Sketches of George Washington by Those Who Were in His Presence

“The strength of his character lay in his integrity, his love of justice, his fortitude, the soundness of his judgment, and his remarkable prudence....”

- James Madison
Eyewitness descriptions of George Washington have appeared in seemingly all of the biographical literature on Washington. The recorded impressions of those who observed Washington show, with some exceptions, a consistency over time and through various eyes when describing his appearance, behavior, presentation-of-self, manner of speaking and writing.

The recollections of these observers, detailed as many are, and sometimes appearing decades after the events quoted, were often composed with the aid of the author’s unpublished diaries, journals, letters, and notes. For example, Pierre-Etienne Duponceau’s autobiographical letters, composed late in life, draw on his diaries, early writings and copies of correspondence written at or near the time of the events he describes. An unpublished diary, in the possession of the Delaware Historical Society, tells of his first month at Valley Forge in 1778 when he arrived to support the revolution.

The following collection of Washington descriptions is presented chronologically. A brief introduction sets the historical context for each source quote, using information that often comes from the preface and introduction to the material quoted. With a few exceptions, multiple quotes from the same source, but written originally at different dates, start with the earliest entry date and are grouped together, as with Dr. Thacher’s numerous observations throughout the war.

Included are a handful of Washington descriptions by people in their 70s, 80s and 90s. From our common experiences with elderly acquaintances and relatives, we know that advanced age does not necessarily disqualify someone’s recollection of past events as inaccurate or incomplete - especially if mental acuity is strong and recalled events hold significant meaning for that person.

All one hundred-plus descriptions retain the original spelling and syntax from the quoted sources.

The cover image, *General George Washington at Trenton*, (Courtesy of the Yale University Art Gallery), by John Trumbull, 1792, is described in the last entry of this work.
Captain David Kennedy accompanied Washington during part of his February 1756 journey to meet with commander-in-chief of the British forces in America, William Shirley, in Boston. Months later Kennedy described Washington.

“… about 6 foot high of a Black Complection, Black hair which he wore in a bag. Looks like a Forrener, a Strong Man…. his uniform … Bleau faced with Red and Laced.”

Writing to a friend in Europe in 1760, Captain George Mercer of Virginia described Washington. Mercer served as an officer in Washington’s regiment in 1754 and later as aide-de-camp.

“… He may be described as being straight as an Indian, measuring six feet two inches in his stockings, and weighing 175 lbs when he took his seat in the House of Burgesses in 1759. His frame is padded with well-developed muscles, indicating great strength. His bones and joints are large, as are his feet and hands. He is wide shouldered, but has not a deep or round chest; is neat waisted, but is broad across the hips, and has rather long legs and arms. His head is well shaped, though not large, but is gracefully poised on a superb neck. A large and straight rather than a prominent nose; blue-gray penetrating eyes, which are widely separated and overhung by a heavy brow. His face is long rather than broad, with high round cheek bones, and terminates in a good firm chin. He has a clear though rather colorless pale skin, which burns with the sun. A pleasing, benevolent, though a commanding countenance, dark brown hair, which he wears in a cue. His mouth is large and generally firmly closed, but which from time to time discloses some defective teeth. His features are regular and placid, with all the muscles of his face under perfect control, though flexible and expressive of deep feeling when moved by emotions. In conversation he looks you full in the face, is deliberate, deferential and engaging. His demeanor at all times composed and dignified. His movements and gestures are graceful, his walk majestic, and he is a splendid horseman.”

Silas Deane of Connecticut, writing from the First Continental Congress in Philadelphia to his wife, Elizabeth Deane, September 11-12, 1774, characterizes the various attending delegates, including George Washington.

“… Col. Washington is nearly as Tall a Man as Col. Fitch and almost as hard a Countenance, yet with a very young Look, & an easy Soldier like Air, & gesture…. Col. Bland, is a … tolerable Speaker in public, as is Col. Washington who speaks very Modestly, & in cool but determined Stile & Accent….”

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Virginia merchant and planter Roger Atkinson was in the presence of Washington on various occasions before the war. With other merchants, he signed the Virginia Nonimportation Resolutions in Williamsburg on June 22, 1770, as did House of Burgesses member George Washington. In a letter dated October 1, 1774, to his brother-in-law, Samuel Pleasants, Atkinson gives his opinions of the seven members serving as the Virginia delegation to the First Continental Congress.

“… Ye 3d gentleman Col’o Washington, was bred a soldier – a warriour, & distinguished himself in early life before & at ye Death of ye unfortunate but intrepid Braddock. He is a modest man, but sensible & speaks little – in action cool, like a Bishop at his prayers....”

Judge of Admiralty and Loyalist Samuel Curwen, in Philadelphia and preparing to sail to England, spent the evening of May 9, 1775, at the home of Joseph Reed. The company included three Virginia delegates to the Second Continental Congress – Benjamin Harrison, Richard Henry Lee, and George Washington. Curwen’s journal gives a brief account of that evening.

“… dined at Stephen Collins, passed the evening at Mr. Joseph Reed’s in company with Colonel Washington a fine figure, and of a most easy and agreeable address. Mr. R. H. Lee, and Colonel Harrison, three of the Virginia Delegates, Dr. Shippen, Thomas Smith, Mrs. Deberdt, Mr. and Mrs. Reed where I staid till 12 o’clock, the conversation being chiefly on the most feasible and prudent method of stopping up the Channel of Delaware to prevent the coming up of any large King’s ships to the City. I could not perceive the least disposition to accommodate matters or even risk....”

Silas Deane, as a member of the Second Continental Congress, continues his description of Washington to his wife, Elizabeth Deane, in a letter of June 16, 1775.

“… I have been with him [Washington] for a great part of the last Forty eight Hours, in Congress & Committee and the more I am acquainted with, the more I esteem him.... I wish to cultivate this Gentlemans acquaintance & regard, not from any sinister Views, but from the great Esteem I have of his Virtues....”

Speaking on the floor of the Continental Congress, Massachusetts delegate John Adams


6 Silas Deane to Elizabeth Deane, June 16, 1775, in Paul H. Smith et al., eds., Letters of Delegates, 1:494.
proposed that George Washington lead the Continental Army. A few days later he described Washington in a letter to Abigail Adams from Philadelphia on June 17, 1775. Washington was elected Commander-in-Chief on June 15, 1775, and took actual command of the Continental Army in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on July 3, 1775.

"I can now inform you that the Congress have made choice of the modest and virtuous, the amiable, generous, and brave George Washington, Esquire, to be General of the American army, and that he is to repair, as soon as possible, to the camp before Boston. This appointment will have a great effect in cementing and securing the union of these colonies...."[7]

Continental Congressman Eliphalet Dyer from Connecticut describes his impressions of Washington in a letter to Joseph Trumbull on June 17, 1775.

“...He is a Gent. highly Esteemed by those acquainted with him.... he is Clever, & if any thing too modest. He seems discret & Virtuous, no harum Starum ranting Swearing fellow but Sober, steady, & Calm. His modesty will Induce him I dare say to take & order everstep with the best advice possible to be obtained in the Army....”[8]

Silas Deane from Connecticut, serving in the Continental Congress, offers his impressions of Washington to Joseph Trumbull in a letter dated June 18, 1775.

“General Washington will be with You soon, possibly by the Time, You receive This. his Election was unanimous, his acceptance of the high Trust, modest and polite, his Character I need not enlarge on but will only say to his honor, that he is said to be as fixed and resolute in having his Orders on all Occasions executed, as he is cool and deliberate, in giving them....”[9]

In a letter of June 18, 1775, Robert Treat Paine, as member of the Continental Congress from Massachusetts, congratulates Artemas Ward on his appointment as Second-in-Command of the American Army while also sharing an impression of Washington’s appointment as Commander-in-Chief.

“Hond. & beloved Sr Philada June 18 1775 I could not omit this opportunity of Congratulating you on yr. appointment to the second Command in the American Army & of the heroic & amiable General Washington to the first Command. He will be with you

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Continental Congress member Thomas Cushing of Massachusetts describes the newly appointed Commander of the Continental Army, George Washington, to Massachusetts political leader James Bowdoin, Sr. in a letter dated June 21, 1775.

“You will doubtless have been informed that the Congress have unanimously appointed George Washington, Esqr, General & Commander in Chief of the American forces. I beg leave to recommend him to your respectful notice. He is a compleat gentleman. He is sensible, amiable, virtuous, modest, & brave. I promise myself that your acquaintance with him will afford you great pleasure, and I doubt not his agreeable behaviour & good conduct will give great satisfaction to our people of all denominations. General Lee accompanies him as Major General…”

Charles Carroll of Annapolis inherited vast wealth and lands upon his father’s death. His son, Charles Carroll of Carrollton, was active in Maryland politics and participated in the pre-revolutionary protests against Great Britain. He signed the Declaration of Independence as a member of the Continental Congress. In the 1760s and early 1770s Washington traveled frequently to Annapolis for pleasure, for business, and to visit his adopted son, Jacky Custis, who was being tutored there. Washington’s diary entry for September 17, 1771, states that he dined that day at the Carroll home. Charles Carroll of Annapolis shared his opinion of the choice for the new Commander-in-Chief in a letter, dated June 24, 1775, with his son, Charles Carroll of Carrollton.

“… I am pleased with Washington’s appointment to be Generalissimo, there may be as brave & good officers to the Northward, but we know him to be a cool, prudent man. Our Rifle Men will I am confident be of vast service….”

Bookseller Henry Knox first served in the military as an engineer before taking charge of the artillery. A few days after meeting Washington at Roxbury, Massachusetts, on July 5, 1775, Knox gave his first impression of Washington in a letter to his wife.

“General Washington fills his place with vast ease and dignity, and dispenses happiness around him….”

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12 Charles Carroll of Annapolis to Charles Carroll of Carrollton, 24 June 1775, Charles Carroll Papers, 1731-1833, MS 206, H. Furlong Baldwin Library, Maryland Historical Society.

From her residence in Braintree, Massachusetts, Abigail Adams wrote to her husband, John Adams, on July 16, 1775. Washington had just assumed command of the Continental Army in Cambridge on July 3, 1775, and Mrs. Adams described her impressions upon meeting him.

“I was struck with General Washington. You had prepared me to entertain a favorable opinion of him, but I thought the one half was not told me. Dignity with ease, and complacency, the Gentleman and Soldier look agreeably blended in him. Modesty marks every line and feature of his face.… “14

Revolutionary War surgeon James Thacher served from the war’s beginnings in 1775 until his final day on January 1, 1783. The eyewitness accounts from the journal he kept during the war formed the core of his Military Journal published in 1823. Frequently in the presence of Washington, he recorded impressions and actions of the Commander-in-Chief throughout the war.

Journal entry dated July 1775:
“I am informed that General George Washington arrived at our provincial camp, in this town, on the 2d July; having been appointed, by the unanimous voice of the Continental Congress at Philadelphia, General and Commander in Chief of all the troops raised, and to be raised, for the defence of the United Colonies, as they are now termed…. he is supposed to possess ample qualifications for the command of our army, and the appointment gives universal satisfaction. Such is his disinterested patriotism, that he assured Congress, on his appointment, that he should receive from the public, for his military services, no other compensation than the amount of his necessary expenses. He has been received here with every mark of respect, and addressed by our Provincial Congress in the most affectionate and respectful manner. All ranks appear to repose full confidence in him as Commander in Chief....”

Journal entry dated July 20, 1775, with the army in Cambridge:
“… I have been much gratified this day with a view of General Washington. His Excellency was on horseback, in company with several military gentlemen. It was not difficult to distinguish him from all others; his personal appearance is truly noble and majestic; being tall and well proportioned. His dress is a blue coat with buff color facings, a rich epaulette on each shoulder, buff under dress, and elegant small sword; a black cockade in his hat.”

Journal entry dated July 4, 1778, describing the aftermath of the battle of Monmouth Court House on June 28:
“… General Washington commanded in person on this memorable day. He was exposed to every danger while encouraging and animating his troops, and his presence and example

were of the utmost importance during the day. After the action, at night, he laid down in his cloak under a tree, with the expectation of recommencing the battle in the morning, but the royal army silently retreated during the night without being pursued.”

Journal entry dated October 1778:
“His Excellency, the Commander in Chief, made a visit to our hospital; his arrival was scarcely announced, before he presented himself at our doors. Dr. Williams and myself had the honor to wait on this great and truly good man, through the different wards, and to reply to his inquiries relative to the condition of our patients. He appeared to take a deep interest in the situation of the sick and wounded soldiers, and inquired particularly as to their treatment and comfortable accommodations. Not being apprized of his intended visit in time to make preparation for his reception, we were not entirely free from embarrassment, but we had the inexpressible satisfaction of receiving his Excellency’s approbation of our conduct, as respects the duties of our department. The personal appearance of our Commander in Chief, is that of the perfect gentleman and accomplished warrior. He is remarkably tall, full six feet, erect and well proportioned. The strength and proportion of his joints and muscles, appear to be commensurate with the preeminent powers of his mind. The serenity of his countenance, and majestic gracefulness of his deportment, impart a strong impression of that dignity and grandeur, which are his peculiar characteristics, and no one can stand in his presence without feeling the ascendancy of his mind, and associating with his countenance the idea of wisdom, philanthropy, magnanimity, and patriotism. There is fine symmetry in the features of his face, indicative of a benign and dignified spirit. His nose is strait, and his eyes inclined to blue. He wears his hair in a becoming cue, and from his forehead it is turned back and powdered in a manner which adds to the military air of his appearance. He displays a native gravity, but devoid of all appearance of ostentation. His uniform dress is a blue coat, with two brilliant epaulettes, buff colored under clothes, and a three cornered hat, with a black cockade. He is constantly equipped with an elegant small sword, boots and spurs, in readiness to mount his noble charger. There is not in the present age, perhaps, another man so eminently qualified to discharge the arduous duties of the exalted station he is called to sustain, amidst difficulties which to others would appear insurmountable, nor could any man have more at command the veneration and regard of the officers and soldiers of our army, even after defeat and misfortune. This is the illustrious chief, whom a kind Providence has decreed as the instrument to conduct our country to peace and to Independence.”

Journal entry dated February 26, 1779:
“His Excellency the Commander in Chief has long been in the practice of inviting a certain number of officers to dine at his table every day. It is not to be supposed, that his Excellency can be made acquainted with every officer by name, but the invitations are given through the medium of general orders, in which is mentioned the brigade, from which the officer is expected. Yesterday I accompanied Major Cavil to head quarters, and had the honor of being numbered among the guests at the table of his Excellency, with his lady, two young ladies from Virginia, the gentlemen who compose his family, and several other officers.
“It is natural to view with keen attention the countenance of an illustrious man, with a secret hope of discovering in his features some peculiar traces of excellence, which distinguishes him from and elevates him above his fellow mortals. These expectations are realized in a peculiar manner, in viewing the person of General Washington. His tall and noble stature and just proportions, his fine, cheerful open countenance, simple and modest deportment, are all calculated to interest every beholder in his favor, and to command veneration and respect. He is feared even when silent, and beloved even while we are unconscious of the motive. The table was elegantly furnished, and the provisions ample but not abounding in superfluities…. In conversation, his Excellency’s expressive countenance is peculiarly interesting and pleasing; a placid smile is frequently observed on his lips, but a loud laugh, it is said, seldom if ever, escapes him. He is polite and attentive to each individual at table, and retires after the compliments of a few glasses…”

Doctor Benjamin Rush in Philadelphia expresses his thoughts about Washington in a letter to Doctor Thomas Ruston in London, October 29, 1775. Rush was a member of the Second Continental Congress in 1775 when Washington was chosen to lead the Continental Army.

“… General Washington has astonished his most intimate friends with a display of the most wonderful talents for the government of an army. His zeal, his disinterestedness, his activity, his politeness, and his manly behavior to General Gage in their late correspondence have captivated the hearts of the public and his friends. He seems to be one of those illustrious heroes whom providence raises up once in three or four hundred years to save a nation from ruin. If you do not know this person, perhaps you will be pleased to hear that he has so much martial dignity in his deportment that you would distinguish him to be a general and a soldier from among ten thousand people. There is not a king in Europe that would not look like a valet de chamber by his side…."

In an October 1775 letter to John Adams, Mercy Warren, author, poet, playwright, and historian of the revolution, writes about her first impressions of Washington after meeting him at Cambridge, Massachusetts. At the time, her husband, James Warren, was serving as Paymaster General for the Continental Army.

“The Generals Washington, Lee, and Gates, with several other distinguished officers from head-quarters, dined with us (at Watertown) three days since. The first of these I think one of the most amiable and accomplished gentlemen, both in person, mind, and manners, that I have met with…."

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**Jonathan Boucher** was born in England and came to Virginia to work as a private tutor. In addition to conducting a school for boys, he served as rector of various parishes in Virginia and Maryland. Among his students was John Parke Custis, the son of Martha Washington. From the time Jacky Custis became a resident student with Boucher in 1768, Boucher and George Washington became friends, writing and visiting each other often. The friendship finally ceased when Boucher, a committed and vocal Tory, sent Washington a letter, dated 6 August 1775, strongly condemning him for his political views.

“… You cannot say that I deserved to be run down, vilified, and injured in the manner which you know has fallen to my lot, merely because I cannot bring myself to think on some political points just as you and your party would have me think. And yet you have borne to look on, at least as an unconcerned spectator, if not an abettor, whilst, like the poor frogs in the fable, I have in a manner been pelted to death. I do not ask if such conduct in you was friendly: was it either just, manly, or generous? It was not: no, it was acting with all the base malignity of a virulent Whig. As such, sir, I resent it: and oppressed and overborne as I may seem to be by popular obloquy, I will not be so wanting in justice to myself as not to tell you, as I now do with honest boldness, that I despise the man who, for any motives, could be induced to act so mean a part. You are no longer worthy of my friendship: a man of honour can no longer without dishonour be connected with you. With your cause I renounce you; and now for the last time subscribe myself, sir, Your humble servant Jonathan Boucher.”

Clergyman **Jonathan Boucher**, loyal and committed to the British Crown, left America to reside in England in August 1775. Washington and Boucher corresponded and visited each other occasionally when Boucher was a private tutor to Jacky Parke Custis. During the period of Boucher’s departure for England, he penned these comments about Washington.

“Among my boys I had the son-in-law of the since so celebrated General Washington; and this laid the foundation of a very particular intimacy and friendship, which lasted till we finally separated, never to unite again, on our taking different sides in the late troubles.

“Mr. Washington was the second of five sons of parents distinguished neither for their rank nor fortune…. At Braddock’s defeat, and every subsequent occasion throughout the war, he acquitted himself much in the same manner as in my judgment he has since done - i.e. decently, but never greatly. I did know Mr. Washington well; and though occasions may call forth traits of character that never could have been discovered in the more sequestered scenes of life, I cannot conceive how he could, otherwise than through the interested representations of party, have ever been spoken of as a great man. He is shy, silent, stern, slow and cautious, but has no quickness of parts, extraordinary penetration,

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nor an elevated style of thinking. In his moral character he is regular, temperate, strictly just and honest (except that as a Virginian he has lately found out that there is no moral turpitude in not paying what he confesses he owes to a British creditor), and, as I always thought, religious; having heretofore been pretty constant and even exemplary, in his attendance on public worship in the Church of England. But he seems to have nothing generous or affectionate in his nature. Just before the close of the last war he married the widow Custis, and thus came into possession of her large jointure. He never had any children, and lived very much like a gentleman at Mount Vernon, in Fairfax County, where the most distinguished part of his character was that he was an admirable farmer.”

Israel Trask joined a Massachusetts regiment in 1775 at the age of ten, serving as cook and messenger. As proof of service Trask submitted recollections of his experiences when he applied for a military pension in 1845. He was with Washington at Cambridge in early 1776, and, as part of a larger statement, registered these observations of Washington ending a fight between a Virginia corps of riflemen and a Marblehead regiment.

“… It was at this encampment [Cambridge] I saw for the first time the commander-in-chief, General Washington. A description of the peculiar circumstances under which it took place may not be thought foreign to the object of the present narrative but tend to illustrate not only the intrepidity and physical as well as mental power of the commandant-in-chief….

“… a fierce struggle commenced with biting and gouging on the one part, and knockdown on the other part with as much apparent fury as the most deadly enemy could create. Reinforced by their friends, in less than five minutes more than a thousand combatants were on the field, struggling for the mastery.

“At this juncture General Washington made his appearance, whether by accident or design I never knew. I only saw him and his colored servant [Billy Lee], both mounted. With the spring of a deer, he leaped from his saddle, threw the reins of his bridle into the hands of his servant, and rushed into the thickest of the melee, with an iron grip seized two tall, brawny, athletic, savage-looking riflemen by the throat, keeping them at arm’s length, alternately shaking and talking to them. In this position the eye of the belligerents caught sight of the general. Its effect on them was instantaneous flight at the top of their speed in all directions from the scene of the conflict. Less than fifteen minutes time had elapsed from the commencement of the row before the general and his two criminals were the only occupants of the field of action. Here bloodshed, imprisonment, trials by court-martial were happily prevented, and hostile feelings between the different corps of the army extinguished by the physical and mental energies timely exerted by one individual.”


Hessian officer **Lieutenant Jakob Piel** was captured at the battle of Trenton on December 26, 1776. He was introduced to General Washington after the capture, and he recorded his impressions of Washington in his diary on December 28, 1776.

“That one, [Washington], received us very politely, but we understood very little of what he said because he spoke nothing but English – a language which at that time none of us handled well. In the face of this man nothing of the great man showed for which he would be noted. His eyes have no fire, but a slight smile in his expression when he spoke inspired love and respect….”

**Lieutenant Andreas Wiederhold** was one of four Hessian officers who dined with Washington after their capture during the battle of Trenton on December 26, 1776. Wiederhold also entered impressions of Washington in his diary on December 28, 1776.

“General Washington is a polite and refined man, seldom speaks, and has a cunning physiognomy. He is not especially tall, but also not short, but rather of middle height with a good body.…”

By May 1777 the winter encampment for Washington’s army at Morristown, New Jersey, was coming to an end. Col. Theodorick Bland’s wife, **Martha Daingerfield Bland**, had been in camp a little over a month when she wrote to her sister-in-law, Frances Bland Randolph, describing life at headquarters.

“… Now let me speak of our Noble and Agreeable Commander (for he commands both Sexes) one by his Excellent Skill in Military Matters the other by his ability politeness and attention we visit them twice or three times a week by particular invitation – Ev’ry day frequently from Inclination – he is generally busy in the forenoon – but from dinner till night he is free for all company his Worthy Lady seems to be in perfect felicity while she is by the side of her Old Man as she calls him, we often make partys on Horse Back the Genl his lady Miss Livingstone & his Aid de Camps … this is our riding party Generly – at which time General Washington throws off[fl] the Hero – and takes on the chatty agreeable companion – he can be down right impudent sometimes – such impudence, Fanny, as you and I like…."

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22 Andreas Wiederhold, Diary, December 26, 1776, in Bruce Burgoyne, ed. and trans., *The Trenton Commanders*, 4.

Elias Boudinot, lawyer and statesman from New Jersey, was a member of the Continental Congress, serving as President in 1782 and 1783. He was later a member of the House of Representatives in the first six years of Washington’s presidency. During the war Washington persuaded him to become commissary general for prisoners, American and British, a position he held from May 1777 until July 1778. Struggling to procure funds from Congress for supplies for prisoners held by the British in New York, he apprised Washington of his desperate situation and his wish to resign the position.

“In much distress & with tears in his eyes, he assured me that if he was deserted by the gentlemen of the country, he should despair, He could not do everything, he was General, Quartermaster, and Commissary. Everything fell on him and he was unequal to the task, he gave me the most positive engagement that if I would contrive any mode for their support and comfort, he would confirm it as far as was in his power. On this I told him that I knew of but one way and that was to borrow money on my own private security. He assured me that in case I did, and was not reimbursed by Congress, he would go an Equal sharer with me in the loss….”

Cavalry commander Henry “Light-Horse Harry” Lee joined the Continental Army in 1775, was with Washington’s army in Pennsylvania in 1777, and remained active through the Yorktown campaign. His memoirs and history of the war were published in 1812. When describing Washington’s preparation for the October 1777 Germantown engagement with the British Army, Lee interprets Washington’s command style by showing that Washington often subjugates a natural boldness to his military wisdom and judgment.

“Cautious as Washington undoubtedly was, his caution was exceeded by his spirit of enterprise. He resembled Marcellus rather than Fabius, notwithstanding his rigid adherence to the Fabian policy during our war. Ardent, and impetuous by nature, he had, nevertheless, subjected his passions to his reason; and could with facility, by his habitual self-control, repress his inclinations whenever his judgment forbade their indulgence: the whole tenor of his military life evinces uniform and complete self-command.”

The Chevalier de Pontgibaud was one of that group of French volunteers who supported the American war by joining the Continental Army before France was officially allied with the United States on February 6, 1778. De Pontgibaud, with the financial support of his father, arrived in the Chesapeake Bay in November 1777 and immediately traveled to the American encampment at Valley Forge. He sought out and introduced himself to Lafayette, who, in time, named de Pontgibaud one of his aides-de-camp. De Pontgibaud’s description of Washington is taken from his memoirs written 40 years after his American involvement.

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“... The Marquis de la Fayette presented me as his aide-de-camp to the commander-in-chief. Washington was intended by nature for a great position, - his appearance alone gave confidence to the timid, and imposed respect on the bold. He possessed also those external advantages which a man born to command should have; tall stature, a noble face, gentleness in his glance, amenity in his language, simplicity in his gestures and expressions. A calm, firm bearing harmonized perfectly with these attributes. This general, who has since become so celebrated for his talents and successes, was just beginning to play that important part in history that he has since so gloriously sustained, in every capacity, military, civil, and political. But I intend here only to speak of the general.”

Philip Mazzei, an Italian physician and businessman, came to America in 1773 to cultivate vineyards. He lived near Thomas Jefferson and became strongly interested in politics and the American cause. Because of his European connections, Mazzei was dispatched to Tuscany in 1779 to seek funds to support the revolution. Later, when in France, Mazzei wrote a rebuttal to the criticisms of the United States by French writer Abbe’ Mably. In the work, published in 1788, Mazzei writes that he knew George Washington. He gives an anecdote about Washington told to him by his Virginia neighbor John Harvie, who, with other members of the Continental Congress, visited Washington in 1778 to consult with him about a reorganization of the army.

“Another anecdote reveals General Washington’s remarkable control over his pride. During the early part of the war some citizens maliciously compared him to Fabius Cunctator. They preferred General Lee and later General Gates, whose reputation was enhanced by the Saratoga affair, although several subordinate officers, such as [Benjamin] Lincoln, [Daniel] Morgan, and the traitor Arnold, should have shared the glory. The opposition consisted of men with talent and means to make themselves appreciated; although they did not declare war openly, everyone knew who they were. After their protests against the commander had continued for a year, Congress sent a delegation of three men, one of whom was my friend and neighbor, Mr. John Harvie. The deputation soon realized the complete falsity of all this gossip, and when Mr. Harvie was alone with Washington, he said: ‘My dear general, if you had been willing to explain your position, all this talk would have stopped long ago.’ ‘Could I justify myself without risk to the common cause?’ replied this great man, whose nobility in this instance cannot be put into words.”

Pierre-Etienne Duponceau arrived in America in December 1777 with Baron von Steuben, for whom he served as translator and aide-de-camp. Von Steuben and Duponceau reached Valley Forge on February 23, 1778. Drawing on his diary and journal records of the period, Duponceau wrote a series of detailed autobiographical letters to family late in life. These letters included descriptions of Washington.

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“From Lancaster, we proceeded directly to Valley Forge, where we arrived on the 23rd of February. On the next day, I had the honour of being presented to General Washington, and to dine with him that day and the next. He received the Baron with great cordiality, and to me he showed much condescending attention. I cannot describe the impression that the first sight of that great man made upon me. I could not keep my eyes from that imposing countenance, grave yet not severe: affable, without familiarity. Its predominant expression was calm dignity through which you could trace the strong feelings of the patriot and discern the father, as well as, the commander of his soldiers. I have never seen a picture that represents him to me as I saw him at Valley Forge, and during the campaigns in which I had the honour to follow him. Perhaps that expression was beyond the skill of the painter, but while I live it will remain impressed on my memory….”

Samuel Shaw enlisted in the American Army in December 1775 and remained until forces were disbanded at the end of the war. As a Major of Brigade in the artillery corps under General Knox, Shaw was frequently close to Washington. He wrote detailed observations of the war in a series of letters to family and friends.

Letter from Artillery Park, April 12, 1778:
“It would be paying very little attention to that warm attachment which you so justly have to our illustrious Commander-in-chief, were I to omit acquainting you, that he enjoys a perfect state of health, and is the same steady, amiable character he ever has been. His fortitude, patience, and equanimity of soul, under the discouragements he has been obliged to encounter, ought to endear him to his country, - it has done it exceedingly to the army. When I contemplate the virtues of the man, uniting in the citizen and soldier, I cannot too heartily coincide with the orator for the Fifth of March last, who so delicately describes him, as a person that appears to be raised by Heaven to show how high humanity can soar….”

Letter from New Brunswick, July 3, 1778, summarizing the Battle of Monmouth:
“… Our brave Commander-in-chief, by his gallant example, animated his forces, and, by exposing his person to every danger common to the meanest soldier, taught them to hold nothing too dear to resign for the good of their country; he thanked the whole army the next day in general orders, and made particular mention of the good service done by the artillery….”

In reprinting the “Particulars of the Life and Character of General Washington” by An Old Soldier, London’s Westminster Magazine for August 1778 introduced the article by stating, “The following historical sketch of the life of General Washington, is written with such


Authenticity and Candour, by one who seems to have an intimate knowledge of his subject, that we presume it will be entertaining and instructive to most of our Readers; we could not therefore withhold from them such a curious Description of a Person who makes a distinguished figure in the political System of the Globe, and is like to hold the same rank in future records of Historians.

“… Having been used to the woods, and being a youth of great sobriety, diligence, and fidelity, on the first encroachments of the French previous to the last war, he was appointed, by the Assembly of Virginia, to go out to enquire into, and make a report of, the true state of the complaints. He published his journal, which did credit to his character for care and industry. His appointment soon after to the command of one of the Provincial regiments, and his very decent conduct in that command, are facts of sufficient notoriety. One circumstance, perhaps not so generally known, may be mentioned. The very first engagement in which he was ever concerned, was against his own countrymen. He unexpectedly fell in, in the woods, with a party of the other Virginia regiment in the night, and fifty men were killed before the mistake was found out. The blame was laid (and possibly with great justness) on the darkness of the night. It is remarkable, however, that the same misfortune befell him in his last action at German-Town; the blame was then also laid on a darkness occasioned by a thick fog.

“Before the war was over Mr. Washington resigned, urged thereto by his lady, a widow of Mr. Custis, whom he then married, and which certainly was an advantageous match.

“It is not to be denied, that he was not then much liked in the army; but it is not less true that no very good reasons were ever given for his being disliked. I attributed it (and I hope I may be allowed to have some pretensions to judge of it, having served with him in that very campaign) to his being a tolerably strict disciplinarian; a system which ill suited with the impatient spirits of his headstrong countrymen, who are but little used to restraint. Method and exactness are the fort of his character; he gave very strong proof of this in this very service.

“He is not a generous, but a just man; and having, from some idea of propriety, made it a point neither to gain nor lose as an individual in the war, he kept to his purpose, and left the service without either owing a shilling, or being a shilling richer for it.

“Placed at the head of an army and country, which, at least, were great and glorious in the American accounts of them, it is not to be wondered at that Mr. Washington soon began to feel his consequence. His ruling passion is military fame. Nature has certainly given him some military talents, yet it is more than probable he never will be a great soldier. There are insuperable impediments in his way. He is but of slow parts, and these are totally unassisted by any kind of education….

“It should not be denied, however, that, all things considered, he really has performed wonders. That he is alive to command an army, or that an army is left him to command, might be sufficient to ensure him the reputation of a great General, if British Generals any
longer were what British Generals used to be.”

John Bell of Maryland, in a letter to a friend in Europe, dated May 3, 1779, gives a short biographical sketch of Washington, from which the following statement comes. During the period, Bell’s letter appeared in various publications in England and the U.S. His relationship to Washington is explained only as being “connected and intimate in the family of that great man.”

“I would not mention to you the character of this excellent man, were I not convinced that it bears great analogy to the qualifications of his mind. General Washington is now in the forty-seventh year of his age; he is a tall, well-made man, rather large boned, and has a tolerably genteel address: his features are manly and bold, his eyes of a bluish cast and very lively; his hair a deep brown, his face rather long and marked with the small pox; his complexion sun-burnt and without much colour, and his countenance sensible, composed, and thoughtful; there is a remarkable air of dignity about him, with a striking degree of gracefulness: he has an excellent understanding without much quickness; is strictly just, vigilant, and generous; an affectionate husband, a faithful friend, a father to the deserving soldier; gentle in his manners, in temper rather reserved; a total stranger to religious prejudices, which have so often excited Christians of one denomination to cut the throats of those of another; in his morals irreproachable; he was never known to exceed the bounds of the most rigid temperance: in a word, all his friends and acquaintance universally allow, that no man ever united in his own person a more perfect alliance of the virtues of a philosopher with the talents of a general. Candour, sincerity, affability, and simplicity, seem to be the striking features of his character, till an occasion offers of displaying the most determined bravery and independence of spirit.”

Conrad Gerard de Rayneval served as the first French minister to the United States after the Treaty of Alliance was signed on February 6, 1778, until he was replaced in September 1779. Gerard was in close contact with Washington during this term and corresponded frequently with his superior in France, the French Foreign Minister, Count de Vergennes. Gerard offers comments about Washington in his letter to Vergennes, written on May 4, 1779, from Washington’s camp at Middlebrook, New Jersey.

“I have had many conversations with General Washington, some of which have continued for three hours. It is impossible for me briefly to communicate the fund of intelligence, which I have derived from him, but I shall do it in my letters as occasions shall present themselves. I will now say only, that I have formed as high an opinion of the powers of his mind, his moderation, his patriotism, and his virtues, as I had before from common report conceived of his military talents and of the incalculable services he has rendered to his


31 W.S. Baker, ed., Character Portraits of Washington as Delineated by Historians, Orators and Divines.... (Philadelphia: Robert M. Lindsay, 1887), 12-14.
Francois Marbois, later marquis de Barbe-Marbois, was secretary of the French legation to the United States at the time of this meeting with Washington on September 12, 1779, at Fishkill, NY.

“... He received us with a noble, modest, and gentle urbanity and with that graciousness which seems to be the basis of his character. He is fifty years old, well built, rather thin. He carries himself freely and with a sort of military grace. He is masculine looking, without his features’ being less gentle on that account. I have never seen anyone who was more naturally and spontaneously polite. His eyes are blue and rather large, his mouth and nose are regular, and his forehead open. His uniform is exactly like that of his soldiers. Formerly, on solemn occasions, that is to say on days of battle, he wore a large blue sash, but he has given up that unrepulicdistinction. I have been told that he preserves in battle the character of humanity which makes him so dear to his soldiers. I have seen him for sometime in the midst of his staff, and he has always appeared even-tempered, tranquil, and orderly in his occupations, and serious in his conversation. He asks few questions, listens attentively, and answers in a low tone and with few words. He is serious in business. Outside of that he permits himself a restricted gaiety. His conversation is as simple as his habits and his appearance. He makes no pretensions, and does the honors of his house with dignity, but without pompousness or flattery. His conversation is as simple as his habits and his appearance. He makes no pretensions, and does the honors of his house with dignity, but without pompousness or flattery. His aides-de-camp preside at his table and offer the toasts. Before being head of the American army, he did not disdain the care of his farm. To-day, he sometimes throws and catches a ball for whole hours with his aides-de-camp. He is reverent without bigotry, and abhors swearing, which he punishes with the greatest severity...”


“General Washington, altho’ advanced in years, is remarkably healthy, takes a great deal of exercise, and is very fond of riding on a favorite white horse; he is very reserved, and loves retirement. When out of camp he has only a single servant attending him, and when he returns within the lines a few of the light horse escort him to his tent. When he has any great object in view he sends for a few of the officers of whose abilities he has a high opinion, and states his present plan among half a dozen others, to all which they give their separate judgments: by these means he gets all their opinions, without divulging his


intentions. He has no tincture of pride, and will often converse with a sentinel with more
freedom than he would with a general officer. He is very shy and reserved to foreigners,
tho’ they have letters of recommendation, from Congress. He punishes neglect of duty
with great severity, but is very tender and indulgent to recruits until they learn the articles
of war and their exercise perfectly. He has a great antipathy to spies, although he employs
them himself, and has an utter aversion to all Indians. He regularly attends divine service
in his tent every morning and evening, and seems very fervent in his prayers. He is so
tender-hearted, that no soldiers must be flogged nigh his tent, or if he is walking in the
camp, and sees a man tied to the halberds, he will either order him to be taken down, or
walk another way to avoid the sight. He has made the art of war his particular study; his
plans are in general good and well digested; he is particularly careful always of securing a
retreat, but his chief qualifications are steadiness, perseverance, and secrecy; any act of
bravery he is sure to reward, and make a short eulogy on the occasion to the person and
his fellow soldiers (if it be a soldier) in the ranks. He is humane to the prisoners who fall
into his hands, and orders every thing necessary for their relief. He is very temperate in his
diet, and the only luxury he indulges himself in, is a few glasses of punch after supper.”

Mathieu Dumas arrived in America with the first contingent of French troops in 1780. As an
aide-de-camp to Rochambeau he was in close company with Washington many times during the
war. His memoirs, published in 1839, describe his Revolutionary War experiences.

During the 1st meeting between Washington and Rochambeau at Hartford, CT., Sept. 21, 1780:
“… General Washington, accompanied by the marquis de la Fayette, repaired in person to
the French headquarters. We had been impatient to see the hero of liberty. His dignified
address, his simplicity of manners, and mild gravity, surpassed our expectation, and won
every heart….”

Dumas arrives with dispatches from Rochambeau at Washington’s headquarters, New Windsor,
CT on January 21, 1781:
“The general gave me a most cordial reception. He appeared to be highly satisfied with the
despatches which I delivered to him, in the presence of M. de la Fayette, colonel Hamilton,
his aide-de-camp, and colonel Humphries, who performed the duties of chief of staff. He
withdrew to confer with them. Being invited to dinner, which was remarkably plain, I had
leisure to admire the perfect harmony of his noble and fine countenance, with the
simplicity of his language and the justice and depth of his observations. He generally sat
long at table, and animated the conversation by unaffected cheerfulness….”

Hans-Axel, comte de Fersen met Washington immediately before the September 21, 1780,
conference between Washington and Rochambeau near Hartford, CT. His mission was to
announce the arrival of Rochambeau for whom Fersen served as aide-de-camp.


35 Count Mathieu Dumas, Memoirs of His Own Time: Including the Revolution, the Empire, and the Restoration, 2
“… I had the opportunity of seeing this man, the most illustrious, not to say unique, in our century. His face handsome and full of majesty, but at the same time kind and honest, expresses perfectly his moral qualities: he looks like a hero; he seems to be very distant, speaks little but is polite and gentlemanly. His countenance is overcast with sadness, but this becomes him perfectly and makes him even more attractive.”

Claude Blanchard served under Rochambeau as chief quartermaster of the French Army. On June 29, 1781, Blanchard had dinner with Washington and his officer staff at Peekskill, NY. He recorded an account of this meeting in his diary.

“… His physiognomy has something grave and serious; but it is never stern, and, on the contrary, becomes softened by the most gracious and amiable smile. He is affable and converses with his officers familiarly and gaily.”

Louis-Alexandre Berthier was a member of Rochambeau’s staff, acting as cartographer for the Yorktown campaign. On March 6, 1781, Washington visited Rochambeau at Newport, RI. Berthier’s journal entry for that day records these observations of Washington as he appeared before the French Army for the first time.

“… Thus the General passed before the whole army. The nobility of his bearing and his countenance, which bore the stamp of all his virtues, inspired everyone with the devotion and respect due his character, increasing, if possible, the high opinion we already held of his exceptional merit.”

French officer Jean Francois Louis, comte de Clermont-Crevecœur was present when Washington met with Rochambeau at Newport, RI, on March 6, 1781. His journal offers impressions of Washington from that meeting.

“General Washington is about 5 foot 10 or 11, well built, with a good figure. His face is handsome and his expression modest. Although cold, it conveys an impression of kindliness and affability. His uniform is simple and unadorned. He responded to the courtesies shown him in an altogether admirable manner.”

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37 Gilbert Chinard, ed. and trans., George Washington as the French Knew Him, 65.


During the March 6, 1781, meeting of Washington and Rochambeau in Newport, RI, as the French commanders received Washington at the head of seven thousand troops, an unnamed observer in the crowd recounted this observation many years later.

"Never will that scene be erased from my memory….

“Calm and unmoved by all the honors that surrounded him, the voice of adulation nor the din of battle had never disturbed the equanimity of his deportment. Ever dignified, he wore on this day the same saint-like expression that always characterized him. There were other officers of inferior grade too that followed, and I afterwards saw them all on horseback, but they did not set on a horse like Washington….”

Baron Ludwig von Closen, serving as aide-de-camp to General Rochambeau, was one of the French Army diarists who described Washington from close contact.

Diary entry for March 13, 1781:
“He [Washington] left us on the 13th. The troops gave him the same honors once more, and all the gilded company escorted him as far as the Bristol Ferry. He returned to New Windsor by way of Providence. It can be said that he bears with him the regrets, affection, respect, and veneration of our entire army. Throughout my career under General Washington, I had ample opportunity to note his gentle and affable nature; his very simple manners, his very easy accessibility; his even temper; his great presence of mind, in sum, it is evident that he is a great man and a brave one. He can never be praised sufficiently. In military matters, he does not have the brilliance of the French in expression, but he is penetrating in his calculations and a true soldier in his bearing. This is the opinion of the entire army, which no one can applaud more sincerely than I.”

Diary entry for September 20, 1782:
“On the 20th, General Washington reviewed our army and watched it march past him. He seemed to be delighted with it, and expressed his great satisfaction with it. It is impossible for those who know the General not to have the highest opinion of his gentle, calm, and stately bearing, which distinguishes him in every gathering. As for his military talents and knowledge, he gave such striking evidence of them during many of his conversations with M. de Rochambeau concerning our profession, when I was continuously present as interpreter, that I could not find strong enough words to describe them as vividly and forcefully as I should.”

40 Quoted in Catharine R. Williams, Biography of Revolutionary Heroes; Containing the Life of Brigadier Gen. William Barton, and also, of Captain Stephen Olney (Providence, RI: The Author; New York: Wiley & Putnam; [etc., etc.], 1839), 308-309.

41 Baron Ludwig von Closen journal entries for March 13, 1781, & September 20, 1782, in Mary V. Thompson, “Statements…”, 37, 43.
Abbe Robin was a chaplain with Rochambeau in 1781. Shortly after the French Army joined the Continental Army at Philipsburg, NY, in early July 1781, Robin recorded his impressions of Washington.

“I saw Washington, the man who is the soul and support of one of the greatest revolutions that has ever happened! I gazed at him earnestly with eagerness that is always aroused by the presence of great men. It seems that one may find in their features the marks of the genius which sets them apart and places them above their fellow men. More than any other man Washington can vindicate this opinion: a tall, noble and well proportioned figure, an open, kind and calm expression, an appearance simple and modest, he strikes, he interests Frenchmen, Americans and even his enemies....”

Francois-Jean Beauvoir, Chevalier de Chastellux was one of three major generals to serve under Rochambeau. Although a professional soldier he was also a published man of letters in France. His fluency in English provided valuable intermediary services between French and American officers. His two-volume account of military activities and life in America first appeared in print in 1786. On the evening of November 23, 1780, Chastellux arrived at Washington’s headquarters at Preakness, NJ. His book offers a detailed characterization of Washington.

“... He [Washington] conducted me to his house, where I found the company still at table.... He presented me to the Generals Knox, Waine, Howe, &c. and to his family, then composed of Colonels Hamilton and Tilgman, his Secretaries and his Aides de Camp.... A fresh dinner was prepared for me, and mine.... A few glasses of claret and madeira accelerated the acquaintances I had to make, and I soon felt myself at my ease near the greatest and the best of men. The goodness and benevolence which characterize him, are evident from everything about him; but the confidence he gives birth to, never occasions improper familiarity; for the sentiment he inspires has the same origin in every individual, a profound esteem for his virtues, and a high opinion of his talents....

“The weather being fair, on the 26th, I got on horseback, after breakfasting with the General. He was so attentive as to give me the horse he rode on, the day of my arrival.... I found him as good as he is handsome; but above all, perfectly well broke, and well trained.... I mention these minute particulars, because it is the General himself who breaks all his own horses; and he is a very excellent and bold horseman, leaping the highest fences, and going extremely quick, without standing upon his stirrups, bearing on the bridle, or letting his horse run wild....

“Here would be the proper place to give the portrait of General Washington.... The strongest characteristic of this respectable man is the perfect union which reigns between the physical and moral qualities which compose the individual, one alone will enable you to judge of all the rest.... Brave without temerity, laborious without ambition, generous without prodigality, noble without pride, virtuous without severity; he seems always to

42 Gilbert Chinard, ed. and trans., George Washington as the French Knew Him, 68.
have confined himself within those limits, where the virtues, by cloathing themselves in more lively, but more changeable and doubtful colours, may be mistaken for faults. This is the seventh year that he has commanded the army, and that he has obeyed the Congress; more need not be said, especially in America, where they know how to appreciate all the merit contained in this simple fact.

“In speaking of this perfect whole of which General Washington furnishes the idea, I have not excluded exterior form. His stature is noble and lofty, he is well made, and exactly proportioned; his physiognomy mild and agreeable, but such as to render it impossible to speak particularly of any of his features, so that in quitting him, you have only the recollection of a fine face. He has neither a grave nor a familiar air, his brow is sometimes marked with thought, but never with inquietude; in inspiring respect, he inspires confidence, and his smile is always the smile of benevolence.”

Cromot Dubourg arrived in America in May 1781 to serve as aide-de-camp to Rochambeau. When Washington visited the French encampment at North Castle, New York, on July 5, 1781, Cromot Dubourg was among those who rode out to meet him. Dubourg recorded his first impressions of Washington in his diary of service in the Revolution.

“General Washington came to see M. de Rochambeau. Notified of his approach, we mounted our horses and went out to meet him. He received us with the affability which is natural to him and depicted on his countenance. He is a very fine looking man, but did not surprise me as much as I expected from the descriptions I had heard of him. His physiognomy is noble in the highest degree, and his manners are those of one perfectly accustomed to society, quite a rare thing certainly in America. He paid a visit to our camp, dined with us, and later we escorted him several miles on his return and took leave of him.”

Guillaume, Comte de Deux-Ponts came to America with Rochambeau’s army in 1780. In the journal of his experiences, Deux-Ponts gives a view of Washington’s excitement over the news of the arrival of de Grasse’s French naval fleet and French reinforcement troops in the Chesapeake on August 26, 1781.

“On the 5th of September, we encamped at Chester, where we learned the authentic news of the arrival of the Count de Grasse with twenty-eight ships of the line, and three thousand five hundred troops under the Marquis de St. Simon, who landed them on the 27th of August, the day after his arrival, with orders to join the corps of the Marquis de Lafayette.


“The joy which this welcome news produces among all the troops, and which penetrates General Washington and the Count de Rochambeau, is more easy to feel than to express.…

“I have been equally surprised and touched at the true and pure joy of General Washington. Of a natural coldness and of a serious and noble approach, which in him is only true dignity, and which adorns so well the chief of a whole nation, his features, his physiognomy, his deportment - all were changed in an instant. He put aside his character as arbiter of North America and contented himself for the moment with that of a citizen, happy at the good fortune of his country. A child, whose every wish had been gratified, would not have experienced a sensation more lively, and I believe I am doing honor to the feelings of this rare man, in endeavoring to express all their ardor.”

American soldier John Suddarth was present at the siege of Yorktown in October 1781. When offering proof of service during his application for pension benefits in 1839, Suddarth described details of the action he witnessed, which included a description of Washington’s bravery under enemy fire.

“Your declarant, during the progress of these works, witnessed a deed of personal daring and coolness in General Washington which he never saw equaled. During a tremendous cannonade from the British in order to demolish our breastworks, a few days prior to the surrender, General Washington visited that part of our fortifications behind which your declarant was posted and, whilst here, discovered that the enemy were destroying their property and drowning their horses, etc. Not, however, entirely assured of what they were doing, he took his glass and mounted the highest, most prominent, and most exposed point of our fortifications, and there stood exposed to the enemy’s fire, where shot seemed flying almost as thick as hail and were instantly demolishing portions of the embankment around him, for ten or fifteen minutes, until he had completely satisfied himself of the purposes of the enemy. During this time his aids, etc., were remonstrating with him with all their earnestness against this exposure of his person and once or twice drew him down. He severely reprimanded them and resumed his position. When satisfied, he dispatched a flag to the enemy, and they desisted from their purpose.”

In 1864 the Reverend E. B. Hillard attempted to locate as many surviving veterans of the Revolutionary War as he could find for interview. Working from pension records he was able to meet seven men, all of whom were close to or past 100 years of age. Three of the veterans were in the presence of Washington and gave recollections of the Commander-in-Chief. Samuel Downing enlisted in July 1780 and stayed until the war ended. He was at the Yorktown siege in October 1781.

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46 John Suddarth pension statement in Mary V. Thompson, “Statements…”, 42.
Downing: “… We were right opposite Washington’s headquarters [at Yorktown]. I saw him every day.”

Hillard: “Was he as fine a looking man as he is reported to have been?”

Downing: “Oh!” he exclaimed, lifting up both his hands and pausing, “but you never got a smile out of him. He was a nice man. We loved him. They’d sell their lives for him.”

E. B. Hillard also interviewed Alexander Milliner in 1864. Due to Milliner’s young age, he entered service as a drummer, and he was present at the battles of White Plains, Saratoga, Monmouth and Yorktown. Interviewer Hillard states that Milliner’s “recollection of Washington is distinct and vivid.”

“He was a good man, a beautiful man. He was always pleasant; never changed countenance, but wore the same in defeat and retreat as in victory.”

In 1864 E. B. Hillard interviewed Lemuel Cook, one of that small group of Revolutionary War survivors he was able to locate. Cook enlisted at the age of 16 in 1781 and served until the end of the war. He was present at the October 19, 1781, Yorktown surrender and commented on Washington’s orders to the witnessing troops.

“… We were on a kind of a side hill. We had plaguey little to eat and nothing to drink under heaven. We hove up some brush to keep the flies off. Washington ordered that there should be no laughing at the British; said it was bad enough to have to surrender without being insulted. The army came out with guns clubbed on their backs. They were paraded on a great smooth lot, and there they stacked their arms….”

Louis-Phillippe, comte de Segur was one of that group of French officers who joined the revolution as replacement officers, arriving at his regiment at Camp Crampond, September 26, 1782. Rochambeau introduced Segur to Washington shortly after his arrival in camp.

“One of my most anxious wishes was to see Washington, the hero of America. He was then encamped at a short distance from us, and the Count de Rochambeau was kind enough to introduce me to him. Too often reality disappoints the expectations our imagination had raised, and admiration diminishes by a too near view of the object upon which it had been bestowed; but, on seeing General Washington, I found a perfect similarity between the impression produced upon me by his aspect, and the idea I had formed of him.

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“His exterior disclosed, as it were, the history of his life: simplicity, grandeur, dignity, calmness, goodness, firmness, the attributes of his character, were also stamped upon his features, and in all his person. His stature was noble and elevated; the expression of his features mild and benevolent; his smile graceful and pleasing; his manners simple without familiarity.

“He did not display the luxury of a monarchical general; every thing announced in him the hero of a republic; he inspired with, rather than commanded respect, and the expression of all those that surrounded his person manifested the existence in their breasts of feelings of sincere affection, and of that entire confidence in the chief upon whom they seemed exclusively to found all their hopes of safety. His quarters ... offered the image of the order and regularity displayed in the whole tenor of his life, his manner, and conduct....

“Washington, when I saw him, was forty-nine years of age. He endeavored modestly to avoid the marks of admiration and respect which were so anxiously offered to him, and yet no man ever knew better how to receive and to acknowledge them. He listened, with an obliging attention, to all those who addressed him, and the expression of his countenance had conveyed his answer before he spoke.”

Claude-Victor, Prince de Broglie came to America to join the revolution as a replacement officer in Rochambeau’s army. With other officers, he landed at Dover, Delaware, on September 13, 1782. He soon joined his regiment at Camp Crampond in eastern New York, and met and dined with Washington two days later at his headquarters at Verplanck’s Point on the Hudson River. De Broglie recorded observations of Washington in his journal.

“General Washington is now about forty-nine years of age. He is tall, nobly built and very well proportioned. His face is much more agreeable than represented in his portrait. He must have been much handsomer three years ago, and although the gentlemen who have remained with him during all that time say he seems to have grown much older, it is not to be denied that the General is still as fresh and active as a young man.

“His physiognomy is mild and open. His accost is cold although polite. His pensive eyes seem more attentive than sparkling; but their expression is benevolent, noble, and self-possessed. In his private conduct, he preserves that polite and attentive good breeding which satisfies everybody, and that dignified reserve which offends no one. He is a foe to ostentation and to vain-glory. His temper is always even. He has never testified the least humor. Modest even to humility, he does not seem to estimate himself at his true worth. He receives with perfect grace all the homages which are paid him, but evades them rather than seeks them. His company is agreeable and winning. Always serious, never abstracted, always simple, always easy and affable without being familiar, the respect which he inspires is never oppressive. He speaks but little in general, and that in a subdued tone, but

he is so attentive to what is said to him, that being satisfied he understands you perfectly, one is disposed to dispense with an answer. This behaviour has been very useful to him on numerous occasions. Nobody has greater necessity than he to act with circumspection, and to carefully weigh his words.

“To an unalterable tranquility of soul he joins a most exact judgment, and the utmost with which he has been reproached is a little tardiness in his determination and even in the execution of his decisions, when once he has made them….

“Mr. Washington received no pay as General; refused it as not needing it. The expenses of his table only are paid by the State. Every day he has about thirty persons to dinner. He gives good military fare, and is very civil towards all the officers admitted to his table. It is ordinarily the moment of the day when he is most cheerful.

“At desert he eats an enormous quantity of nuts, and when the conversation is entertaining he keeps eating through a couple of hours, from time to time giving sundry healths, according to the English and American custom….

“General Washington appeared to me to maintain a perfect demeanor towards the officers of his army. He treats them with great politeness, but they are far from attempting any familiarity with him. All of them, on the contrary, exhibit towards their General an air of respect, of confidence and of admiration.”

As a member of Congress, Stephen Higginson was among those who visited Washington at his Newburgh headquarters in February 1783. Higginson’s letter to John Lowell, written shortly after that visit, praises Washington’s leadership qualities.

“I arrived here the 26th ult…. Three days we spent at head Quarters with Genl. Washington, with whose steadiness & great prudence I was much pleased, he surely was made expressly for these times & no other than such a Character could have answered Our purpose”

Near the end of the war some of the Continental Army officers were organizing to present Congress with a threatening ultimatum demanding overdue back pay and pension settlements. On March 15, 1783, Major Samuel Shaw attended the Newburgh, New York, meeting organized by Washington to defuse tensions by letting the officers properly air grievances over lack of service pay. Washington made a surprise appearance at the meeting, took the floor and attempted to persuade those attending to trust Congress for a solution. As Washington read a Virginia congressman’s letter supportive of the army, Shaw made the following observations.


“… One circumstance in reading this letter must not be omitted. His Excellency, after reading the first paragraph, made a short pause, took out his spectacles, and begged the indulgence of his audience while he put them on, observing at the same time, that he had grown gray in their service, and now found himself growing blind. There was something so natural, so unaffected, in this appeal, as rendered it superior to the most studied oratory; it forced its way to the heart, and you might see sensibility moisten every eye. The General, having finished, took leave of the assembly, and the business of the day was conducted in the manner which is related in the account of the proceedings.

" I cannot dismiss this subject without observing, that it is happy for America that she has a patriot army, and equally so that a Washington is its leader. I rejoice in the opportunities I have had of seeing this great man in a variety of stations; - calm and intrepid where the battle raged, patient and persevering under the pressure of misfortune, moderate and possessing himself in the full career of victory. Great as these qualifications deservedly render him, he never appeared to me more truly so, than at the assembly we have been speaking of. On other occasions he has been supported by the exertions of an army and the countenance of his friends; but in this he stood single and alone. There was no saying where the passions of an army, which were not a little inflamed, might lead; but it was generally allowed that longer forbearance was dangerous, and moderation had ceased to be a virtue. Under these circumstances he appeared, not at the head of his troops, but as it were in opposition to them; and for a dreadful moment the interests of the army and its General seemed to be in competition! He spoke, - every doubt was dispelled, and the tide of patriotism rolled again in its wonted course. Illustrious man! what he says of the army may with equal justice be applied to his own character....”

Rhode Island Continental Congressman David Howell, writing to Rhode Island Governor William Greene on September 9, 1783, tells of Washington’s behavior during a dinner with the Congress at Princeton, NJ. The Treaty of Paris was signed on September 3, 1783.

“… The repast was elegant -- but the Generals Company crowned the whole. As I had the fortune to be seated facing the General; I had the pleasure of hearing all his Conversation....

“I observed with much pleasure that the Generals front was uncommonly open & pleasant -- the contracted, pensive Air betokening deep thought & much care, which I noticed on Prospect Hill in 1775 is done away: & a pleasant smile sparkling vivacity of wit & humour succeeds....”


54 David Howell to William Greene, September 9, 1783, in Paul H. Smith et al., eds., Letters of Delegates), 20:646.
Chevalier de la Luzerne was the French minister to the United States during the second half of the war and knew Washington from visiting him in the field. In April 1784 Washington invited Luzerne to spend several days at Mount Vernon. In a letter, dated April 12, 1784, to Conrad Alexandre Gérard de Rayneval, the first minister to the U.S. during the war, Luzerne presents one of the earliest written descriptions of Washington as a private citizen at Mount Vernon after he resigned his commission as commander-in-chief.

“The estate of General Washington not being more than fifteen leagues from Annapolis, I accepted an invitation that he gave me to go and pass several days there, and it is from his house that I have the honor to write to you. After having seen him on my arrival in this continent, in the midst of his camp and in the tumult of arms, I have the pleasure to see him a simple citizen, enjoying in the repose of his retreat the glory which he has so justly acquired…. The general has taken this occasion to make mention of all the obligations of the United States and their gratitude to his Majesty; and he has expressed himself with much sensibility relating to the service that the American cause has received from us…. He dresses in a gray coat like a Virginia farmer, and nothing about him recalls the recollection of the important part which he has played except the great number of foreigners who come to see him. His wife and his relations form his habitual society, and the happiness of the persons who surround him seems to be his principal occupation…."

Twenty-one-year-old Gijsbert Karel van Hogendorp, a relative of the Dutch minister to the United States, traveled to the U.S. in the fall of 1783. Carrying a letter of introduction from Thomas Jefferson, Hogendorp visited Mount Vernon in late April 1784. His description of that visit, written in French, appeared in a multi-volume work of his writings, first published in the late 19th century. Washington’s vague answers to Hogendorp’s many questions was a disappointment for the young Dutchman, a thing that is reflected in Hogendorp’s description of the visit.

On reaching Mount Vernon, he was taken “to a chamber where Madame Washington was seated with two of her friends; with them were two or three gentlemen. They greeted my arrival with dismal silence, regarding me with that careless manner I have met so often in America. After a brief conversation, carried on almost entirely by me, I heard the door behind me open and saw Washington himself enter the room. There is so much integrity in his face that he prepossesses in his favor all those who see him for the first time. They are not able to understand the great man. I had the desire to appreciate him but at the outset his mien and his conversation seemed to me so commonplace that I was bewildered by what I observed … I became convinced that he was not a man of genius, that he had no great talents…. He is slow of perception; he expresses himself slowly. Transition from one subject to another is difficult for him; he does not consider matters profoundly; he shares the indolence common to Americans who stifle in themselves all inclinations to industry. He possesses so little vivacity and enthusiasm that he seemed embarrassed by evidence of these

qualities in others … I could never be on familiar terms with the General – a man so cold, so cautious, so obsequious, fearing to speak even of his campaigns … giving his opinions vaguely or repeating his annoying, ‘In truth I know nothing about it ….’

Mrs. Washington “has not a bad opinion of me for not adoring her husband; she has eyes more perceptive than her husband; she has many piquant remarks to me that reveal to me that she is not irritated by what I say, as she would be if I were wrong…. 

“It is not to be denied that they make a stranger feel at home and entertain him very well.”

Charles Varlo. English agriculturalist and author on the subject, came to the United States in the in the summer of 1784 on the false notion that he had rights to land holdings in New Jersey. Varlo spent twelve months traveling in New England and Virginia where he visited Mount Vernon in October 1784.

“I crossed the river from Maryland into Virginia, near to the renowned General Washington's, where I had the honour to spend some time, and was kindly entertained with that worthy family. As to the General, if we may judge by the countenance, he is what the world says of him, a shrewd, good-natured, plain, humane man, about fifty-five years of age, and seems to wear well, being healthful and active, straight, well made, and about six feet high.

“He keeps a good table, which is always open to those of a genteel appearance. He does not use many Frenchified congees, or flattering useless words without meaning, which favours more of deceit than an honest heart; but on the contrary, his words seem to point at truth and reason, and to spring from the fountain of a heart, which, being good of itself, cannot be suspicious of others, till facts unriddle designs, which evidently appeared to me by a long tale that he told me about Arnold’s manoeuvres, far-fetched schemes, and deep-laid designs to give him and his army up above a month before the affair happened; and though he said he wondered at many things that he observed in Arnold’s conduct, yet he had not the least suspicion of any treachery going on, till the thing happened, and then he could trace back and see through his intentions from the beginning; which, from the General’s behaviour to him, I am well apprized, seems to be the highest sin of ingratitude that a man could be guilty of.

“The General's house is rather warm, snug, convenient and useful, than ornamental. The size is what ought to suit a man of about two or three thousand a year in England....

“The General's house is open to poor travellers as well as rich; he gives diet and lodging to all that come that way, which indeed cannot be many, without they go out of their way on purpose....

“Many roads being cut in the woods, and some not fit for my carriage, I was astray for some time … but by good luck I met a woman with a child on her back. She told me that she came two or three miles out of her way, because she knew she could have lodgings at the General’s, for he gave orders to his servants to entertain all that came; that she had lain there two or three times before, though she lived above two hundred miles distance. In short, the General, in one sense of the word, may be thought to be a happy man, because he has every one’s good word. I have travelled and seen a great deal of the world, have conversed with all degrees of people, and have remarked that there are only two persons in the world which have every one’s good word, and those are – the Queen of England and General Washington, which I have never heard friend or foe speak slightly of.”

Elkanah Watson, acting as agent for a Rhode Island merchant, traveled to France on August 4, 1779. He carried dispatches to Benjamin Franklin in Paris, spent time with John Adams, and traveled extensively throughout Europe. He returned to the United States in October 1784 carrying a bundle of books from British author Granville Sharp with the request to present them to George Washington. On January 23, 1785, Watson visited Mount Vernon to deliver the books. His journal gives an account of that visit.

“… I found him at table with Mrs. Washington and his private family, and was received in the native dignity and with that urbanity so peculiarly combined in the character of a soldier and eminent private gentleman. He soon put me at ease, by unbending, in a free and affable conversation.

“The cautious reserve, which wisdom and policy dictated, whilst engaged in rearing the glorious fabric of our independence, was evidently the result of consummate prudence, and not characteristic of his nature. Although I had frequently seen him in the progress of the Revolution, and had corresponded with him from France in ’81 and ’82, this was the first occasion on which I had contemplated him in his private relations. I observed a peculiarity in his smile, which seemed to illuminate his eye; his whole countenance beamed with intelligence, while it commanded confidence and respect….

“… I found him kind and benignant in the domestic circle, revered and beloved by all around him; agreeably social, without ostentation; delighting in anecdote and adventures, without assumption; his domestic arrangements harmonious and systematic….

“The first evening I spent under the wing of his hospitality, we sat a full hour at table by ourselves, without the least interruption, after the family had retired. I was extremely oppressed by a severe cold and excessive coughing… He pressed me to use some remedies, but I declined doing so. As usual after retiring, my coughing increased. When some time had elapsed, the door of my room opened, and on drawing my bed-curtains, to my utter astonishment, I beheld Washington himself, standing at my bed-side, with a bowl of hot tea in his hand. I was mortified and distressed beyond expression. This little incident,

occuring in common life with an extraordinary man, would not have been noticed; but as a trait of the benevolence and private virtue of Washington, deserves to be recorded.”

British historian Catharine Macaulay Graham sympathized with colonial grievances against British taxation policies. As early as 1769 she began her correspondence with James Otis, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Mercy Warren, and other colonists. After the war she visited the United States, and, at the invitation of Washington, she and her husband spent ten days at Mount Vernon, arriving June 4, 1785. In a letter to Mercy Warren on July 15, 1785, she briefly gives what may be the only account of that visit. Macaulay Graham’s adulatory letter to Washington on July 13, 1785, expresses more personally how that visit impressed her with Washington’s greatness. She continued to correspond with Washington until her death in 1791.

“… Our reception at Mount Vernon was of the most friendly and engaging kind we spent ten days very happily in one of the sweetest situations on the continent. The opinion we had formed of the illustrious owners was rather improved than lessened by that converse which our situation enabled us to enjoy…”

Robert Hunter, a young Scot working on business for his father, kept a diary of his travels in Canada and the United States. Accompanied by the President of Congress, Richard Henry Lee, and Colonel John Fitzgerald, he visited Mount Vernon on November 16, 1785, and recorded his observations of Washington.

“… When Colonel Fitzgerald introduced me to the General, I was struck with his noble and venerable appearance…. The General is about six foot high, perfectly straight and well made, rather inclined to be lusty. His eyes are full and blue and seem to express an air of gravity. His nose inclines to the aquiline; his mouth small; his teeth are yet good; and his cheeks indicate perfect health. His forehead is a noble one, and he wears his hair turned back, without curls and quite in the officer’s style, and tied in a long queue behind. Altogether, he makes a most noble, respectable appearance, and I really think him the first man in the world….

“… The General is remarked for writing a most elegant letter. Like the famous Addison, his writing excels his speaking….

“… The General with a few glasses of champagne got quite merry, and being with his intimate friends laughed and talked a good deal. Before strangers he is generally very

58 Winslow C. Watson, ed., Men and Times of the Revolution; or, Memoirs of Elkanah Watson, Including Journals of Travels in Europe and America, from 1777 to 1842, with His Correspondence with Public Men and Reminiscences and Incidents of the Revolution (New York: Dana and Company, 1856), 243-244.

Count Luigi Castiglioni, an Italian nobleman and botanist, sailed to America in April 1785, and traveled throughout the United States and portions of Canada for almost two years. In 1790 Castiglioni published his extensive notes as *Viaggio negli Stati Uniti dell’America Settentrionale fatto negli anni 1785, 1786, e 1789*. The work was translated into English in 1983. Count Castiglioni visited Mount Vernon on Christmas day in 1785 and stayed four days. Although his description of Washington offers a lengthy history of Washington’s military experience, his characterization of Washington was brief.

“… I spent four days there, favored by the General with the greatest hospitality, as he is accustomed to do with strangers, who come in great numbers to admire such a famous personage.

“General Washington is about 57 years old, tall, of a sturdy physique and majestic mien, and although toughened by military service, he does not give the appearance of being of advanced age. This famous man who opened and brought to a happy conclusion the American war, seemed produced by nature to free America from European subjection and to create an epoch in the history of human revolutions…. Heaven grant that, by living for many years, he may long serve as an example of virtue and industry for his fellow citizens, as he served as an example to Europe in the victories that consecrated his name to an eternal flame.”

Tobias Lear became Washington’s personal secretary in 1784 through the recommendation of his uncle, Revolutionary War veteran Major General Benjamin Lincoln. He served in that intimate capacity, while living at Mount Vernon and the presidential homes, until Washington’s death in 1799. In a letter, dated March 4, 1788, to friend William Prescott, Lear characterizes the Washington he knows.

“I am now about to close my letter with what, perhaps, should have begun it. - General Washington is, I believe, almost the only man of an exalted character who does not lose some part of his respectability by an intimate acquaintance – I have lived with him near two years, have received as many marks of his affection & esteem as perhaps any young man ever did – and have occasions to be with him in every situation in which a man is placed in his family – have ate and drank with him constantly, and almost every evening play at cards with him, and I declare I have never found a single thing that could lessen my respect for him, - a compleat knowledge of his honesty, uprightness, & candour in all his private transactions have sometimes led me to think him more than a man. His industry is

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unparalleled – he rises every day before the sun – writes till breakfast (which never exceeds ½ after 7) then mounts his horse & rides round his farm till ½ past 2, sees that everything is proper order – and if there is no company he writes till dark & in the Evning – plays a game at whist, or, if pressed with business writes till 9 in the Evning – this the general round which he pursues with little variation – He raises no tobacco on his lands here, but is introducing the present mode of Husbandry practised in Eng. on his farms – The body of Land cultivated here is abt. 8000 Acres divided into 5 farms – worked by abt. 200 hands – he has no white overseers – an active negro is foreman at each plantation, & no whipping is allowed without a regular complaint & the defendant found guilty of some bad deed.”

Alexandria merchant Olney Winsor and others accepted an invitation to dine with Washington at Mount Vernon on Sunday, March 30, 1788. In a letter to his wife, written the next day, Winsor describes the event.

“Saturday morning last Mr. Jenckes & myself received a very polite Card from General Washington, requesting our company to dine with him on Sunday, in Company with several other Gentlemen from this Town. Accordingly we set out from the Store yesterday Morning half past 11. oClock and arrived at Mount Vernon about one, where we were received by the General & his family with great freedom and politeness, at the same time without any ceremonious parade. The general converses with great deliberation, & with ease, except in pronouncing some few words, in which he has a hesitancy of speech. He was dressed in a plain drab Coat, red Jacket, buff Breeches & white Hose…..”

“We had an exceeding good Dinner, which was served up in excellent order. After dinner the new Constitution was introduced as the subject of conversation, & sundry questions asked me by the General, & Colo. Humphreys, from Connecticut, who now resides at the Generals, respecting the part I expected your State [Rhode Island] would take…. The General expressed himself on the Subject with such real concern for the united happiness of the States, & at the same time with such clearness on those parts of the Constitution which have been objected to, as not being suffic[ie]ntly explicit, that I was much pleased with him, as a private man, a former of a System for the United States, as I have heretofore been in his military character, in which all agree that he was the Saviour of America….“

Former soldier, minister and Dutch patriot Francis Adrian van der Kemp met and befriended diplomat John Adams in Amsterdam in 1780. When he moved his family to the United States in 1788, van der Kemp carried letters of introduction from Adams, Jefferson and Lafayette. Shortly after his arrival, Van der Kemp wrote to Washington and included the letter from Lafayette. A quick reply from Washington concluded with an invitation: “… give me leave to request that I

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62 Tobias Lear to William Prescott, Mount Vernon, 4 March 1788, William Hickling Prescott Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

may have the pleasure to see you at my house whensoever it can be convenient to you, and to offer whatsoever services it may ever be in my power to afford yourself, as well as to the other Patriots & friends to the Rights of Mankind of the Dutch Nation.” According to Washington’s diary, Van der Kemp visited Mount Vernon on July 29, 1788. Impressions of Washington appeared in his autobiography.

“… so I proceeded to Baltimore, to the country seat of my old Dutch friend, Adr. Valck, then Consul of the United Provinces, and arrived at last at Mount Vernon, where simplicity, order, unadorned grandeur, and dignity, had taken up their abode. That great man approved, as well as Clinton, my plan for an agricultural life, and made me a tender of his services; although in his opinion I should make a more desirable choice in the State of New York, among the posterity of Dutchmen.

“There seemed to me, to skulk somewhat of a repulsive coldness, not congenial with my mind, under a courteous demeanour; and I was infinitely better pleased by the unassuming, modest gentleness of the lady, than the conscious superiority of her consort. There was a chosen society. Colonel Humphreys was there. I was charmed with his manners, his conversation; he knew how to please, he knew how to captivate, when he deemed it worthwhile.”

French political writer Jean-Pierre Brissot de Warville came to the United States in 1788 to “study men who had just acquired their liberty” as he says in the preface to his book of travels and observations. Brissot, carrying a letter of introduction from Lafayette, visited Mount Vernon in November 1788 and spent three days there in the company of Washington.

“… The General came home in the evening, fatigued with having been to lay out a new road in some part of his plantations. You have often heard him compared to Cincinnatus: the comparison is doubtless just. This celebrated General is nothing more at present than a good farmer, constantly occupied in the care of his farm and the improvement of cultivation. He has lately built a barn … destined to receive the productions of his farms, and to shelter his cattle, horses, asses, and mules. It is built on a plan sent to him by that famous English farmer Arthur Young. But the General has much improved the plan. This building is in brick…. All this is new in Virginia, where they know not the use of barns, and where they lay up no provisions for their cattle….  

“Every thing has an air of simplicity in his house; his table is good, but not ostentatious; and no deviation is seen from regularity and domestic oeconomy….

“M. de Chastellux has mingled too much of the brilliant in his portrait of General Washington. His eye bespeaks great goodness of heart, manly sense marks all his answers, and he sometimes animates in conversation, but he has no characteristic features; which renders it difficult to seize him. He announces a profound discretion, and great diffidence

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in himself; but at the same time, an unshaken firmness of character, when once he has made his decision. His modesty is astonishing to a Frenchman; he speaks of the American war, and of his victories, as of things in which he had no direction.”

David Humphreys’ close relationship to Washington began when he served as Washington’s aide-de-camp during the war. As early as 1784, Humphreys proposed that Washington write an autobiography to include an account of the war. Washington declined to initiate such a project himself, but he did invite Humphreys to live at Mount Vernon and write the history. After some interruptions to the work, Humphreys moved to the Mount Vernon estate in 1787 and stayed for almost three years, serving as Washington’s secretary while also working on the biography. Jedidiah Morse printed a segment of Humphreys’ history, without attribution, in his 1789 issue of American Geography. Humphreys’ work carried Washington’s life to the beginning of his presidency only, and then he abandoned the project – it was never published under Humphreys’ name. The biography was finally published in its entirety, from dispersed manuscripts, in 1991. The following excerpts from that biography characterize Washington from David Humphreys’ view.

“To apply a short life to the most useful purposes, he lives as he has ever done, in the unvarying habits of regularity, temperance, & industry. He rises, in winter as well as summer, at the dawn of day; and generally reads or writes some time before breakfast. He breakfasts about 7 O’Clock on three small Indian Hoe-cakes, & as many dishes of tea. He rides immediately to his different farms & remains with his labourers untill a little past two O’Clock, when he returns & dresses. At three he dines, commonly on a single dish, and drinks from a half a pint to a pint of Madeira wine. This, with one small glass of punch, a draught of beer, and two dishes of tea (which he takes half an hour before sun-set) constitutes his whole sustenance, until the next day. Whether there be company or not, the table is always prepared by its elegance & exuberance for their reception; and the General remains at it for an hour after dinner, in familiar conversation & convivial hilarity. He is more cheerful than he was in the army. Notwithstanding his temper is rather of a serious cast & his countenance commonly carries the impression of thoughtfulness; he perfectly relishes a pleasant story, an unaffected sally of wit, or a burlesque description which surprises by its suddenness & incongruity with the ordinary appearance of the same object. After the sociable relaxation, he applies himself to business, & about 9 O’Clock retires to rest. This the rotine, & this the hour he observes, when no one but his family is present; at other times, he attends politely upon his company untill they wish to withdraw. Though he has no offspring, his actual family consists of eight persons: it is seldom alone….

“It was a great advantage to General Washington, in forming an army composed of men who were on a footing of perfect equality, to have been distinguished for unusual dignity in his figure, appearance & manners. If many estimable qualities be connected with that dignified presence which thus conciliates esteem and imposes respect; subordination is always established with the less difficulty. Such was the case with the American

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Commander in Chief & so peculiarly did he seem fitted for command that no one even in his own mind disputed the right to the first place. He inherited from Nature a strong constitution and uncommon force of nerves. Tho’ his life had been endangered by a pulmonic disorder which he contracted from fatigues in youth; yet by time, temperance & a voyage to one of the West India Islands he recovered his health & became remarkably robust. No person in the army was capable of enduring the excess of heat, cold, watching & hardship better than himself. In the report of his Mission to the western frontiers in his early age, he demonstrated that he possessed good sense and discriminating judgment in an eminent degree. To these he joined a purity of intention, which Slander itself has never attempted to stain. It has been observed in some well-written dissertations on his character, that his talents were rather solid than brilliant. It is certain that he never affected a shining reputation. It is also certain that Heaven had destined him by endowments of different kinds, which are but rarely bestowed on mortals, to be indeed a great man. Of what kinds they were, it is not now my purpose or here the place to discuss. Some have taken a pleasure in exalting & others in depressing his character for mental abilities & accomplishments. Those who pretend that every thing published in his name was written by himself and those who desire to have it believed that he was incapable of being the author of many of those interesting compositions, were equally erroneous in their opinions....

“Few men have ever thought with more justice, and consequently few men have ever had clearer ideas or expressed them with more precision than General Washington. At the same time, he knew how, better than any other man, to avail himself of the talents of others without wounding their feelings. This perhaps is the most useful quality which a man in a high public station can possess: since it is impossible that any mortal thus circumstanced can enter into all the details of business & perform every thing himself. He had too much magnanimity to feel jealousy, and he was too far removed from rivalship to be the cause of it in others. He did not prefer an opinion on account of its having originated with himself, nor was its value diminished in his estimation because it had originated with another. When the circumstances were not urgent, he was slow in deliberation, taking time to examine the question in every possible point of light. His mind was open to conviction so long as he was at liberty to suspend his determination. But when circumstances pressed, he was prompt & decisive. Yet sometimes, when the situation of affairs seemed to dictate the expediency of a provisional arrangement, he decided upon a partial but as he thought just view of the subject, and afterwards changed his decision, if he found sufficient motives to justify the change. For acting in this manner, his conduct appeared to be placed in a due medium between fickleness & obstinacy. He loved truth, he sought it unceasingly & he endeavoured to regulate all his actions by that standard....

“... He was a pattern of neatness in every thing that belonged to him; and he was particularly fond of elegance united with simplicity in his dress, furniture & equipage. In his mode of living he was hospitable, without being ostentatious. In society he was always modest; & sometimes so reserved & so silent as to be accused of coldness or want of talents for conversation. With his friends (and it was generally his custom to remain at table in conversation with one or more of them for a considerable time after dinner) he was ever communicative, often animated & not unfrequently expressed himself with colloquial
eloquence. No man probably ever appeared more different from himself as to the features of his face or in point of manners than he did at different times. Grave & majestic as he ordinarily was in his deportment, he occasionally, not only relished wit & humour in others, but displayed no inconsiderable share of them himself. He appreciated talents, but he distinguished between the splendid & the useful; and he held either the dearer to his heart from its being blended with honesty. It is presumed that in his long & extensive intercourse with mankind, he paid a considerable attention to physiognomy in selecting persons for particular places; for in speaking of their various qualities he seldom failed (if they were not intimately known to him) to make some observations upon their exterior appearance. His moderation & firmness have been justly noticed amongst his distinguished characteristics. He ought not to be less advantageously known for his exemption from prejudices. On the other part the resources of his mind in useful ideas were copious & constant. His courage & prudence were equal to the exigencies of every crisis. Yet his attendants in the Army thought that he sometimes exposed his own person too much, especially in reconnoitring the enemy. In some instances, it would not have been difficult to have killed or taken him prisoner. But he deemed it very important to ascertain positions with his own eyes; and his attendants knew the value of his person better than he appeared to know it himself…”

Colonel John May was active in the Boston militia during the Revolutionary War years and beyond. He became a successful merchant in Boston and was a member of the Ohio Company of Associates that purchased and settled western lands along the Ohio River. May kept journals of his travels to those settlements, and, during a 1789 journey west, he attended Washington’s inauguration on April 30, 1789, in New York. In a letter to his wife, May gives an account of the inaugural ceremony with a brief description of Washington.

“This excellent man drew the attention of all, his bearing demanded it, but I think him much altered in countenance since I saw him last.”

Fisher Ames of Massachusetts served in the United States House of Representatives during the eight years of Washington’s two presidential terms. His letter of May 3, 1789, to close friend George Richards Minot, describes Washington’s first inauguration.

“I was present [at the inauguration of Washington] in the pew with the President, and must assure you that, after making all deductions for the delusion of one’s fancy in regard to characters, I still think of him with more veneration than for any other person. Time has made havoc upon his face. That, and many other circumstances not to be reasoned about, conspire to keep up the awe which I brought with me. He addressed the two Houses in the Senate chamber; it was a very touching scene, and quite of the solemn kind. His aspect

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grave, almost to sadness; his modesty, actually shaking; his voice deep, a little tremulous, and so low as to call for close attention; added to the series of objects presented to mind, and overwhelming it, produced emotions of the most affecting kind upon the members. I, Pilgaric, sat entranced. It seemed to me an allegory in which virtue was personified, and addressing those whom she would make her votaries. Her power over the heart was never greater, and the illustration of her doctrine by her own example was never more perfect."68

The people of Massachusetts elected Fisher Ames to four successive terms in the House of Representatives, beginning with the 1st United States Congress in 1789. He presents a brief picture of Washington’s inauguration in a May 1789 letter to Nathaniel Bishop.

"I saw and listened to Washington with as much emotion as you have supposed. It seemed to be a deception—a kind of allegorical vision, which over-whelmed the senses with vast objects, and the mind with vast reflections. The crowd was great—but not a stupid one—each expressing as much admiration and joy as a painter would have on his canvas. The modesty, benevolence and dignity of the President cannot be described. Your own feeling heart must finish the picture.”69

Count de Moustier, the French ambassador to the United States from 1787 to 1789, visited Mount Vernon in November 1788. De Moustier was present at Washington’s inauguration in New York and described the event in a dispatch of June 5, 1789, to the Count de Montmorin, French Minister of Foreign Affairs.

“The remembrances of that great man’s past services, his actual elevation, his modesty, all contributed to diffuse added interest to his speech. All left the Hall in procession, in order to go on foot to St Paul’s Church, where the Anglican bishop, Chaplain of the Senate, recited prayers suitable to the occasion. From there the same procession escorted the President back to his residence.

“… Nature, that has conferred on him the art of governing, seems to have endowed his figure, which has nothing in common with the other Americans. He has the soul, look, and figure of a hero united in him. Born to command, he never seems embarrassed with the homage rendered him, and he has the advantage of mingling great dignity with great simplicity of manner.”70

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Abigail Adams corresponded frequently with her sister, Mary Cranch, and included some comments about President Washington in her letter of July 12, 1789, a little over two months after Washington’s first inauguration.

“Our August President is a singular example of modesty and diffidence. He has a dignity which forbids Familiarity mixed with an easy affability which creates Love and Reverence….”

Pennsylvania senator William Maclay served just two years, from March 4, 1789, to March 4, 1791, in the First United States Congress. During his term he kept a personal, daily journal that was first published in 1890. Explaining Maclay’s colorful descriptions in the diary, editor and relative Edgar Maclay states, “… It should be kept in mind, however, that the journal was strictly private in its nature, intended merely for personal reference, and that the thought of its publication seems never to have entered the mind of its author, else he undoubtedly would have smoothed over many phrases and erased entire passages, as being too forcible for public expression.”

April 30, 1789:
“… the President took the chair and the Senators and Representatives their seats. He rose, and all arose also, and addressed them. This great man was agitated and embarrassed more than ever he was by the leveled cannon or pointed musket. He trembled, and several times could scarce make out to read, though it must be supposed he had often read it before. He put part of the fingers of his left hand into the side of what I think the tailors call the fall of the breeches [corresponding to the modern side-pocket], changing the paper into his left [right] hand. After some time he then did the same with some of the fingers of his right hand. When he came to the words all the world, he made a flourish with his right hand, which left rather an ungainly impression. I sincerely, for my part, wished all set ceremony in the hands of the dancing-masters, and that this first of men had read off his address in the plainest manner, without ever taking his eyes from the paper, for I felt hurt that he was not first in everything….”

January 14, 1790:
“Dined with this day with the President. It was a great dinner – all in the taste of high life. I consider it as a part of my duty as a Senator to submit to it, and am glad it is over. The President is a cold, formal man; but I must declare that he treated me with great attention. I was the first person with whom he drank a glass of wine. I was often spoken to by him. Yet he knows how rigid a republican I am. I can not think that he considers it worth while to soften me. It is not worth his while. I am not an object if he should gain me, and I trust he can not do it by any improper means….”

March 4, 1790:
“Dined with the President of the United States. It was a dinner of dignity. All the Senators

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were present, and the Vice-President. I looked often around the company to find the happiest faces, Wisdom, forgive me if I wrong thee, but I thought folly and happiness most nearly allied. The President seemed to bear in his countenance a settled aspect of melancholy. No cheering ray of convivial sunshine broke through the cloudy gloom of settled seriousness. At every interval of eating or drinking he played on the table with a fork or knife, like a drumstick. Next to him, on his right, sat Bonny Johnny Adams, ever and anon mantling his visage with the most unmeaning simper that ever dimpled the face of folly....

January 20, 1791:

“I have now, however, seen him for the last time perhaps. Let me take a review of him as he really is. In stature about six feet, with an unexceptionable make, but lax appearance. His frame would seem to want filling up. His motions rather slow than lively, though he showed no signs of having suffered by gout or rheumatism. His complexion pale, nay, almost cadaverous. His voice hollow and indistinct, owing, as I believe, to artificial teeth before his upper jaw, which occasioned a flatness of [the following text missing].”

In a letter dated August 30, 1789, Vice President John Adams communicated with acquaintance Silvanus Bourn about his letter of interest for appointment by President Washington to an office in the new government.

“I have received your letter of the 18th of this month, and have communicated that to the President which was inclosed in it. The particular office you solicit by that letter will be sought by numbers.... The President will, as he ought, weigh all these particulars, and give the preference upon the whole as justice, humanity, and wisdom shall dictate....

“I must caution you, my dear Sir, against having any dependence on my influence or that of any other person. No man, I believe, has influence with the President. He seeks information from all quarters, and judges more independently than any man I ever knew....”

As the wife of Washington’s vice president, Abigail Adams offers her view of President Washington’s personal strengths in a letter to her sister, Mary Cranch – written January 5, 1790.

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“… he is polite with dignity, affable without familiarity, distant without Haughtiness, Grave without Austerity, Modest, wise, & Good these are traits in his Character which peculiarly fit him for the exalted station he holds….”

In his book *Washington and the American Republic*, historian Benson Lossing reprints a description of Washington, but supplies this additional information in the preface. “An **English gentleman**, of intelligence and culture, was a guest at the presidential mansion, in New York, after Washington had left Franklin square, and taken up his abode in M’Comb’s house, on the west side of Broadway, near Trinity church. The following account of that [1790] visit … appeared in the London New Monthly Magazine”

“I remember my father telling me he was introduced to Washington, in 1790, by an American friend…. In a few minutes the general was in the room. It was not necessary to announce his name, for his peculiar appearance, his firm forehead, Roman nose, and a projection of the lower jaw, his height and figure, could not be mistaken by any one who had seen a full-length picture of him, and yet no picture accurately resembled him in the minute traits of his person. His features, however, were so marked by prominent characteristics, which appear in all likenesses of him, that a stranger could not be mistaken in the man. He was remarkably dignified in his manners, and had an air of benignity over his features which his visitant did not expect, being rather prepared for sternness of countenance.

“After an introduction by Mrs. Washington, without more form than common good manners prescribes, ’he requested me,’ said my father, ’to be seated; and, taking a chair himself, entered at once into conversation. His manner was full of affability. He asked how I liked the country, the city of New York; talked of the infant institutions of America, and the advantages she offered, by her intercourse, for benefiting other nations. He was grave in manner, but perfectly easy. His dress was of purple satin. There was a commanding air in his appearance which excited respect, and forbade too great a freedom toward him, independently of that species of awe which is always felt in the moral influence of a great character. In every movement, too, there was a polite gracefulness equal to any met with in the most polished individuals in Europe, and his smile was extraordinarily attractive. It was observed to me that there was an expression in Washington’s face that no painter had succeeded in taking. It struck me no man could be better formed for command. A stature of six feet, a robust but well-proportioned frame, calculated to sustain fatigue, without that heaviness which generally attends great muscular strength and abates active exertion, displayed bodily power of no mean standard. A light eye and full—the very eye of genius and reflection, rather than of blind, passionate impulse. His nose appeared thick, and, though it befitted his other features, was too coarsely and strongly formed to be the handsomest of its class. His mouth was like no other that I ever saw; the lips firm, and the under jaw seeming to grasp the upper with force, as if its muscles were in full action when he sat still. Neither with the general nor with Mrs. Washington was there the slightest

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restraint of ceremony. There was less of it than I ever recollect to have met with where perfect good breeding and manners were at the same time observed. To many remarks Washington assented with a smile or inclination of the head, as if he were by nature sparing in his conversation, and I am inclined to think this was the case. An allusion was made to a serious fit of illness he had recently suffered; but he took no notice of it. I could not help remarking that America must have looked with anxiety to the termination of his indisposition. He made no reply to my compliment but by an inclination of the head. His bow at my taking leave I shall never forget. It was the last movement which I saw that illustrious character make, as my eyes took their leave of him for ever, and it hangs a perfect picture upon my recollection....”

Samuel Breck, a young merchant of Boston, moved with his family to Philadelphia in 1792. He frequently attended President Washington’s receptions held early in the day and Mrs. Washington’s in the evening. Breck kept a diary, using it late in life to sketch his recollections of earlier times and memorable people.

“Washington’s personal presence was majestic. Six feet high and finely proportioned; no individual of his day was so remarkable for dignity and grace in deportment when in public. At the receptions, his manners were so engaging and affable, yet exercised with discrimination, that it pleased and contented everyone. Sir Robert Liston, the British Minister, was so surprised, that he said to his friends: ‘I have read much about this great man; but no passage in his history prepared me to see such commanding dignity in person and behavior.’....”

Edward Thornton, in his mid-twenties, was secretary to the new British minister to the United States, George Hammond, when Great Britain and the U.S. normalized diplomatic relations in 1791. Thornton’s former mentor and British Foreign Department official, James Burges, asked for periodic communication from Thornton about life and conditions in America. As an official in the Foreign Department, Edward Thornton had frequent contact with Washington and included descriptions of Washington in his correspondence with Burges.

Thornton to Burges, April 2, 1792:
“I promised you in a former letter a description of the President of the United States, conscious as I am of the difficulty and danger of describing again what has been so often described before, I will yet attempt to convey to you my idea of him. His person is tall and sufficiently graceful, his face well-formed, his complexion rather pale, with a mild and philosophic gravity in the expression of it. In his air and manner he displays much natural dignity, in his address he is cold, reserved and even phlegmatic, though without the least appearance of haughtiness and ill nature; it is the effect I imagine of constitutional diffidence. That caution and circumspection which form so striking and well-known a


feature in his military and indeed in his political character, is very strongly marked in his countenance: for his eyes retire inward (do you understand me?) and have nothing of fire, of animation or openness in their expression. If this circumspection is accompanied by discernment and penetration, as I am informed it is, and as I should be inclined to believe from the judicious choice he has generally made of persons to fill public stations, he possesses the two great requisites of a statesman, the faculty of concealing his own sentiments, and of discovering those of other men. A certain degree of indecision however, a want of vigor and energy may be observed in some of his actions, and are indeed the obvious result of too refined caution. He is a man of great but secret ambition, and has sometimes, I think condescended to use little arts, and those too very shallow ones, to secure the object of that ambition. He is, I am told, indefatigable in business, and extremely clear and systematic in the arrangement of it; his time is regularly divided into certain portions, and the business allotted to any one portion rigidly attended to. Of his private character I can say very little positive; I have never heard of any truly noble, generous or disinterested action of his; he has very few, who are on terms of intimate and unreserved friendship; and what is worse, he is less beloved in his own state (Virginia) than in any part of the United States. After all, he is a great man; circumstances have made him so; but I cannot help thinking the misconduct of our commanders has given him a principle part of that greatness....”

Thornton to Burges, October 3, 1792:
“… The President is a great farmer, and delights much in agricultural pursuits; indeed I am told that he feels more animation and throws off more of his natural phlegm when conversing on that topic than any other....”

Jacob Hiltzheimer, German by birth, served in the Quartermaster’s department during the Revolution by supplying horses to the Continental Army. He later operated a successful livery stable in Philadelphia, was elected to the Pennsylvania Assembly, and had frequent contact with Washington during his presidency in Philadelphia. Hiltzheimer kept a diary from 1765 until his death in 1798.

January 19, 1793:
“Dined with the President of the United States on Market Street, with our Speaker and eighteen members of the House. I cannot help remarking the ease and great sociability shown to all by the President.”

March 9, 1795:
“At four o’clock, with the Speaker and twenty-two members of the House, dined with President Washington. He was exceedingly affable to all.”

June 4, 1796:
“… On our return we met, just below the stone bridge in the meadows, our President, Washington, and lady in a coach and four, two postillions, and only one servant on

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horseback. In old countries a man of his rank and dignity would not be seen without a retinue of twenty or more persons.”

Henry Wansey, an English businessman of the clothing trade and author, traveled to the United States in the summer of 1794. Washington invited him to breakfast at the President’s home in Philadelphia on June 6, 1794. Wansey recorded observations of that meeting in a journal of his experiences that was published two years after his return to England.

“Friday, June 6. Had the honor of an interview with the President of the United States, to whom I was introduced by Mr. Dandridge, his secretary. He received me very politely, and after reading my letters, I was asked to breakfast. There was very little of the ceremony of courts, the Americans will not permit this; nor does the disposition of his Excellency lead him to assume it….

“The President in his person, is tall and thin, but erect; rather of an engaging than a dignified presence. He appears very thoughtful, is slow in delivering himself, which occasions some to conclude him reserved, but it is rather, I apprehend, the effect of much thinking and reflection, for there is great appearance to me of affability and accommodation. He was at this time in his sixty-third year, being born February 11, 1732, O. S. but he has very little the appearance of age, having been all his life-time so exceeding temperate. There is a certain anxiety visible in his countenance, with marks of extreme sensibility.”

Isaac Weld, concerned about the wars and unsettled conditions in Europe, left his native Ireland in 1795 for a voyage to America “to ascertain whether in case of future emergency, any part of those territories might be looked forward to, as an eligible and agreeable place of abode.” He wrote a series of letters covering the fifteen months of his travels and experiences. A book of the letters was published early in 1799. During February 1796, Weld visited Washington in Philadelphia and included observations of him in the book.

“… There is a very material difference, however, in his looks, when seen in private, and when he appears in public full dressed; in the latter case the hand of art makes up for the ravages of time of time, and he seems many years younger.

“Few persons find themselves for the first time in the presence of General Washington, a man so renowned in the present day for his wisdom and moderation, and whose name will be transmitted with such honour to posterity, without being impressed with a certain degree of veneration and awe; nor do these emotions subside on a closer acquaintance; on


the contrary, his person and deportment are such as rather tend to augment them. There is something very austere in his countenance, and in his manners he is uncommonly reserved. I have heard some officers, that served immediately under his command during the American war, say, that they never saw him smile during all the time that they were with him. No man has ever yet been connected with him by the reciprocal and unconstrained ties of friendship; and but a few can boast even of having been on an easy and familiar footing with him.

“The height of his person is about five feet eleven; his chest is full; and his limbs, though rather slender, well-shaped, and muscular. His head is small, in which respect he resembles the make of a great number of his countrymen. His eyes are of a light grey colour; and, in proportion to the length of his face, his nose is long. Mr. Stewart, the eminent portrait painter, told me, that there are features in his face totally different from what he ever observed in that of any other human being; the sockets for the eyes, for instance, are larger than what he ever met with before, and the upper part of the nose broader. All his features, he observed, were indicative of the strongest and most ungovernable passions, and had he been born in the forests, it was his opinion he would have been the fiercest man amongst the savage tribes. In this Mr. Stewart has given a proof of his great discernment and intimate knowledge of the human countenance; for although General Washington has been extolled for his great moderation and calmness, during the very trying situations in which he has so often been placed, yet those who have been acquainted with him the longest and most intimately, say, that he is by nature a man of a fierce and irritable disposition, but that, like Socrates, his judgment and great self-command have always made him appear a man of a different cast in the eyes of the world. He speaks with great diffidence, and sometimes hesitates for a word; but it is always to find one particularly well adapted to his meaning. His language is manly and expressive. At levee, his discourse with strangers turns principally upon the subject of America; and if they have been through any remarkable places, his conversation is free and particularly interesting, as he is intimately acquainted with every part of the country. He is much more open and free in his behaviour at levee than in private, and in the company of ladies still more so than when solely with men.

“General Washington gives no public dinners or other entertainments, except to those who are in diplomatic capacities, and to a few families on terms of intimacy with Mrs. Washington. --Strangers, with whom he wishes to have some conversation about agriculture, or any such subject, are sometimes invited to tea. --This by many is attributed to his saving disposition; but it is more just to ascribe it to his prudence and foresight; for as the salary of the president, as I have before observed, is very small, and totally inadequate by itself to support an expensive style of life, were he to give numerous and splendid entertainments, the same might possibly be expected from subsequent presidents, who, if their private fortunes were not considerable, would be unable to live in the same style, and might be exposed to many ill-natured observations, from the relinquishment of what the people had been accustomed to; it is most likely also that General Washington has been actuated by these motives, because in his private capacity at Mount Vernon every stranger meets with a hospitable reception from him.
“General Washington’s self-moderation is well known to the world already. It is a remarkable circumstance, which redounds to his eternal honour, that while president of the United States he never appointed one of his own relations to any office of trust or emolument, although he has several that are men of abilities, and well qualified to fill the most important stations in government.”

Charlotte Chambers, daughter of Revolutionary War veteran Major General James Chambers, attended one of the drawing-room levees at the President’s house in Philadelphia, at the invitation of Mrs. Washington. In a letter to her mother, dated February 25, 1795, Charlotte Chambers describes the recent event.

“The hall, stairs, and drawing-room of the President’s house were well lighted by lamps and chandeliers. Mrs. Washington, with Mrs. Knox, sat near the fire-place. Other ladies were seated on sofas, and gentlemen stood in the center of the room conversing. On our approach, Mrs. Washington arose and made a courtesy – the gentlemen bowed most profoundly – and I calculated my declension to her own with critical exactness.

“The President soon after, with that benignity peculiarly his own, advanced, and I arose to receive and return his compliments with the respect and love my heart dictated. He seated himself beside me, and inquired for my father, a severe cold having detained him at home.”

William Sullivan, a young lawyer from Massachusetts, moved to Philadelphia in 1795. He wrote about his recollections of Washington in his final years as president from frequent observations during the presidential receptions.

“… He was over six feet in stature; of strong, bony, muscular frame, without fullness of covering, well-formed and straight. He was a man of most extraordinary physical strength. In his own house, his action was calm, deliberate, and dignified, without pretension to gracefulness, or peculiar manner, but merely natural, and such as one would think it should be in such a man. When walking in the street, his movement had not the soldierly air which might be expected…. At the age of sixty-five, time had done nothing towards bending him out of his natural erectness. His deportment was invariably grave; it was sobriety that stopped short of sadness…. His mode of speaking was slow and deliberate, not as though he was in search of fine words, but that he might utter those only adapted to his purpose….”

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Charles Biddle, veteran of the Revolution, later Vice-President of Pennsylvania, was in frequent contact with Washington, in person and via letter, from wartime until Washington died. He wrote an account of his life's experiences and observations, held in manuscript form until descendants published it in 1883. Biddle offers comments about Washington in the manuscript.

“On the 14th of December, 1799, died General Washington. The loss of this great and good man was deeply lamented.... I had seen him during the war at my brother Edward’s, and in camp. When he was in the Convention I dined several times in company with him, and had the honor of his company to dine with me. When he was elected President of the United States, he lived during the whole of the time that he was in Philadelphia nearly opposite to me. At that time I saw him almost daily.... He was a most elegant figure of a man, with so much dignity of manners, that no person whatever could take any improper liberties with him. I have heard Mr. Robert Morris, who was as intimate with him as any man in America, say that he was the only man in whose presence he felt any awe. You would seldom see a frown or a smile on his countenance, his air was serious and reflecting, yet I have seen him in the theatre laugh heartily. Dr. Forrest, who laughs a great deal, desired me, one night at the theatre, to look at General Washington. ‘See how he laughs, by the Lord he must be a gentleman.’ The General was in the next box and I believe heard him. He was much more cheerful when he was retiring from the office of President than I had ever seen him before.... He was in Philadelphia a short time before he died, and I thought he never looked better than he did at that time. He enjoyed remarkable health, hardly ever having been confined by sickness. The loss of no man was ever more severely felt by his countrymen than General Washington....

“... Within the memory of the present writer, an aged Philadelphia mechanic being asked if he remembered General Washington replied, ‘General Washington! Oh yes, I remember General Washington well; I once see General Washington kick a fellow down stairs.’ He proceeded to relate that he and a fellow journeyman were once sent to the President’s house to do a job of painting or glazing. Arriving early, they were admitted by a servant-maid who led the way up the stairs. Whilst ascending the stairs his companion attempted some liberties with the girl, who gave a loud shriek as they reached the second story. Immediately the General sallied forth from the front room, half dressed and half shaved, and demanded the cause of the disturbance. Hearing the girl's story, he rushed at the man in a rage and started him down stairs with a violent kick from behind; at the same time he cried out, ’I will have no woman insulted in my house,’ and called for Colonel Lear to put the rascal out the front door. The language of the narrator was more graphic, if less decorous, than in the above repetition.”

Thomas Twining, an English government agent working in India, traveled to the United States in 1796 on his way back to England. Prompted by mutual interests in India, Twining met and enjoyed the company of Martha Washington’s granddaughter and husband, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Law, at their home in the city of Washington. They gave Twining a letter of introduction

to President Washington and asked him to deliver a miniature portrait of Washington upon their meeting in Philadelphia. Twining’s diary offers a record of that time spent with Washington on May 13, 1796.

“At one o’clock to-day I called at General Washington’s with the picture and letter I had for him….

“While engaged in this conversation [with Mrs. Washington] … the door opened, and Mrs. Washington and myself rising, she said, ‘The President,’ and introduced me to him. Never did I feel more interest than at this moment, when I saw the tall, upright, venerable figure of this great man advancing towards me to take me by the hand. There was a seriousness in his manner which seemed to contribute to the impressive dignity of his person, without diminishing the confidence and ease which the benevolence of his countenance and the kindness of his address inspired. There are persons in whose appearance one looks in vain for the qualities they are known to possess, but the appearance of General Washington harmonized in a singular manner with the dignity and modesty of his public life. So completely did he look the great and good man he really was, that I felt rather respect than awe in his presence, and experienced neither the surprise nor disappointment with which a personal introduction to distinguished individuals is often accompanied.

“The General’s age was rather more than sixty-four. In person he was tall, well-proportioned, and upright. His hair was powdered and tied behind. Although his deportment was that of a general, the expression of his features had rather the calm dignity of a legislator than the severity of a soldier….”

To capture his recollections of Washington, author and poet Grace Greenwood interviewed octogenarian Robert E. Gray in 1869. Gray’s family lived near the president’s house in Philadelphia, and, as a young boy, Gray saw Washington frequently. Gray’s father was Washington’s confidential courier during the war.

Greenwood: “Was Washington the stately and formal personage he has been represented?”

Gray: “Yes, he was a very dignified gentleman, with the most elegant manners – very nice in his dress, careful and punctual. I suppose he would be thought a little stiff nowadays.”

Greenwood: “Did you ever hear him laugh heartily?”

Gray: “Why no, I think I never did.”

Greenwood: “Was he always grave, as you remember him, or did he smile now and then?”

Gray: “Why, bless you, yes, he always smiled on children! He was particularly popular with small boys. When he went in state to Independence Hall, in his cream-colored chariot, drawn by six bays, and with postilions and out-riders, and when he set out for and returned from Mount Vernon, we boys were on hand; he could always count us in, to huzza and wave our hats for him, and he used to touch his hat to us as politely as though we had been so many veteran soldiers on parade.”

Greenwood: “Were you ever in his house, as a child?”

Gray: “Oh! yes; after his great dinners he used to tell the stewards to let in the little fellows, and we, the boys of the immediate neighborhood, who were never far off on such occasions, crowded about the table and made quick work with the remaining cakes, nuts, and raisins.

“Washington had a habit of pacing up and down the large front room on the first floor, in the early twilight, with his hands behind him; and one evening a little boy, who had never seen him, in attempting to climb up to an open window to look in upon him, fell and hurt himself. Washington heard him cry, rung for a servant, and sent him to inquire about the accident — for, after all, he was very soft-hearted, at least toward children. The servant came back and said: ’The boy was trying to get a look at you, sir.’ ‘Bring him in,’ said the General, and, when the boy came in, he patted him on the head and said: ‘You wanted to see General Washington, did you? Well. I am General Washington.’ But the little fellow shook his head and said: ‘No, you are only just a man, I want to see the President.’

“They say Washington laughed, and told the boy that he was the President, and a man for all that. Then he had the servant give the little fellow some nuts and cakes and dismissed him.”

Greenwood: “Do you remember Washington’s levees and Mrs. Washington’s drawing rooms?”

Gray: “Yes, I remember hearing about them. All the evening parties were over by nine o’clock, and the President’s house was dark and silent by ten. They were great affairs, but I was too young to know much about them. I attended his horse-levees. I was very fond of visiting his stables, early in the morning, at the hour when he always went to inspect them. I liked to see him at that work, for he seemed to enjoy it himself. Like President Grant, he was a great lover of horses. I can almost think I see him now, come striding out from his house across the yard to the stables, booted and spurred, but bareheaded in his shirtsleeves.”

Greenwood: “Washington in his shirt-sleeves!”

Gray: “Yes, madam; but he was always Washington. The grooms stood aside, silent and respectful, while he examined every stall and manger, and regularly went over every horse — I mean, he passed over a portion of its coat his large white hand, always looking to see if it was soiled, or if any loose hairs had come off on it. If so, the groom was reprimanded and
ordered to do his work over. Generally, however, Washington would say: ‘Very well. Now, John, get out Prescott and Jackson’ (his white chargers). ‘I’ll be ready by the time you come round’”

Greenwood: “Did he ride at so early an hour?”

Gray: “Yes; generally between five and six of a pleasant morning he was off; and he almost always rode up to Point-no-Point, on the Delaware, a little way above Richmond. He was a fine horseman, and, being a long-bodied man, looked grandly on horseback. It was a sight worth getting up early to see.”

Greenwood: “Did Washington ever swear?”

Gray: “Well, as for that, I cannot speak from my own observation. Washington had great self-control – he was a moral man – a religious man, for those times, and did not swear upon small occasions, and, I should say, never before children; but, from what I have heard my father and old soldiers say, I think he must have blazed away considerably in times of great excitement. He was very tender of his favorite horses, and, at one time, I remember to have heard a young aide or secretary ask leave to ride one of his white chargers, on the way to Mount Vernon, and the General allowed him to, but cautioned him not to rein up the horse too tightly. After a while, Washington saw he was worrying the animal, and cautioned him again; but the fellow kept on pulling and jerking at the bit, until the creature became almost unmanageable. Then Washington broke upon him like a whole battery, ordered him to dismount, and swore tremendously….

“These things were told of him, but not told against him. It was the fashion of those times. However I never heard a rough word from him, or saw his face when it was not peaceful and pleasant.”

Mr. Gray continued: “Commonly, General Washington walked out in the morning without any attendants. He used to go from his house down High-street to Second-street, on which he often stopped for a few moments, at his watch-maker’s, to compare his time with that in the shop. Sometimes, I believe he set his watch by the clock in the old State House. He walked down Second to Chestnut, and up Chestnut to the corner of Fifth, where he would stop for a half hour or so at the War Office. From thence, he walked up to Sixth-street, and then home. He was so regular and punctual, that people knew just when and where to meet him on his walks. Everybody knew him, and everybody made way for him most respectfully – the men, unless Quakers, removing their hats, and the women bowing or courtesying. Washington always acknowledged such marks of respect, even from the poorest and humblest, in his own grand way.”

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Judge Francis T. Brooke spent his early life in Spotsylvania County, Virginia. He was active in the militia during the revolution, and he was a member of the Virginia legislature and the Supreme Court of Virginia. Brooke wrote “A Narrative Of My Life For My Family,” which included a brief description of Washington.

“I personally knew (as well as so young a man could know) all the eminent military characters of the Revolution, with the exception of Alexander Hamilton and General Knox. I knew Washington, Green and Gates.... After the war he frequently came to Fredericksburg, where his mother resided, and his only sister, Mrs. Lewis. He attended the ball of the 22nd of February; opened it by dancing a minuet with some lady, and then danced cotillions and country dances; was very gallant, and always attached himself, by his attentions, to some one or more of the most beautiful and attractive ladies at the balls. The next day, his friends gave him a dinner, at which, after the cloth was removed, and the wine came on, a Mr. Jack Stewart (who had been a clerk of the House of Delegates), a great vocalist, was called upon for a song; and he sang one from the novel of “Roderick Random,” which was a very amusing one. General Washington laughed at it very much, and encored it. The next day, when I went to his sister’s to introduce strangers to him, I found him one of the most dignified men of the age. While he was President of the United States, at the instance of my father-in-law, General Spotswood, he offered me the collector’s office at Tappahannock; but I preferred my profession, and declined it, though the office, at that time, was a very lucrative one. Washington was undoubtedly a great man, and there was a sublimity in his greatness which exceeded that of any of the great men of ancient or modern history.”


“… In about ten minutes the president came to me. He wore a plain blue coat; his hair dressed and powdered. There was a reserve but no hauteur in his manner. He shook me by the hand, said he was glad to see a friend of his nephew’s, drew a chair, and desired me to sit down.

“Washington has something uncommonly majestic and commanding in his walk, his address, his figure, and his countenance. His face is characterized, however, more by intense and powerful thought than by quick and fiery conception. There is a mildness about its expression, and an air of reserve in his manner lowers its tone still more. He is sixty-four, but appears some years younger, and has sufficient apparent vigor to last many years yet. He was frequently entirely silent for many minutes, during which time an awkwardness seemed to prevail in everyone present. His answers were often short and sometimes approached to moroseness. He did not at any time speak with very remarkable

87 Judge Francis T. Brooke’s narrative in Mary V. Thompson, “Statements…”, 43-44.
fluency; perhaps the extreme correctness of his language, which almost seemed studied, prevented that effect. He appeared to enjoy a humorous observation, and made several himself. He laughed heartily several times in a very good-humored manner. On the morning of my departure he treated me as if I had lived in his house, with ease and attention, but in general I thought there was a slight air of moroseness about him as if something had vexed him.”

John Singleton Copley, Jr., son of the famous painter, was in the United States in the summer of 1796 when he met Washington and spent time at Mount Vernon. In a letter to The Reverend Richard Bellward, D. D., Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cambridge, Copley comments on Washington’s mood and behavior at a banquet given by the people of Alexandria.

“The civic soldiery are continued from year to year. On this occasion the Alexandrians invited Washington himself, who resides ten miles off, to dinner. I was present at the banquet, and saw the President of the Republic; he participated in the happiness of the citizens, and added to it by his genial and benevolent good humor….”

Lady Henrietta Liston, wife of Robert Liston, the British minister to the United States, met Washington near the end of his presidency and visited Mount Vernon a number of times after he retired from office. Mr. Liston shared Washington’s strong interest in farming and agriculture, a thing that helped bond the two men. She describes Washington in one of her journals.

“… Naturally grave & silent, his mode of life had rendered him frugal & temperate. Vanity in him was a very limited passion, & prudence his striking trait…. To a majestic figure was added a native unaffected gracefulness of deportment, & dignity of manner, which was rather improved by a liking—I will not say a fondness—for dress….

“Naturally hot-tempered, cold hearted, & guarded, he acquired a uniform command over his passions on publick occasions, but in private & particularly with his Servants, its violence sometimes broke out. His countenance was peculiarly pleasant when he laughed which he apparently did with good humour at the jests of others, & he told his own occasionally with gaiety; but it was the flash of a moment; gaiety was not natural to him.

“… His first & last pleasure appeared to be farming; on that theme he always talked freely, being on other topics extremely cautious not to commit himself, & never spoke on any subject of which he was not master.

“… About ten days before his quitting his situation, I congratulated him on his approaching happiness…. I observed that his countenance indicated the pleasure to which


89 Letter of John Singleton Copley to Reverend Richard Bellward in Mary V. Thompson, “Statements…”, 68.
he looked forward. You are wrong replied he, my countenance never yet betrayed my feelings..."90

Lady Henrietta Liston wrote many letters to her uncle in Scotland during the Listons’ stay in America. The Listons were frequent guests of the Washingtons in Philadelphia and at Mount Vernon. It was this close contact that gave Henrietta Liston the opportunity to observe and comment about George Washington’s character and behavior during the last years of his presidency and in his retirement.

Letter of December 9, 1796 (Philadelphia):
“My dear Uncle....

“... yesterday tempted me abroad to hear the Presidents Speech, at the opening of Congress, the last He may, probably, ever make in publick.... after composing himself He drew a paper from his pocket. Washington Writes better than He reads, there is even a little hesitation in his common speaking, but He possesses so much natural unaffected dignity, and is so noble a figure as to give always a pleasing impression....”

Letter of December 8, 1797 (Norfolk):
“My dear Uncle....

“I mentioned by my last Packet Mr. Liston’s intention and mine to accompany my Brother and his Party to Norfolk, taking them to Mount-Vernon on our way. Mr. Marchant and Mr. Athill were charmed with General Washington, who we found improved by retirement, like a Man relieved from an heavy burthen. He has thrown off a little that prudence which formerly guarded his every word, of course, He converses with the more ease and cheerfulness....”

Letter of January 17, 1799 (Philadelphia):
“My dear Uncle....

“In coming to Town this Winter We found General Washington fixing, with the officers of Government, the arrangements of the Army. He dined with Us one day, and called repeatedly, I have scarcely ever seen a change of situation produce a greater or more agreeable one in manners than in him, He was kind, affable, cheerful and happy....”91

Julian Niemcewicz, statesman, soldier, and author, was born into Polish nobility. He accompanied Revolutionary War volunteer Thaddeus Kosciusko to the United States in 1797. He


returned to Poland in 1802, came back to the U.S. in 1804 and traveled home to Poland in 1807. Niemcewicz kept a detailed diary of his travels and experiences. On May 21, 1798, he met Washington near Georgetown at the home of Martha Washington’s granddaughter, Martha Parke Custis Peter. Washington invited Niemcewicz to visit Mount Vernon, and he stayed with the Washingtons almost two weeks, arriving on June 2\textsuperscript{nd} and departing June 15\textsuperscript{th}.

Diary entry for May 21, 1798:
“… my respected host, Mr. Law [husband of Elizabeth Parke Custis Law, a granddaughter of Martha Washington] ... announced to us that General Washington had arrived at Mr. Peeters’ house. This Mr. Peeters had married Miss Custis, granddaughter of Mrs. Washington…. It was immediately decided that we should all go present our respects to him….

“… I was presented to him by Mr. Law. He held out his hand to me and shook mine. We went into the parlor; I sat down beside him; I was moved, speechless. I had not eyes enough to look on him. His is a majestic figure in which dignity and gentleness are united. The portraits that we all have of him in Europe do not resemble him much. He is nearly six feet tall, square set, and very strongly built; aquiline nose, blue eyes, the mouth and especially the lower jaw sunken, a good head of hair…. He wore a coat of deep nut brown, black stockings, a waistcoat and breeches of satin of the same color.”

Diary entry for May 23, 1798:
“... He came with Mrs. Washington to spend two days in Mr. Law’s house, where I was staying. The whole time he was courteous, polite, even attentive; he talked very little, now and then on agriculture, on natural history, on all that one would wish, except on politics, on which he maintains an absolute silence and reserve; to the extent that he never asked the slightest question either on our unfortunate Revolution, or on the least thing that could be connected with it.”

Diary entry for May 24, 1798:
“The Gl.’s pastime was billiards; he plays with a mace and although it is 25 years since he has played, his attention and skill made up for the lack of practice; he played each game better.”

Diary entry for June 3, 1798, Mount Vernon:
“The next day, which was Sunday, the Gl. Retired to write letters, this day being set aside for that activity....”

Diary entry for June 5, 1798, Mount Vernon:
“I have often heard the Gl. reproached for his reserve and his taciturnity. It is true that he is somewhat reserved in speech, but he does not avoid entering into conversation when one furnishes him with a subject....

“At the table after the departure of the ladies, or else in the evening seated under the portico, he often talked with me for hours at a time. His favorite subject is agriculture, but he answered with kindness all questions that I put to him on the Revolution, the armies,
etc. He has a prodigious memory. One time in the evening he listed all the rivers, lakes, creeks and the means to procure a communication between these waters from Portsmouth in the province of Maine as far as the Mississippi. This man may have erred during his administration; he may not be exempt from a few faults connected more with his age than with his heart, but in all he is a great man whose virtues equal the services that he has rendered his Fatherland. He has shown courage and talent in combat, perseverance and steadfastness during reverses and difficulties, disinterestedness, having at all times served without reward, and in the time of general enthusiasm of a grateful nation he never wished to accept the slightest recompense. Finally he has shown that he was not eager for glory, for being able to remain all his life at the head of the government he resigned voluntarily from the office of President.…

“Since his retirement he has led a quiet and regular life. He gets up at 5 o’clock in the morning, reads or writes until seven. He breakfasts on tea and caks made from maize; because of his teeth he makes slices spread with butter and honey. He then immediately goes on horseback to see work in the fields; sometimes in the middle of a field he holds a council of war with Mr. Anderson. He returns at two o’clock, dresses, goes to dinner. If there are guests, he loves to chat after dinner with a glass of Madeira in his hand. After dinner he diligently reads the newspapers, of which he receives about ten of different kinds. He answers letters, etc. Tea at 7 o’clock; he chats until nine, and then goes to bed.”

English actor John Bernard came to the United States in 1797 to continue his acting profession after some recent managerial failures in England. He had residences in Philadelphia and Boston, and, as a noted actor, he toured extensively throughout the U.S. before returning to England in 1819. After he retired from the stage, Bernard wrote a detailed autobiography, which remained unpublished in his lifetime. In July 1798 he first met Washington, by chance, on a road near Mount Vernon when both men stopped to aid travelers.

“A few weeks after my location at Annapolis I met with a most pleasing adventure, no less than an encounter with General Washington, under circumstances which most fully confirmed the impression I had formed of him. I had been to pay a visit to an acquaintance on the banks of the Potomac, a few miles below Alexandria, and was returning on horseback, in the rear of an old-fashioned chaise, the driver of which was strenuously urging his steed to an accelerated pace. The beast showed singular indifference till a lash, directed with more skill than humanity, took the skin from an old wound. The sudden pang threw the poor animal on his hind-legs, and the wheel swerving upon the bank, over went the chaise, flinging out upon the road a young woman who had been its occupant. The minute before I had perceived a horseman approaching at a gentle trot, who now broke into a gallop, and we reached the scene of the disaster together. The female was our first care. She was insensible, but had sustained no material injury. My companion supported her, while I brought some water in the crown of my hat, from a spring some way off. The

driver of the chaise had landed on his legs, and, having ascertained that his spouse was not dead, seemed very well satisfied with the care she was in, and set about extricating his horse. A gush of tears announced the lady’s return to sensibility, and then, as her eyes opened, her tongue gradually resumed its office, and assured us that she retained at least one faculty in perfection, as she poured forth a volley of invectives on her mate. The horse was now on its legs, but the vehicle still prostrate, heavy in its frame, and laden with at least a half ton of luggage. My fellow-helper set me an example of activity in relieving it of the external weight; and, when all was clear, we grasped the wheel between us and, to the peril of our spinal columns, righted the conveyance. The horse was then put in, and we lent a hand to help up the luggage. All this helping, hauling, and lifting occupied at least half an hour, under a meridian sun in the middle of July, which fairly boiled the perspiration out of our foreheads…. My companion, after an exclamation at the heat, offered very courteously to dust my coat, a favor the return of which enabled me to take a deliberate survey of his person. He was a tall, erect, well-made man, evidently advanced in years, but who appeared to have retained all the vigor and elasticity resulting from a life of temperance and exercise. His dress was a blue coat buttoned to his chin, and buckskin breaches. Though, the instant he took of his hat, I could not avoid the recognition of familiar lineaments – which, indeed, I was in the habit of seeing on every sign-post and over every fireplace – still I failed to identify him, and, to my surprise, I found that I was an object of equal speculation in his eyes. A smile at length lighted them up, and he exclaimed, ‘Mr. Bernard, I believe?’ I bowed. ‘I had the pleasure of seeing you perform last winter in Philadelphia.’ I bowed again, and he added, ‘I have heard of you since from several of my friends at Annapolis. You are acquainted with Mr. Carroll?’ I replied that that gentleman’s society had made amends for much that I had lost in quitting England. He then learned the cause of my presence in the neighborhood, and remarked, ‘You must be fatigued. If you will ride up to my house, which is not a mile distant, you can prevent any ill-effects from this exertion, by a couple of hours’ rest.’ I looked around for his dwelling, and he pointed to a building which, the day before, I had spent an hour contemplating. ‘Mount Vernon!’ I exclaimed; and then, drawing back, with a stare of wonder, ‘have I the honor of addressing General Washington?’ With a smile, whose expression of benevolence I have rarely seen equalled, he offered his hand, and replied, ‘An odd sort of introduction, Mr. Bernard; but I am pleased to find you can play so active a part in private, and without a prompter,’ and then pointed to our horses (which had stood like statues all this time, as though in sympathy with their fallen brother), and shrugged his shoulders at the inn. I needed no further stimulus to accept his friendly invitation. As we rode up to his house we entered freely into conversation, first, in reference to his friends at Annapolis, then respecting my own success in America and the impression I had received of the country. “Flattering as such inquiries were from such a source, I must confess my own reflections on what had just passed were more absorbing. Considering that nine ordinary country gentlemen out of ten, who had seen a chaise upset near their estate, would have thought it savored neither of pride nor ill-nature to ride home and send their servants to its assistance, I could not but think that I had witnessed one of the strongest evidences of a great man’s claim to his reputation - the prompt, impulsive working of a heart which having made the good of mankind - not conventional forms – its religion, was never so happy as in practically displaying it. On reaching the house (which, in its compact
simplicity and commanding elevation, was no bad emblem of its owner’s mind), we found
that Mrs. Washington was indisposed; but the general ordered refreshments in a parlor
whose windows took a noble range of the Potomac, and, after a few minutes’ absence,
rejoined me.

“Though I have ventured to offer some remarks on his less-known contemporaries, I feel it
would be an impertinence to say a word on the public merits of a man whose character has
been burning as a beacon to Europe till its qualities are as well known as the names and
dates of his triumphs. My retrospect of him is purely a social one, and much do regret, for
the interest of these pages, that it is confined to a single interview. The general impression I
received from his appearance fully corresponded with the description of him by the
Marquis de Chastelluz, who visited America at the close of the war. ‘The great
characteristic of Washington,’ says he, ‘is the perfect union which seems to subsist between
his moral and physical qualities; so that the selection of one would enable you to judge of
all the rest....’ Whether you surveyed his face, open yet well defined, dignified but not
arrogant, thoughtful but benign; his frame, towering and muscular, but alert from its good
proportion – every figure suggested a resemblance to the spirit it encased, and showed
simplicity in alliance with the sublime. The impression, therefore, was that of a most
perfect whole; and though the effect of proportion is said to be to reduce the idea of
magnitude, you could not but think you looked upon a wonder, and something sacred as
well as wonderful - a man fashioned by the hand of Heaven, with every requisite to achieve
a great work. Thus a feeling of awe and veneration stole over you.

“In conversation his face had not much variety of expression: a look of thoughtfulness was
given by the compression of the mouth and the indentation of the brow (suggesting an
habitual conflict with the mastery over passion) which did not seem so much to disdain a
sympathy with trivialities as to be incapable of denoting them. Nor had his voice, so far as I
could discover in our quiet talk, much change, or richness of intonation, but he always
spoke with earnestness, and his eyes (glorious conductors of the light within) burned with a
steady fire which no one could mistake for mere affability; they were one grand expression
of the well-known line, ‘I am a man, and interested in all that concerns humanity.’ In our
hour and a half’s conversation he touched on every topic that I brought before him with an
even current of good sense, if he embellished it with little wit or verbal elegance. He spoke
like a man who had felt as much as he had reflected, and reflected more than he had spoken....”

Richard Parkinson, an English agriculturalist and author on the subject, arranged from abroad
to rent farmland at Mount Vernon. On September 3, 1798, he sailed to America with his family
and a supply of livestock, arriving in Virginia on November 11. Parkinson’s strong
disappointment in the Mount Vernon land caused him to back out of the rental agreement with
Washington. Parkinson did find farmland to his liking in the vicinity of Baltimore. But
throughout his stay, as expressed in his writings, he remained very critical of the American
farmland he saw within the confines of his travels. Parkinson returned to England in 1800. His

93 John Bernard, Retrospections of America, 1797 – 1811, edited from the manuscript by Mrs. Bayle Bernard (New
comments about Washington were included in the two-volume work of his tour in America.

“… It was always his custom, when he travelled, to pay as much for his servant’s breakfast, dinner, or supper, as for his own. I was told this by the keeper of a tavern, where the General breakfasted; and he made the bill three shillings and nine pence for the master’s breakfast, and three shillings the servant’s. The General sent for the tavern-keeper into the room, and desired he would make the same charge for his servants as for himself, for he doubted not that they had eaten as much. This shews he was as correct in paying as in receiving…..

“It may be worthy the reader’s notice to observe what regularity does; since there cannot be any other particular reason given for General Washington’s superior powers, than his correctness, that made him able to govern that wild country: for it was the opinion of many of his most intimate friends, that his intellects were not brighter than those of many other men. To me he appeared a mild friendly man, in company rather reserved, in private speaking with candor. His behaviour to me was such, that I shall ever revere his name…. ”94

Joshua Brookes, a young English merchant traveling in the United States, visited Mount Vernon on February 4, 1799. He kept a journal of his experiences and recorded an account of his dinner with Washington and his family.

“About half past two the General returned. [He was] dressed in a blue great coat, large buttons, blue overalls and bespattered boots, a blue coat, coquelico cassimere waiscoat, blue small cloathes, cocked hat with a cockade. In conversation he informed us his cloathes were all of American manufacture. He bowed on entering when Mr. S[amuel] C[ampbell] presented his introductory letter, desired us to be seated, put on his spectacles, perused it and again bowed. His demeanor was formal, stiff and reserved. He sat about five minutes, said little. He mentioned he went to change his dress, prior to which he introduced Mrs. Washington….

Upon our mentioning to each other that we must return [to town] when the General came in, Miss Custis said we would stay to dinner, [that] twenty miles was too much to ride without something. She went out, said she would call the General and he soon came in and with great familiarity and politeness requested our stay. I was willing but must do as the Campbells did. He repeated it again, as Samuel Campbell said, in so polite a manner that it was just ready, that we accepted his offer. He is near six feet high, [has] a roman nose, projection under chin, rough, weather beaten countenance, healthy look, large hands. He appears a reserved man [but] became pleasant, free and sociable at dinner, seems naturally austere and reflective….

“We dined about four. Mrs. Washington at the head [of the table], the General on her right…and then Mr. Craig [Craik] next [to the] General…. After [dinner] we drank about

three glasses when we took our leave. The General and Lear came to the door and waited till we were on our horses….

“The General enquired if we had seen General [Alexander] Hamilton lately, was happy to hear he was well….

“… I did not find that openness in the General I expected, reserve and stiffness abounded. Perhaps it might be greater than it otherwise would have been from our introduction, as I since heard, being from one of opposite politics to the General. He was polite, he gave attention to us, but there was wanting the Je ne scai quoi that gratifies. I was [e]xtremely happy at seeing a person so noted in this country and who has filled the highest offices in it….”

George Washington’s diary entry for June 20, 1799, states that ”A Mr. Hancock from Boston … dined here.” Two days later John Hancock, nephew of the famous signer of the Declaration of Independence, wrote of the visit to Mount Vernon in a letter to John Nicholson.

"I have just returned from Mount Vernon, where I have been to pay my best respects to Genl. Washington, he treated me in a very polite manner I had also the honor of dining with him - his Lady is a charming agreeable Woman & my time passed away in a very pleasant manner - You would be delighted with his Seat, & his farm is in the highest state of Cultivation - he owns upwards of 500 Slaves & they all are as happy as Lords. My friend Colo. Lear supposes him to be worth a Million of Dollars - You would be surprized to find what an uniform Life he leads, every thing he does is by method & system - he rises at day break, breakfasts at 7 oClo, dines at 3 oClo, retires to bed at 10 - he keeps a journal where he records every thing that transpires from day to day, & it is impossible that any action of his life, can give him the least remorse - he is a model of the highest perfection....”

William White, D. D. was an Episcopal clergyman who actively supported the American cause throughout the war. He became chaplain of Congress in 1777. He was in Washington’s presence often as his pastor and friend. White’s correspondence and autobiographical sketch formed the basis of a memoir of his life published in 1839.

“Although I was often in company of this great man, and had the honour of dining often at his table, I never heard any thing from him that could manifest his opinions on the subject of religion. I knew no man who seemed so carefully to guard against the discoursing of himself or of his acts, or of any thing pertaining to him: and it has occasionally occurred to me, when in his company, that if a stranger to his person were present, he would never have known, from anything said by the President, that he was conscious of having


distinguished himself in the eyes of the world. His ordinary behaviour, although unexceptionably courteous, was not such as to encourage obtrusion on what might be in his mind.”

Washington’s nephew Howell Lewis worked as a secretary to Washington during his presidency and managed Mount Vernon for a while, also during the presidency. Lewis was a frequent visitor to Mount Vernon and was one of the last guests to stay at Mount Vernon before Washington died on December 14, 1799. To author James K. Paulding, Lewis reflected on saying goodbye to Washington as he departed from that visit.

“When I parted from him, he stood on the steps of the front door, where he took leave of myself and another, and wished us a pleasant journey, as I was going to Westmoreland on business. It was a bright frosty morning, he had taken his usual ride, and the clear healthy flush on his cheek, and his sprightly manner, brought the remark from both of us that we had never seen the general look so well. I have sometimes thought him decidedly the handsomest man I ever saw; and when in a lively mood, so full of pleasantry, so agreeable to all with whom he associated, I could hardly realize that he was the same Washington whose dignity awed all who approached him.

“A few days afterwards, being on my way home in company with others, while we were conversing about Washington, I saw a servant rapidly riding towards us. On his near approach, I recognized him as belonging to Mount Vernon. He rode up – his countenance told the story – he handed me a letter. Washington was dead!”

*General descriptions of Washington written after his death:*


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“Nelly Custis was considered one of the most beautiful women of the day…. All who knew
her can recall the pleasure which they derived from her extensive information, brilliant
wit, and boundless generosity…. Would that we could recall the many tales of the past we
have heard from her lips, but alas! we should fail to give them accurately. One narrative is
retained, as it made a strong impression at the time. She said the most perfect harmony
always existed ‘between her grandmamma and the general;’ that in all his intercourse with
her he was most considerate and tender. She had often seen her when she had something to
communicate, or a request to make, at a moment when his mind was entirely abstracted
from the present, seize him by the button to command his attention, when he would look
down upon her with a most benignant smile, and become at once attentive to her and her
wishes, which were never slighted. She also said, the grave dignity which he usually wore
did not prevent his keen enjoyment of a joke, and that no one laughed more heartily than
he did, when she, herself, a gay, laughing girl, gave one of her saucy descriptions of any
scene in which she had taken part, or any one of the merry pranks she then often played;
and that he would retire from the room in which her young companions were amusing
themselves, because his presence created a reserve which they could not overcome. But he
always regretted it exceedingly, as he liked nothing better than to look on at their sports
and see them happy….””

Washington’s grandson and adopted son, George Washington Parke Custis, gave portraits of
Washington, from the view of an observant family member, in the essays that fill his daughter’s

“The first president took considerable pains, and used frequent stratagems, in endeavoring
to avoid the numberless manifestations of attachment and respect which awaited him
wherever he went. On his journeys, he charged the courier who would precede to engage
accommodations at the inns, by no means to mention the coming of the president to other
than the landlord. These precautions but rarely took effect; and often when the chief would
suppose that he had stolen a march upon his old companions-in-arms and fellow-citizens, a
horseman would be discovered dashing off at full speed, and soon would be heard the
trumpet of the volunteer-cavalry; and the village cannon, roused from its bed of neglect,
where it had lain since warlike time, would summon all within reach of its echoes, to haste
and bid welcome to the man who was “first in the hearts of his countrymen.” Every village
and little hamlet poured forth their population to greet the arrival of him who all delighted
to honor….”

George Washington Parke Custis comments on Washington’s disciplined daily schedule.

99 George Washington Parke Custis, Mary Custis Lee and Benson J. Lossing, Recollections and Private Memoirs of
Washington, by His Adopted Son, George Washington Parke Custis, with a Memoir of the Author, by His Daughter;

100 George Washington Parke Custis, Mary Custis Lee and Benson J. Lossing, Recollections, 411-412.
“Although much retired from the business world, the chief was by no means inattentive to the progress of public affairs. When the post-bag arrived, he would select the letters, and lay them by for perusal in the seclusion of his library. The journals he would peruse while taking a single cup of tea (his only supper), and would read aloud passages of peculiar interest, making remarks upon the same. These evenings with his family always ended precisely at nine o’clock, when Washington bade every one good night, and retired to rest, to rise again at four, and to renew the same routine of labor and enjoyment that distinguished his last days at Mount Vernon.

“Washington’s last days, like those that preceded them in the course of a long and well-spent life, were devoted to constant and useful employment. After the active exercise of the morning, in attention to agriculture and rural affairs, in the evening came the post-bag, loaded with letters, papers, and pamphlets. His correspondence both at home and abroad was immense; yet was it promptly and fully replied to. No letter was unanswered. One of the best-bred men of his time, Washington deemed it a grave offence against the rules of good manners and propriety to leave letters unanswered. He wrote with great facility, and it would be a difficult matter to find another, who had written so much, who had written so well. His epistolary writings will descend to posterity, as models of good taste, as well as exhibiting superior powers of mind. General Henry Lee once observed to the chief, ‘We are amazed, sir, at the vast amount of work that you accomplish.’ Washington replied, ‘Sir, I rise at four o’clock, and a great deal of my work is done while others sleep.’”

George Washington Parke Custis comments on the physical description of Washington.

“In giving a description of the stature and form of Washington, we give not only the result of our personal observation and experience of many years, but information derived from the highest authority – a favorite nephew. Major Lawrence Lewis asked his uncle what was his height in the prime of life? He replied, ‘In my best days, Lawrence, I stood six feet and two inches in ordinary shoes.’ We know that he measured, by a standard, precisely six feet when laid out in death. Of his weight we are an evidence, having heard him say to Crawford, governor of Canada, in 1799, ‘My weight, in my best days, sir, never exceeded from two hundred and ten to twenty.’ His form was unique. Unlike most athletic frames that expand at the shoulders and then gather at the hips, the form of Washington deviated from the general rule, since it descended from the shoulders to the hips in perpendicular lines, the breadth of the trunk being nearly as great at the one end as at the other. His limbs were long, large, and sinewy; in his lower limbs, he was what is usually called straight-limbed. His joints, feet, and hands, were large, and, could a cast have been made from his right hand (so far did its dimensions exceed nature’s model), it would have been preserved in museums for ages as the anatomical wonder of the eighteenth century.

“The eyes of the chief were a light-grayish blue, deep sunken in their sockets, giving the expression of gravity and thought. Stuart painted those eyes of a deeper blue, saying, ‘In a hundred years they will have faded to the right color.’ His hair was of a hazel brown, and

very thin in his latter days. In his movements, he preserved, in a remarkable degree and to an advanced age, the elastic step that he had acquired in his service on the frontier.”

Author, poet and historian **Mercy Warren** was impressed with George Washington at first sight when they met upon his arrival in Cambridge to assume command of the American Army. Her husband, James Warren, was active in Massachusetts politics and served as Paymaster General under Washington at the beginning of the war. Mercy Warren’s three-volume history of the American Revolution was published in 1805. According to the title of her work, it is “interspersed with Biographical, Political and Moral Observations” that include character sketches of the American leadership.

“Mr. Washington was a gentleman of family and fortune, of a polite, but not learned education; he appeared to possess a coolness of temper, and a degree of moderation and judgment, that qualified him for the elevated station in which he was now placed; with some considerable knowledge of mankind, he supported the reserve of the statesman, with the occasional affability of the courtier. In his character was blended a certain dignity, united with the appearance of good humour; he possessed courage without rashness, patriotism and zeal without acrimony, and retained with universal applause the first military command, until the establishment of independence. Through the various changes of fortune in the subsequent conflict, though the slowness of his movements was censured by some, his character suffered little diminution to the conclusion of a war, that from extraordinary exigencies of an infant republic, required at times, the caution of Fabius, the energy of Caesar, and the happy facility of expedient in distress, so remarkable in the military operations of the illustrious Frederick. With the first of these qualities, he was endowed by nature; the second was awakened by necessity; and the third he acquired by experience in the field of glory and danger, which extended his fame through half the globe.”

**Thomas Jefferson** gives a full characterization of George Washington in a letter to Dr. Walter Jones on January 2, 1814.

“… I think I knew General Washington intimately and thoroughly; and were I called on to delineate his character, it should be in terms like these.

“His mind was great and powerful, without being of the very first order; his penetration strong, though not so acute as that of a Newton, Bacon, or Locke; and as far as he saw, no judgment was ever sounder. It was slow in operation, being little aided by invention or


imagination, but sure in conclusion. Hence the common remark of his officers, of the advantage he derived from councils of war, where hearing all suggestions, he selected whatever was best; and certainly no General ever planned his battles more judiciously. But if deranged during the course of the action, if any member of his plan was dislocated by sudden circumstances, he was slow in a re-adjustment. The consequence was, that he often failed in the field, and rarely against an enemy in station, as at Boston and York. He was incapable of fear, meeting personal dangers with the calmest unconcern. Perhaps the strongest feature in his character was prudence, never acting until every circumstance, every consideration, was maturely weighed; refraining if he saw a doubt, but, when once decided, going through with his purpose, whatever obstacles opposed. His integrity was most pure, his justice the most inflexible I have ever known, no motives of interest or consanguinity, of friendship or hatred, being able to bias his decision. He was, indeed, in every sense of the words, a wise, a good, and a great man. His temper was naturally irritable and high-toned; but reflection and resolution had obtained a firm and habitual ascendancy over it. If ever, however, it broke its bonds, he was most tremendous in his wrath. In his expenses he was honorable, but exact; liberal in contributions to whatever promised utility; but frowning and unyielding on all visionary projects, and all unworthy calls on his charity. His heart was not warm in its affections; but he exactly calculated every man's value, and gave him a solid esteem proportioned to it. His person, you know, was fine, his stature exactly what one would wish, his deportment easy, erect, and noble; the best horseman of his age, and the most graceful figure that could be seen on horseback. Although in the circle of his friends, where he might be unreserved with safety, he took a free share in conversation, his colloquial talents were not above mediocrity, possessing neither copiousness of ideas, nor fluency of words. In public, when called on for a sudden opinion, he was unready, short, and embarrassed. Yet he wrote readily, rather diffusely, in an easy and correct style. This he had acquired by conversation with the world, for his education was merely reading, writing, and common arithmetic, to which he added surveying at a later day. His time was employed in action chiefly, reading little, and that only in agriculture and English history. His correspondence became necessarily extensive, and, with journalizing his agricultural proceedings, occupied most of his leisure hours within doors. On the whole, his character was, in its mass, perfect, in nothing bad, in few points indifferent; and it may truly be said, that never did nature and fortune combine more perfectly to make a man great, and to place him in the same constellation with whatever worthies have merited from man an everlasting remembrance. For his was the singular destiny and merit, of leading the armies of his country successfully through an arduous war, for the establishment of its independence; of conducting its councils through the birth of a government, new in its forms and principles, until it had settled down into a quiet and orderly train; and of scrupulously obeying the laws through the whole of his career, civil and military, of which the history of the world furnishes no other example. …

“These are my opinions of General Washington, which I would vouch at the judgment seat of God, having been formed on an acquaintance of thirty years. I served with him in the Virginia legislature from 1769 to the Revolutionary war, and again, a short time in Congress, until he left us to take command of the army. During the war and after it we corresponded occasionally, and in the four years of my continuance in the office of Secretary of State, our intercourse was daily, confidential, and cordial. … I felt on his
death, with my countrymen, that 'verily a great man hath fallen this day in Israel.'”

Historian and Washington biographer Jared Sparks spent years collecting resources for his biographies, histories, and his major work, the twelve-volume *Life and Writings of George Washington*. On April 19, 1830, Sparks interviewed James Madison at Madison’s Montpelier home.

“Washington was not fluent nor ready in conversation, and was inclined to be taciturn in general society. In the company of two or three intimate friends, however, he was talkative, and when a little excited was sometimes fluent and even eloquent. The story so often repeated of his never laughing, Mr. Madison says, is wholly untrue; no man seemed more to enjoy gay conversation, though he took little part in it himself. He was particularly pleased with the jokes, good humor, and hilarity of his companions. Mr. Madison says there was a tradition that, when he belonged to the vestry of a church in his neighborhood, and several little difficulties grew out of some division of the society, he sometimes spoke with great force, animation, and eloquence on the topics that came before them.”

George Washington and James Madison corresponded frequently and collaborated closely from the early 1780s into Washington’s first term as president. As a congressman from Virginia, Madison counseled Washington on legislation and policy during this period before differing political philosophies caused their estrangement. Sometime after 1817, Madison sketched his view of Washington that was part of a series of writings titled Madison’s “Detached Memoranda.” The “Detached Memoranda” document remained unknown until it was discovered in 1946 and published in that year.

“General Washington:
The strength of his character lay in his integrity, his love of justice, his fortitude, the soundness of his judgment, and his remarkable prudence to which he joined an elevated sense of patriotic duty, and a reliance on the enlightened & impartial world as the tribunal by which a lasting sentence on his career would be pronounced. Nor was he without the advantage of a Stature & figure, which however insignificant when separated from greatness of character do not fail when combined with it to aid the attraction. But what particularly distinguished him, was a modest dignity which at once commanded the highest respect, and inspired the purest attachment. Although not idolizing public opinion, no man could be more attentive to the means of ascertaining it. In comparing the candidates for office, he was particularly inquisitive as to their standing with the public and the opinion entertained of them by men of public weight. On important questions to be decided by him, he spared no pains to gain information from all quarters; freely asking from all whom he

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held in esteem, and who were intimate with him, a free communication of their sentiments, receiving with great attention the different arguments and opinions offered to him, and making up his own judgment with all the leisure that was permitted. If any erroneous changes took place in his views of persons and public affairs near the close of his life as has been insinuated, they may probably be accounted for by circumstances which threw him into an exclusive communication with men of one party, who took advantage of his retired situation to make impressions unfavorable to their opponents...."106

Gouverneur Morris, member of New York's Provincial Congress and the Second Continental Congress, spent time at Valley Forge in 1778 on behalf of Congress, and, as a result of his observations there, he worked with Washington to improve conditions of the Continental Army. As a member of the Constitutional Convention Morris was a principal writer of the constitution. He served two years as U.S. Minister to France during Washington’s presidency.

(The editor’s introduction to the passage) June 26th, 1807, Morris, having just finished reading the fourth volume [the character sketch is in volume 5, not volume 4] of Chief Justice Marshall’s history, took occasion to write to the author of the pleasure he had found in it, adding, “I cannot refrain from expressing to you my grateful sense of the kindness with which you have mentioned my name.... In approving highly your character of Washington, permit me to add that few men of such steady, persevering industry ever existed, and perhaps no one who so completely commanded himself. Thousands have learned to restrain their passions, though few among them had to contend with passions so violent. But the self-command to which I allude was of higher grade. He could, at the dictate of reason, control his will and command himself to act. Others may have acquired a portion of the same authority; but who could, like Washington, at any moment command the energies of his mind to a cheerful exertion?”107

John Marshall’s biographer, Allan Magruder, tells us that Thomas Marshall, John’s father, was a close friend of Washington and accompanied him on surveying expeditions. John Marshall was an officer with Washington’s army, serving at Brandywine, Germantown, Monmouth, and Valley Forge. His work as a military deputy judge advocate brought him into close contact with Washington and his central officers. Marshall was a strong supporter of Washington’s presidency. After Washington’s death, his nephew Bushrod Washington asked Marshall to write Washington’s biography, using the papers inherited from Washington’s estate. It was during the early years of Marshall’s long tenure as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court when he wrote the five-volume history, which concludes, in volume 5, with a thorough characterization of Washington.


107 Anne Cary Morris, ed., The Diary and Letters of Gouverneur Morris, Minister of the United States to France; Member of the Constitutional Convention, etc., 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1888), 2:492.
“General Washington was rather above the common size, his frame was robust, and his constitution vigorous...capable of enduring great fatigue, and requiring a considerable degree of exercise for the preservation of his health. His exterior created in the beholder the idea of strength united with manly gracefulness.

“His manners were rather reserved than free, though they partook nothing of that dryness and sternness which accompany reserve when carried to an extreme; and on all proper occasions, he could relax sufficiently to show how highly he was gratified by the charms of conversation, and the pleasures of society. His person and whole deportment exhibited an unaffected and indescribable dignity, unmingled with haughtiness, of which all who approached him were sensible; and the attachment of those who possessed his friendship and enjoyed his intimacy, was ardent, but always respectful.

“His temper was humane, benevolent, and conciliatory; but there was a quickness in his sensibility to anything apparently offensive, which experience had taught him to watch and to correct.

“In the management of his private affairs, he exhibited an exact, yet liberal economy. His funds were not prodigally wasted on capricious and ill examined schemes, nor refused to beneficial though costly improvements. They remained, therefore, competent to that expensive establishment which his reputation, added to a hospitable temper, had in some measure imposed upon him; and to those donations which real distress has a right to claim from opulence.

“He made no pretensions to that vivacity which fascinates, or to that wit which dazzles and frequently imposes on the understanding. More solid than brilliant, judgment rather than genius constituted the most prominent feature of his character.

“As a military man, he was brave, enterprising, and cautious. That malignity which has sought to strip him of all the higher qualities of a general, has conceded to him personal courage, and a firmness of resolution which neither dangers nor difficulties could shake. But candour will allow him other great and valuable endowments. If his military course does not abound with splendid achievements, it exhibits a series of judicious measures, adapted to circumstances, which probably saved his country.

“Placed, without having studied the theory, or been taught in the school of experience the practice of war, at the head of an undisciplined, ill-organized multitude which was unused to the restraints and unacquainted with the ordinary duties of a camp, without the aid of officers possessing those lights which the commander in chief was yet to acquire, it would have been a miracle indeed had his conduct been absolutely faultless. But, possessing an energetic and distinguishing mind, on which the lessons of experience were never lost, his errors, if he committed any, were quickly repaired; and those measures which the state of things rendered most advisable were seldom if ever neglected. Inferior to his adversary in the numbers, in the equipment, and in the discipline of his troops, it is evidence of real merit that no great and decisive advantages were ever obtained over him, and that the opportunity to strike an important blow never passed away unused. He has been termed
the American Fabius; but those who compare his actions with his means, will perceive at
least as much of Marcellus as of Fabius in his character. He could not have been more
enterprising without endangering the cause he defended, nor have put more to hazard
without incurring justly the imputation of rashness. Not relying upon those chances which
sometimes give a favourable issue to attempts apparently desperate, his conduct was
regulated by calculations made upon the capacities of his army, and the real situation of his
country. When called a second time to command the armies of the United States, a change
of circumstances had taken place, and he meditated a corresponding change of conduct. In
modelling the army of 1798, he sought for men distinguished for their boldness of
execution, not less than for their prudence in counsel, and contemplated a system of
continued attack. ‘The enemy,’ said the general in his private letters, ‘must never be
permitted to gain foothold on our shores.’

“In his civil administration, as in his military career, were exhibited ample and repeated
proofs of that practical good sense, of that sound judgment which is perhaps the most rare,
and is certainly the most valuable quality of the human mind. Devoting himself to the
duties of his station, and pursuing no object distinct from the public good, he was
accustomed to contemplate at a distance those critical situations in which the United States
might probably be placed; and to digest, before the occasion required action, the line of
conduct which it would be proper to observe. Taught to distrust first impressions, he
sought to acquire all the information which was attainable, and to hear, without prejudice,
all the reasons which could be urged for or against a particular measure. His own
judgment was suspended until it became necessary to determine, and his decisions, thus
maturely made, were seldom if ever to be shaken. His conduct therefore was systematic,
and the great objects of his administration were steadily pursued.

“Respecting, as the first magistrate in a free government must ever do, the real and
deliberate sentiments of the people, their gusts of passion passed over without ruffling the
smooth surface of his mind. Trusting to the reflecting good sense of the nation for
approbation and support, he had the magnanimity to pursue its real interests in opposition
to its temporary prejudices; and, though far from being regardless of popular favour, he
could never stoop to retain by deserving to lose it. In more instances than one, we find him
committing his whole popularity to hazard, and pursuing steadily, in opposition to a
torrent which would have overwhelmed a man of ordinary firmness, that course which had
been dictated by a sense of duty.

“In speculation, he was a real republican, devoted to the constitution of his country, and to
that system of equal political rights on which it is founded. But between a balanced
republic and a democracy, the difference is like that between order and chaos. Real liberty,
he thought, was to be preserved, only by preserving the authority of the laws, and
maintaining the energy of government. Scarcely did society present two characters which,
in his opinion, less resembled each other than a patriot and a demagogue.

“No man has ever appeared upon the theatre of public action whose integrity was more
incorruptible, or whose principles were more perfectly free from the contamination of
those selfish and unworthy passions which find their nourishment in the conflicts of party.
Having no views which required concealment, his real and avowed motives were the same; and his whole correspondence does not furnish a single case from which even an enemy would infer that he was capable, under any circumstances, of stooping to the employment of duplicity. No truth can be uttered with more confidence than that his ends were always upright, and his means always pure. He exhibits the rare example of a politician to whom wiles were absolutely unknown, and whose professions to foreign governments and to his own countrymen, were always sincere. In him was fully exemplified the real distinction which forever exists between wisdom and cunning, and the importance as well as truth of the maxim that ‘honesty is the best policy.’

“If Washington possessed ambition, that passion was, in his bosom, so regulated by principles, or controlled by circumstances, that it was neither vicious nor turbulent. Intrigue was never employed as the means of its gratification; nor was personal aggrandizement its object. The various high and important stations to which he was called by the public voice, were unsought by himself; and in consenting to fill them, he seems rather to have yielded to a general conviction that the interests of his country would be thereby promoted, than to his particular inclination.

“Neither the extraordinary partiality of the American people, the extravagant praises which were bestowed upon him, nor the inveterate opposition and malignant calumnies which he experienced, had any visible influence upon his conduct. The cause is to be looked for in the texture of his mind.

“In him, that innate and unassuming modesty which adulation would have offended, which the voluntary plaudits of millions could not betray into indiscretion, and which never obtruded upon others his claims to superior consideration, was happily blended with a high and correct sense of personal dignity, and with a just consciousness of that respect which is due to station. Without exertion, he could maintain the happy medium between that arrogance which wounds, and that facility which allows the office to be degraded in the person who fills it.

“It is impossible to contemplate the great events which have occurred in the United States under the auspices of Washington, without ascribing them, in some measure, to him. If we ask the causes of the prosperous issue of a war, against the successful termination of which there were so many probabilities? of the good which was produced, and the ill which was avoided during an administration fated to contend with the strongest prejudices that a combination of circumstances and of passions could produce? of the constant favour of the great mass of his fellow citizens, and of the confidence which, to the last moment of his life, they reposed in him? the answer, so far as these causes may be found in his character, will furnish a lesson well meriting the attention of those who are candidates for political fame.

“Endowed by nature with a sound judgment, and an accurate, discriminating mind, he feared not that laborious attention which made him perfectly master of those subjects, in all their relations, on which he was to decide: and this essential quality was guided by an unvarying sense of moral right, which would tolerate the employment only of those means that would bear the most rigid examination; by a fairness of intention which neither sought
nor required disguise: and by a purity of virtue which was not only untainted, but unsuspected.”

The following quotes refer to the cover image, *General George Washington at Trenton*, by John Trumbull, 1792:

Painter **John Trumbull** served as aide-de-camp to General Washington for a short while during the first years of the Revolutionary War. Early in 1777, Trumbull left the army to study art, and he eventually traveled abroad for study under the famous painter Benjamin West in London. Trumbull’s works concentrated on historical paintings of the American Revolution. In the summer of 1790 he asked Washington to sit for a portrait intended as a gift to Martha Washington. Commissioned by Charleston, S. C., he painted a similar full-body portrait in 1792, also showing Washington in military dress during the war years. Trumbull and **George Washington Parke Custis** considered these paintings to exhibit the most accurate likeness of Washington’s physique when compared to all other portraits of the time.

John Trumbull:
"In 1792 I was again in Philadelphia, and there painted the portrait of General Washington, which is now placed in the gallery at New Haven, the best certainly, of those which I painted, and the best, in my estimation, which exists, in his heroic military character. The city of Charleston, S. C. instructed William R. Smith, one of the representatives of South Carolina, to employ me to paint for them a portrait of the great man, and I undertook it con amore, (as the commission was unlimited,) meaning to give his military character, in the most sublime moment of its exertion - the evening previous to the battle of Princeton; when viewing the vast superiority of his approaching enemy, and the impossibility of again crossing the Delaware, or retreating down the river, he conceives the plan of returning by a night march into the country from which he had just been driven, thus cutting off the enemy's communication and destroying the depot of stores at Brunswick. I told the President my object; he entered into it warmly, and, as the work advanced, we talked of the scene, its dangers, its almost desperation. He looked the scene again, and I happily transferred to the canvass, the lofty expression of his animated countenance, the high resolve to conquer or to perish. The result was in my own opinion eminently successful, and the general was satisfied…"  

George Washington Parke Custis:
“With all its developments of muscular power, the form of Washington had no appearance of bulkiness, and so harmonious were its proportions that he did not appear so passing tall as his portraits have represented. He was rather spare than full during his whole life….

“Of the portraits of Washington, the most of them give to his person a fullness that it did not possess, together with an abdominal enlargement greater than in the life, while his

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matchless limbs have in but two instances been faithfully portrayed — in the equestrian portrait by Trumbull, of 1790, a copy of which is in the city hall of New York, and in an engraving by Loisier, from a painting by Cogniet….

“In 1790 appeared the equestrian portrait of the chief by Colonel Trumbull. In the execution of this fine work of art, the painter had standings as well as sittings - the white charger, fully caparisoned, having been led out and held by a groom, while the chief was placed by the artist by the side of the horse, the right arm resting on the saddle. In this novel mode the relative positions of the man and horse were sketched out and afterwards transferred to the canvass. There is a copy, size of life, of the equestrian portrait by Trumbull, in the City-hall of New York. The figure of Washington, as delineated by Colonel Trumbull, is the most perfect extant. So is the costume, the uniform of the staff in the war for Independence, being the ancient whig colors, blue and buff - a very splendid performance throughout, and the objection to the face as being too florid, not a correct one. He was both fair and florid….

“… Hence, for the correct figure of Washington we must refer, in all cases, to the works of Trumbull….”

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Additions to the First Printing
“Sketches of George Washington
by Those Who Were in His Presence”

Maryland-born portraitist Charles Willson Peale, whose work centered on leaders and scenes of the American Revolution, painted his first portraits of George and Martha Washington at Mount Vernon in 1772. Writing to London attorney and Peale patron Edmond Jenings, August 29, 1775, Peale gives a brief characterization of Washington.

“… I am well acquainted with Gen’l Washington who is a man of very few words but when he speaks it is to the purpose, what I have often admired in him is he allways avoided saying any thing of the actions in which he was engaged in [the] last war, he is uncommonly modest, very industrious and prudent ….”

Having entered the country from the West Indies, Englishman George Bennet sought passage to Philadelphia. Lacking needed credentials to travel freely through the country, Bennet called on Washington at Newburgh to request permission to travel safely. He was welcomed to Washington’s camp and invited to dinner with Washington’s military family. On April 15, 1783, Bennet wrote of the invitation and event in a letter to his mother in England.

“… an honour which I could never have expected & would by no means decline – at table he placed me on the left hand of Mrs. Washington – he was on her right & he drank his first glass of wine with me – the Company besides consisted of about 15 officers. The Dinner was good but everything was quite plain. We all sat on Camp Stools & there was nothing to be seen about his House, but what every officer in the Army might likewise have in his. Mrs. W. was as plain easy & affable as he was, & one would have thought from the familiarity which prevailed here that he saw a respectable private Gentn dining at the head of his own family.

“Genl. W. is now just 50 years old. He is a Tall genteel figure of a man, rather exceeding 6 foot in height. His countenance is grave, composed, mild & penetrating. His nose is long & of the roman shape. His eyes a little hollow under the Eyebrows, but active & lively. His whole countenance is expressive of Sagacity, of prudence, & of moderation, & his figure altogether has something of the Solemn and Majestick, which impresses respect in every beholder. If you were to ask me who he is like I would say, in size, but not in stiffness, he puts me in mind of Lord Abercorn & in his manner of speaking, except the burr, of the late Ld Hopeton. In his dress he was perfectly plain – an old blue coat faced with buff waistcoat & bretches of the latter, seemingly of the same age & without any lace upon them

111 Charles Willson Peale to Edmond Jenings, August 29, 1775, Peale-Sellers Family Collection, 1686-1963, Mss.B.P31, Series 1: Correspondence, Peale, Charles Willson, 1741-1827, Letter to Edmund Jennings; Aug. 29, 1775, American Philosophical Society Library. Edmond is variously spelled Edmond or Edmund, and Jenings as Jenings or Jennings.
composed his dress. His shirt had no ruffles at the wrists, but of very fine Linen. He always wears Boots & never uses a Carriage, but when Mrs. W. is with him & that is only in Winter. His hair is a little grey & combed smoothly back from the forehead & in a small queue – no curls & but very little Powder to it. Such is the man; But his character I cannot presume to describe – it is held in the highest veneration over the whole Continent. No man was ever heard to say one word disrespectfull of him – by his prudence & wisdom he has made an Empire – had it not been for him the Army would have long since left Congress & it is but just a month since he had as difficult a Task as any in the Whole War. The army was ready for revolt, one Speech which he delivered to them in a building called the Temple of Virtue at Camp, reconciled them ...."\textsuperscript{112}

\textsuperscript{112} George Bennet to his mother, April 15, 1783, in General Washington’s Swords and Campaign Equipment (Mount Vernon, Virginia: The Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association, 1948), 4-5.