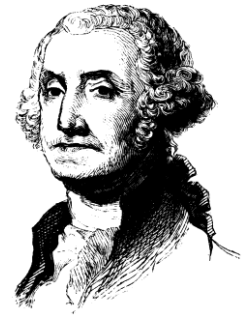


Name: _____

Washington's Birthday—February 22, 1732

George Washington

George Washington is best known for leading the Continental Army to victory over the British in the American Revolution. He was also the first President of the United States and one of the most popular presidents ever.



Early Life:

Washington was born and grew up in the British colony of Virginia. His father, a planter, died when George was only 11 years old. Fortunately, he had an older brother, Lawrence, who helped to raise him.

Although George didn't spend much time at school, he loved to read and was particularly good at math. His brother, Lawrence taught him about planting and surveying. At the age of 16, George went to work as a land surveyor (a person who determines the boundaries and area of land and maps them out in detail).

George grew to be over 6 feet tall. As a young man, he loved horseback riding, fox hunting, dancing, and card playing.

When he was 19, George came down with smallpox. He survived, but the pox left his face permanently scarred.

A year later, Lawrence died and George inherited his brother's plantation, Mount Vernon.

French and Indian War:

As a young man, George joined the Virginia Militia. At this time, Virginia was a British colony (ruled over by the British king). Members of the militia—like George—were volunteers in the British army. The British and the French each claimed land in North America, and the militia's job was to keep the French out of the land claimed by the British.

In 1753, the French began moving onto the land that the British said was theirs. George was sent on a 500 mile trip north to deliver a message to the French. The message ordered the French to stop settling land that was claimed by the British.

The result was a battle in which George and 160 men were badly beaten by a French army. This was the beginning of the 9-year-long French and Indian War in which the British and the Colonists fought against the French and their Native American (Indian) allies.

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During the war, George was promoted to colonel and became the leader of Virginia's militia. At one point, his horse was shot from under him and he barely escaped being killed.

After the British won the war, George settled down at Mount Vernon and took up life as a planter. In 1759, he married the widow Martha Custis. Martha had two children from her previous marriage, Martha "Patsy" and John "Jacky". George and Martha never had any children together.

The American War for Independence:

The French and Indian War had been expensive. To help pay for it, the British decided to tax the American colonies. This angered the colonists and they rebelled.

The colonists were tired of being ruled by a king who lived so far away (across the ocean in England); they wanted to govern themselves. On July 4, 1776, the 13 British colonies in America declared their Independence from Britain. The Revolutionary War was the fight to win that independence.

George Washington was chosen to be Commander in Chief of the Continental Army. It was his job to defeat the British. This was no easy task. George's volunteer army was untrained, barely paid, badly equipped, and vastly outnumbered by the British regulars.

The war went on for 8 years, but somehow George managed to hold his ragtag army together through it all. In the end—with a little help from the French—the colonists won. And, by the time it was over, George Washington was the most respected and popular man in the country and one of the best-known men in the world.

After the War:

After the war, George resigned his commission in the army and returned home to Mount Vernon. He refused to take any pay for his service to the country.

Some of his officers wanted to make him king, but this only made Washington angry. He had fought to free the people from the rule of kings, not to replace one king with another.

Hearing of this, King George III of England (the king whom the colonists had fought against) said, "If it is true, then he [Washington] is the greatest man in the world."

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Return to Public Service:

Soon Washington was back in public service. He was the new country's unanimous (everyone in agreement) choice to be the first President of the United States.

Washington served two terms (8 years) as President, and he was so popular that he could have been re-elected a third time. But Washington refused to serve another term. He felt that the president should not stay in office too long, or he might become too powerful, just like a king.

(Since then, only one president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, has served more than two terms. This was during World War II.)

Retirement and Death:

After leaving office in 1796, Washington returned to Mount Vernon and again took up life as a planter. Three years later, he developed bad throat infection and died on December 14, 1799 at the age of 67.

Six months before he died, Washington (a slave owner all his life) wrote his will. In his will, he freed his personal servant, William Lee, immediately and Mount Vernon's other 300 slaves when his wife, Martha, died.

Learning of Washington's death, General Henry Lee, who had fought alongside Washington in the Revolutionary, gave a speech before Congress praising Washington. In the speech, Lee summed up all of Washington's achievements in just a few words. He said that George Washington was "first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen."

Today, Washington is known as the *Father of Our Country*.

