. 1758, GW to John Stanwix, 4 Mar. 1758, GW to Richard Washington, 18 Mar. 1758, in *PGW*; Zagari, “*Life of George Washington*,” 106n59–60. The illness was probably a dysentery.

<sup>86</sup> Robert Carter Nicholas to GW, 6 Feb. 1758, in *PGW*.

<sup>87</sup> GW to John Stanwix, 4 Mar. 1758, in *PGW*.



was being sent to America with large reinforcements and with “many other Alterations” to be effected in the military reached Washington’s ears; and he stayed.<sup>88</sup> Having almost abandoned the hope of becoming a professional soldier of the British Establishment, Washington explicitly assured his superior that he did not seek “military preferment.” But a preferment of sorts he did still seek, though employing more subtle locution. He hoped to be mentioned to the new general in “favorable terms” in order to “be distinguished” at least “in some measure from the *common run* of provincial Officers; as I understand there will be a motley herd of us.”<sup>89</sup>

Washington’s good friendship with John Robinson, the speaker of the House of Burgesses, allowed the two to express themselves frankly in their correspondence. Washington’s candor in his letters to Robinson is especially revealing with regard to his personal motives and aspirations. In 1758 when the prospects of an attack on the French at Fort Duquesne seemed to be diminishing, Washington exclaimed, “That appearance of Glory once in view – that hope – that *laudable Ambition* of Serving Our Country, and meriting its applause, is now no more.”<sup>90</sup>

If Washington had been charged with self-centered military ambition, he would have vindicated himself, I believe, by emphasizing that the motives that actuated his behavior were “purely laudable.”<sup>91</sup> While history can perhaps be the only unbiased judge, the contours of his ambition were more precisely delineated in his letter to General John Forbes in April 1758. Here, the commander of Virginia explained, “to merit a continuance of the good opinion you seem to entertain of me, shall be one of my Principal Studies; for I have now no ambition that is higher.”<sup>92</sup> Likewise, in his letter to John St. Clair, his superior, Washington said he would be pleased “to stand well in your good Opinions.” Washington then admitted having no other expectation for reward than “than what arises from a Conscience of doing my duty. and from the good liking of my Friends thereupon.”<sup>93</sup>

Although such expressions of his ambitions sound very diplomatic, the moral basis of Washington’s actions seems to have contributed to an increased credibility in rendering his service in a disinterested manner. By proclaiming that the motives for his service were strictly patriotic and that he wished nothing more than good esteem from his fellow countrymen, others gradually began to trust that

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<sup>88</sup> John Stanwix to GW, 10 Mar. 1758, GW to John Blair, 9 Apr. 1758, GW to John Stanwix, 10 Apr. 1758, GW to William Henry Fairfax, 23 Apr. 1758, in *PGW*.

<sup>89</sup> GW to John Stanwix, 10 Apr. 1758, in *PGW*.

<sup>90</sup> GW to John Robinson, 1 Sep. 1758, in *PGW*. Italics added.

<sup>91</sup> GW to Thomas Gage, 12 Apr. 1758, in *PGW*.

<sup>92</sup> GW to John Forbes, 23 Apr. 1758, in *PGW*.

<sup>93</sup> GW to John St. Clair, 27 Apr. 1758, in *PGW*.

he would not misuse his authority. To John Blair, president of the governor's council, Washington wrote in 1758 concerning his newly acquired militia privileges, "I shall make a prudent use of the Power you have been pleased to give me."<sup>94</sup> Later that year, Washington penned a letter to Governor Fauquier similarly pledging to use his powers wisely, "Be assured, Sir, the confidence which you have reposed in me, shall never be wilfully abused."<sup>95</sup> Washington's credibility in not misusing his authority would prove vitally important in his later career.

An offensive against the French at Fort Duquesne did not begin until the late fall of 1758. Yet, as eagerly anticipated an event as that was for Washington, he was afforded no opportunities for distinguishing himself in the action, for there was none. Before any of the British troops arrived, the enemy chose to burn the fort and withdraw.<sup>96</sup> With the onset of freezing temperatures, the military season ended – as did Washington's service in the army. Debilitated by another unusually long bout of illness, Washington sensed that circumstances suggested it was time for him to resign for good.<sup>97</sup>

Out of esteem and respect for Washington, the officers of the Virginia Regiment composed a "humble Address" to their parting commander.<sup>98</sup> Genuinely grateful for the affectionate letter from his officers, Washington was particularly fond of their "approbation of my conduct," which he said, "will constitute the greatest happiness of my life." Despite what libels or aspersions may have claimed during his command of the Virginia Regiment, Washington insisted that his behavior had been invariably governed by principles of "steady honesty."<sup>99</sup> Tired by the incessant struggle with military issues, Washington turned his attention to civil matters. The "animating prospect of possessing Mrs Custis" and leading a domestic life at his newly rebuilt estate at Mount Vernon were now the next items on his agenda.<sup>100</sup>

## Marrying a Wealthy Widow

Washington's rise to the top crust of the Virginia gentry class was solidified by his marriage to Martha Dandridge Custis, one of the wealthiest widows in the

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<sup>94</sup> GW to John Blair, 4–[10] May 1758, in *PGW*.

<sup>95</sup> GW to Francis Fauquier, 30 Oct. 1758, in *PGW*.

<sup>96</sup> GW to Francis Fauquier, 28 Nov. 1758, in *PGW*.

<sup>97</sup> Zagari, "Life of George Washington," 106n59–60; James Craik to GW, 20 Dec. 1758, in *PGW*.

<sup>98</sup> Address from the Officers of the Virginia Regiment, 31 Dec. 1758, in *PGW*.

<sup>99</sup> To the Officers of the Virginia Regiment, 10 Jan. 1759, in *PGW*.

<sup>100</sup> GW to Sarah Cary Fairfax, 12 Sep. 1758, Humphrey Knight to GW, 13 Jul. 1758, George William Fairfax to GW, 25 Jul. 1758, 5 Aug. 1758, John Patterson to GW, 13 Aug. 1758, in *PGW*.

province. The Custis estate, after the decease of Martha's late husband Daniel Parke, was appraised at an imposing £23,632 in Virginia currency. Like Washington, Martha was born in a lower gentry family, but with promising social ties to families of influence.<sup>101</sup> About one year before he began courting Martha, Washington had remodeled his house at Mount Vernon (which he leased from Ann, the wife of his recently deceased brother Lawrence), making it a more fashionable residence. The remodeling may have reflected Washington's attempt to approach the standard of living behooving a proper gentleman, or as Joseph J. Ellis suggests, it reflected his hope that "an appropriate consort would turn up soon."<sup>102</sup>

By the marriage (January 6, 1759), Washington not only espoused a widow with much property, but also became the step father of her two children from the previous marriage. Thus, Washington was at once established as a family man and, given their social status, the two immediately became one of the "power couples" of Virginia, enjoying more social prestige than either one would have had if single.<sup>103</sup>

Considering Washington's rapid ascent in his early years, it is not illogical to suspect the marriage to have been arranged for strategic reasons rather than affection.<sup>104</sup> Washington's wedding occurred in the mid-eighteenth century, a period of transition of marital behavior among the Chesapeake high society when *mariages de convenance* were decreasing in number in favor of spouse selection based on affection.<sup>105</sup> Robert F. Jones avers that the Washingtons were married "with a high regard for one another that matured into a quiet and deep love."<sup>106</sup>

Due to scanty records, it is not easy to ascertain what factors influenced Washington and Martha to marry. For the sake of confidentiality, Martha burned almost all letters exchanged between them, which makes an evaluation of their

<sup>101</sup> Esmond Wright, *Washington and the American Revolution* (Middlesex, 1973), 41; Helen Bryan, *Martha Washington: First Lady of Liberty* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2002), 15, 21, 38, [http://books.google.com/books?id=x-Jfr\\_n\]65UC](http://books.google.com/books?id=x-Jfr_n]65UC); III-B: Schedule B: General Account of the Estate, [ca. Oct. 1759], in PGW.

<sup>102</sup> Knollenberg, *George Washington*, 26–27; Enclosure: Invoice to Richard Washington, 15 Apr. 1757, in PGW; Carol Borchert Cadou, *The George Washington Collection: Fine and Decorative Arts at Mount Vernon* (Manchester: Hudson Hills Press, 2006), 29, <http://books.google.com/books?id=GN0RmDq-8nkC>; Ellis, *His Excellency*, 35.

<sup>103</sup> Bryan, *Martha Washington*, 2.

<sup>104</sup> For example, see Morison, "The Young Man Washington," quoted in H. J. Duteil, *The Great American Parade* (2005), 137, <http://books.google.com/books?id=S2ku4oO48x8C>.

<sup>105</sup> Daniel Blake Smith, *Inside the Great House: Planter Family Life in Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake Society* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986), 21–22, <http://books.google.com/books?id=cobhC8uzacoC>; Sayen, "'A Compleat Gentleman,'" 143.

<sup>106</sup> Robert Francis Jones, *George Washington: Ordinary Man, Extraordinary Leader* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 23, <http://books.google.com/books?id=LY8JTl-lmg8C>.

relationship before and after marriage more difficult. G. W. Parke Custis, Martha's grandson, believed the correspondence was burned to avoid "desecrating their chaste loves," because "some word or expression might be interpreted to his disadvantage."<sup>107</sup> In any case, the records that contain a trace of Washington's evaluation of his marriage denote a long-lasting mutual affection. During the first year of his marriage, Washington wrote, "I am now I beleive fixd at this Seat with an agreeable Consort for Life and hope to find more happiness in retirement than I ever experiencd amidst a wide and bustling World."<sup>108</sup> At the outset of the Revolutionary War, Washington assured Martha, "My dearest [...] I retain an unalterable affection for you, which neither time or distance can change."<sup>109</sup>

The circumstances and events leading up to Washington's proposal to Martha may possibly serve as an argument in favor of a marriage of convenience. Such a claim, however, cannot be established as no conclusive evidence has been identified for or against the case. It is true that Washington found the genteel and well-bred company appealing, but considering Washington's personality, his association with the opposite gender, and the historical time frame of Chesapeake marriage behavior, one could hardly disagree that their betrothal was not motivated by the fortunate combination of mutual affection that was supported by profitable and pragmatic considerations.

## Washington's Rising in the Esteem Among Virginia's Statesmen

Washington's rapid rise in the military was accompanied by his entering into the world of politics. The first time Washington seriously contemplated running for the House of Burgesses, the governing body of Virginia, was in 1755, shortly after his distinguished actions at the Battle of the Monongahela. Learning that his home county of Fairfax would be split into two counties, Washington contemplated taking a poll "if I thought my chance tolerably good."<sup>110</sup> Apparently, the chances were rather small so Washington decided not to run in the elections. Where Washington did run was not in Fairfax, but in the frontier county of Frederick, where he owned some land.<sup>111</sup> Peculiarly enough, Washington may not have been

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<sup>107</sup> John Benson Lossing, *Mary and Martha: The Mother and the Wife of George Washington* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1886), 278n, <http://www.archive.org/details/marymarthamother01loss>.

<sup>108</sup> GW to Richard Washington, 20 Sep. 1759, in *PGW*.

<sup>109</sup> GW to Martha Washington, 23 Jun. 1775, in *PGW*.

<sup>110</sup> GW to John Augustine Washington, 28 May 1755, in *PGW*.

<sup>111</sup> Land Grant, from Thomas, Lord Fairfax, 20 October 1750, in *PGW*; Charles S. Sydnor, *American Revolutionaries in the Making: Political Practices in Washington's Virginia* (New York: Free Press, 1966), 39–40.

aware of his candidacy there as his name did not appear on the poll list until the day of the elections, presumably added by his friends. But with no advance notice or electioneering on his behalf, it came as no surprise that he lost to his opponents who won the two burgess seats for the county.<sup>112</sup>

With regard to Washington's political ascent in the late 1750s, the Fairfax election deserves even closer attention. Although he did not run in his home county, Washington participated in the election there in order to support the candidacy of his friend and neighbor George William Fairfax.<sup>113</sup> It soon became apparent that the election would be very close, perhaps only a few votes apart. Tempers rose quickly in such a situation and some freeholders, including Washington, decided to cast only one vote instead of the usual two. William Payne, one of the incensed voters, engaged in a physical altercation with Washington, during which he knocked the commander of Virginia down with his cane.<sup>114</sup>

The passions of election day subsided and the following day Washington apologized to Payne for being in the wrong. The incident not only demonstrates Washington's well-mannered use of humility and frankness but also his continued loyalty to the Fairfaxes, his patron family, to whom he was indebted for many favors. In his book about early Virginia politicking, Charles S. Sydnor reminds us that "If a young man wished to rise in politics, society, or wealth, it was well for him to vote for those who had the power to aid him in winning his goal."<sup>115</sup> While Washington probably supported his neighbor for being beholden to his powerful family, he may have equally sensed the advantages that came from promoting those who could reciprocate the support in a future election. Either way, Washington's favor was duly returned three years later.

In 1758, the second time his name appeared on the candidacy list of the Frederick County election, it was with Washington's consent. Like three years earlier, his thoughts of running for office were guided by deliberation and caution. He sought the advice of his friends on whether his standing in the poll in the Frederick County would hurt his "Interest as a Candidate."<sup>116</sup> Learning that his chances were reasonable, Washington permitted his name to be added to the candidacy list and allowed his friends to begin canvassing on his behalf. The other candidates in

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<sup>112</sup> Lucille Griffith, *The Virginia House of Burgesses, 1750–1774* (University of Alabama Press, 1970), 93–94, 159–60.

<sup>113</sup> Sydnor, *American Revolutionaries in the Making*, 75.

<sup>114</sup> John Gilman Kolp, *Gentlemen and Freeholders: Electoral Politics in Colonial Virginia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 152; DSF 2: 146; Adam Stephen to GW, 23 Dec. 1755, in *PGW*.

<sup>115</sup> Sydnor, *American Revolutionaries in the Making*, 67.

<sup>116</sup> Nathaniel Thompson to GW, 20 Feb. 1758, in *PGW*.

the election were Bryan Martin, Martin West, and Thomas Swearingen. All three of them were involved in the pre-election canvassing, trying to make themselves more visible to the freeholders of the county. By contrast, Washington was not even in the county and attended to his military duties elsewhere on the frontier.

“Your being elected absolutely depends on your presence that day,” Washington was advised by one of his friends.<sup>117</sup> Although Washington obtained a leave of absence to attend the election, he was hesitant about leaving his military camp some forty miles north-west of Frederick County. “Tho. my being there on that occasion woud, at any other time, be very agreeable to me,” admitted Washington, “yet, at this juncture, I can hardly persuade myself to think of being absent from my more immediate Duty, even for a few days.”<sup>118</sup>

Not campaigning or being present at the election itself was rare among burgess candidates in Virginia. Washington justified his reluctance to attend the election by referring to his “more immediate” military duties.<sup>119</sup> Washington’s presence in the county would have certainly increased his chances of being elected, but he may have felt that his popularity among the freeholders of the county was already such as to attract a sufficient number of votes. Keeping in mind the possibility of an impending call for an attack against Fort Duquesne at that time, it becomes more apparent why Washington was loath to leave his troops.<sup>120</sup>

Having received sanguine reports of voting preferences of the gentlemen of the county, Washington’s outlook indeed seemed bright.<sup>121</sup> The leading gentry were the key to one’s success in any Virginia political election. Members of this class were privileged to be the first to cast their votes and the value of their voting preferences cannot be underestimated because they had a substantial influence on how the rest of the freeholders voted.<sup>122</sup>

The first gentleman to cast his vote at the Frederick election was Lord Fairfax, a true peer and proprietor of extensive land holdings. Fairfax’s two votes were in favor of Martin (his cousin) and Washington.<sup>123</sup> At the proprietor’s heels was

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<sup>117</sup> Gabriel Jones to GW, 6 Jul. 1758, in *PGW*.

<sup>118</sup> GW to Henry Bouquet, 19 Jul. 1758, in *PGW*.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> GW to Henry Bouquet, 21 Jul. 1758, in *PGW*. GW realized that by his participation in the long-anticipated offensive he would not only gain honor by displaying courage in battle but also gain further acclaim among the freeholders of Frederick and thus kill two birds with one stone.

<sup>121</sup> Sydnor, *American Revolutionaries in the Making*, 52.

<sup>122</sup> Kolp, *Gentlemen and Freeholders*, 146. The gentlemen’s voting preferences influenced the rest of the voters because all voting was done orally and was accessible to the public.

<sup>123</sup> Lyon Gardiner Tyler, ed., *Encyclopedia of Virginia Biography*, 5 vols. (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1915), 1: 285, <http://www.archive.org/details/encyclopediaofv01tyleuoft>.

William Meldrum, a respected Protestant minister, who voted for the same candidates. James Wood, a founder of Winchester, the capital of Frederick County, and Washington's representative at the election, voted for Washington, of course, and strategically for West instead of Martin. The fourth gentleman to vote was Colonel John Carlyle who supported Martin and Washington.<sup>124</sup>

This Frederick County election represented almost an exemplary display of how gentry influenced the voting behavior of the rest of the freeholders. For example, Swearingen, who received no vote from any of the first four dignitaries, soon realized that he could not expect to win; he finished last. On the other hand, Washington was the first to lead the poll, though only by a small margin, which gave him a slight advantage over Martin. The results of the poll could have been guessed after the first dozen of prominent freeholders voted: Washington finished first, Martin second, and West third.<sup>125</sup>

One can only speculate how many votes Washington would have lost had Lord Fairfax determined not to support him. But Wood, Washington's representative at the elections, also served the absent commander of Virginia well. Prior to the elections, Wood and other supporters of Washington treated the citizens to food and drink for free as was common in Virginia at that time. The receipts Washington had to pay afterward were not small but such a generosity and open-handedness was expected of a gentleman who hoped to gain the support of local freeholders.<sup>126</sup>

Washington's friends from Frederick County and elsewhere sent him congratulatory notes. His accomplishments were praised and his Burgess victory celebrated. On Washington's behalf, Wood "was Carried round the Town with a General applause, Huzawing Colo. Washington."<sup>127</sup>

Washington's 1758 election to the House of Burgesses was partially expected due to his rising social status and distinguished military career. However, the unconventional aspect of his political rise consisted of his winning a Burgess election *prior to* occupying any of the local political offices. Serving in the local parish

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<sup>124</sup> Sydnor, *American Revolutionaries in the Making*, 66.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 66–67; Series 4, General Correspondence, Frederick County, Virginia, July 24, 1758, Election Poll (List of Voters), in *GWPLC*, images 756–67. The totals for each candidate sent by Lieutenant Smith and Joseph Carroll, the clerk, slightly differ from GW's copy, see Charles Smith to GW, 24 Jul. 1758, 26 Jul. 1758, Enclosure V: Frederick County Poll Sheet, 24 Jul. 1758, in *PGW*.

<sup>126</sup> Enclosure I: Account with Henry Brinker, 24[–25] Jul. 1758, Enclosure II: Account with John Funk, 24[–26] Jul. 1758, Enclosure III: Account with Henry Heth, 24[–26] Jul. 1758, Enclosure IV: Account with Alexander Wodrow, 24 Jul. 1758, Enclosure: Account with John Hite, 24 Jul. 1758, in *PGW*; DSF 2: 320. Small quantities of brandy and cider are omitted here. Kolp, *Gentlemen and Freeholders*, 28–29; Sydnor, *American Revolutionaries in the Making*, 70.

<sup>127</sup> Charles Smith to GW, 24 Jul. 1758, in *PGW*.

vestry and subsequently as justice of the peace typically preceded one's membership in the House of Burgesses but, in Washington's case, the order was reversed.<sup>128</sup> In any case, seats in the House were traditionally reserved for the leading men of the respective counties. By joining the elite group of Virginia's statesmen, Washington's political ascent in his colony reached a significant milestone and served as a springboard for further colonial and continental prominence.<sup>129</sup>

## Conclusion

Washington's prominence in serving his country did not begin in the Revolutionary War but long before – during his early military career, a period which shaped his aspirations and patriotic spirit. When George was just eleven years old his future looked bleak and hardly anything seemed to suggest that his name would ever be known beyond his own county. But there was something about the young Washington that soon began to earn him respect and favor from men of influence as he matured. His unusual physical height combined with his assiduous absorption of moral principles, gleaned from such sources as the panegyric of Duke Schomberg and the *Rules of Civility*, did not escape the attention of those who had the authority to accept his offers of service.

In mid-eighteenth-century Virginia, where relationships and connections with members of the gentry constituted the principal factors in determining one's ascent among the elite, Washington's propinquity with the patrician Fairfaxes and Governor Dinwiddie's sustained support ranked among his most fortunate relationships.

Washington's desire to gain honor by serving his country was deep-rooted and easily recognizable from his early military career. Volunteering to deliver a letter of warning from the governor of Virginia to a French commandant stationed in a disputed territory, Washington placed himself in the spotlight of developing military conflict that resulted in the French and Indian War. His conspicuous role in the early stages of the war could not have escaped the attention of many concerned statesmen on both sides of the Atlantic.

Evidence suggests that those soldiers who served under his immediate command respected him primarily for his great zeal and patriotism. Washington repeatedly assured his superiors that his chief aim is a "laudable Ambition

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<sup>128</sup> Kolp, *Gentlemen and Freeholders*, 143; Sydnor, *American Revolutionaries in the Making*, 84, 100.

<sup>129</sup> H. R. McIlwaine, ed., *Journals of the House of Burgesses of Virginia, 1758–1761*, 13 vols. (Richmond, VA: [Colonial Press, E. Waddey Company], 1908), 9: vii–viii, <http://www.archive.org/details/journalsofhouseo09virg>.



of Serving Our Country, and meriting its applause” and that his ultimate reward shall be “what arises from a Consciousness of doing my duty. and from the good liking of my Friends thereupon.”<sup>130</sup>

Joining in matrimony the widowed Martha Dandridge Custis had a significantly wider social implication for Washington than merely establishing a family. Marrying a lady of good breeding and considerable wealth elevated Washington to the first tier of Virginia gentry – which in turn facilitated his association with other influential gentry families in the Old Dominion.

Washington’s distinguished military career and the support of the leading gentlemen, the Fairfaxes in particular, aided the retired commander of Virginia in winning a burgess election without being physically present at the polls and without having first served as vestryman in a parish or justice of the peace at a court. Whatever Washington did during his early career as a military officer, would-be statesman, or citizen, seems to have contributed to his steep and steady rise among the men of his province.

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<sup>130</sup> GW to John Robinson, 1 Sep. 1758, GW to John St. Clair, 27 Apr. 1758, in *PGW*.