

Chapter One

MARTHA WASHINGTON

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Martha Dandridge Custis, a native Virginian born in 1732, was the wife of George Washington. In that capacity she became the nation's first "first lady." She also distinguished herself as a gifted and gracious hostess for the young republic's political affairs, her husband's trusted confidante, and a beloved symbol of the American Revolution.

Young Martha

Martha Dandridge was the first of eight children born to John Dandridge (1701–1756) and Frances Jones Dandridge (1710–1785) of New Kent County, Virginia. Three brothers and four sisters followed, the last being born in 1756, when Martha was in her mid-twenties and already a wife and a mother with young children of her own. According to the family Bible, she was born on June 2, 1731 at the family's two-story home known as Chestnut Grove. Martha appears to have had a normal and happy upbringing. However, few records and no personal letters of hers from that time have survived through history (Brady, 1996; Fields, 1994).

The Dandridge family lineage can be traced back to the sixteenth and seventeenth

centuries, when they were living in Oxfordshire, England. Surviving records from that time suggest that most of the Dandridge men in England made their living by farming and that several of the men in the family prospered. Documents also show that the first of Martha's ancestors to cross the Atlantic Ocean were William Dandridge and his younger brother John, who came to America in 1715 (Fields, 1994). The two Dandridge boys made their new home in the Crown's Virginia Colony, where they succeeded as merchants. They also wisely acquired vast land holdings in the eastern part of the colony and added to their wealth through the subsequent lease and sale of these properties.

The younger son, John, married Frances Jones, who had been born in the colonies and whose family included a line of well-respected preachers and religious leaders. Her ancestors hailed from England and Wales. One of them, Reverend Rowland Jones, grandfather of the woman whom John Dandridge married, appears to have been the first Jones to settle in the New World after sailing from Wales. Reverend Jones established a successful ministry in Virginia and his family, much like the

Dandridge boys, was part of the new, landed class of colonists (Watson, 2002). Later on John Dandridge and Frances Jones would have a daughter named Martha, who would one day become the first lady of the United States of America.

Martha's father, John, held several jobs and also served as county clerk. He owned a successful plantation on roughly five hundred acres near the Pamunkey River in the Tidewater region of eastern Virginia, which is where his daughter Martha was raised. On the basis of the few surviving records, scholars have suggested that the Dandridge family was not in the upper echelon of Virginia's elite. Rather it could be considered as part of the colony's "lesser aristocracy" (Anthony, 1990; Fields, 1994).

Because of the location of the family home, the family's relative affluence, and her father's public position, Martha likely met members of Virginia's ruling families during her formative years, for example when they attended important social functions at the governor's palace in Williamsburg, the colonial capital and most important social and political town in the region. It also appears that the Dandrighes hosted neighbors and leading families at their home. Thanks to these opportunities, Martha would have been exposed from an early age to politics and to the social norms of entertaining. Of course, these were skills that would come in handy later in life when she served as first lady. She also participated in a *débutante's* "coming out" event, something that was common in the colony among fifteen-year-old daughters of prominent parents with "aspirations" (Anthony, 1990; Bryan, 2002: 38).

Miss Dandridge's childhood and teenage years were likely normal for a girl in a family with the social standing of the Dandrighes. There are some clues as to her earliest experiences as a child and as a teenager. For instance, it is almost certain that she would have assisted her mother and others in hosting dinner parties and social galas, thereby

developing skills as a homemaker. Martha knew how to cook and sew, and she acted with the social graces expected of a young woman of means in the colonial era. As an adult, she was a talented cook and a skilled hostess (Anthony, 1990; Watson, 2002). Her education would also have been one based on domesticity. This practical education was supplemented by lessons in music and dancing, likely from visiting tutors, and by exposure to the teachings of the Anglican Church (Anthony, 1990; Watson, 2002). As an adult, Martha was an active churchgoer, an avid reader of the Bible, and a religious, but not pious woman.

Mrs. Washington enjoyed literature and was a prolific letter writer, traits she likely fashioned as a child. However, she was an inconsistent speller—she spelled phonetically. This feature caused her some embarrassment during George Washington's military and political career. During her married life, Mrs. Washington was also a practitioner of homeopathic medicine. She kept a book of home cures she relied on when friends and family members were taken ill. The tragic loss of her children and other loved ones would contribute to Martha's behaving much like a hypochondriac. For instance, she discussed matters of health in many of her surviving letters and she worried about every sneeze and cough. More adventurous as a teenager, Martha developed great skill on horseback. She abandoned riding later in life, perhaps on account of the weight she gained, but she always enjoyed carriage rides (Brady, 1996; Watson, 2002).

Mrs. Custis

As a teenager, Martha Dandridge likely had several suitors on account of her family's social status. She was described as being of average physical attractiveness, with almond-shaped, hazel eyes, medium-brown hair, and a soft, round face (Anthony, 1990; Watson, 2002).

Standing roughly five feet in height, Martha was thin as a young woman. A computerized “age-regression” of an existing portrait—a version of which now hangs in Mount Vernon—has confirmed her former svelte visage (Farr, 2012). The more recognizable plump, matronly physique and demeanor identified with her in her later years appear to have come about around the time of motherhood, as evidenced by surviving portraits and letters. Paintings of the mature woman represent someone who seems reluctant to “sit” for the artist. She was a private individual who did not like being the focus of an artist’s brush. As a result, in the paintings Martha stares blankly back at the viewer, often wearing her signature white bonnet, which was somewhat fashionable for women of the time (Watson, 2000b).

Martha’s father, John Dandridge, was an elder at St. Peter’s Church, where the Dandridges were active members. This connection to the church made possible her first marriage. Also serving as a deacon at St. Peter’s was Daniel Parke Custis. It appears that Martha first caught Custis’s attention when she was only seventeen, although he likely knew her from the time she was a child. Twenty years Martha’s senior, Custis was born in 1711 and was heir to one of the colony’s largest tobacco plantations. One of the most eligible bachelors in the colony, Custis had never married and was thirty-nine when he wed John Dandridge’s nineteen-year-old daughter.

Little is known about the courtship (Fields, 1994: 421, 430, 434), but Daniel’s father (also a John) was initially opposed to the union. John Custis, a difficult and temperamental man, believed that his son would be marrying well below the family’s social standing. Virginia was perhaps the colony most conscious of social class, and such marital concerns among its elite were not uncommon. Moreover, the elder Custis had derailed his son’s earlier plans to marry other women, and for similar reasons (Brady,

1996). The details are vague, but it is known that John Custis ultimately changed his mind about the wedding after meeting the teenager, which suggests that Martha was a confident and impressive young woman (Watson, 2002). The couple married in 1750 at the Custis home, which was located roughly thirty miles from Williamsburg and was known ironically as “the White House.”

As the wife of a tobacco heir, Martha enjoyed a comfortable and affluent home life. However, her marriage was filled with hardships. One of them was motherhood. The young bride had four children over a period of less than six years. The children were Daniel Parke (1751–1754); Frances Parke (1753–1757); John Parke (1754–1781), nicknamed “Jacky”; and Martha Parke (1756–1773), known as “Patsy.” Tragically, Martha’s first two children died in infancy, Frances when Martha was pregnant with John and Daniel a few months later, during the year in which John was born. To make matters worse, Martha’s own father died in 1756—the year in which her last child, the one named after her, was born. In the following year her husband, who had often struggled with health issues, passed away. After just eight years of marriage, Martha had given birth to four children, buried two of them, and lost her father and her husband. She was only twenty-six at the time.

There was little time for mourning. The Custis widow had two infant children at home. She was also responsible now for the large and lucrative Custis estate and plantation. During the difficult years when she was still married, her father-in-law also died. Because her husband had no living siblings, she was now the sole heir to the family tobacco fortune. Not only was she confronted with the management of several large homes, the plantation, and the many slaves owned by the Custis family, but a long-running, complicated, and potentially ruinous lawsuit hung over the Custis business. The legal matter came to the fore after Daniel Custis’s death (Anthony, 1990;

Brady, 1996). The fact that Daniel Custis did not leave behind a will and had not resolved the lawsuit suggests that he died suddenly and unexpectedly.

Martha nevertheless demonstrated great business acumen in dealing with the will, the lawsuit, and operations on the plantation. Some surviving letters reveal that the widow hired some of the leading attorneys and politicians in Virginia to represent her (Fields, 1994: 29–31, 54, 437; Watson, 2000b). The lawsuit was resolved to her satisfaction and, under Martha's guidance, an extensive plantation with thousands of acres of land, several buildings, and a large workforce thrived. She also wisely decided to continue correspondence and business relations with her late husband's partners and representatives, both in Virginia and in England. In one letter she notified a group of London merchants associated with Daniel:

I take the Opportunity to inform you of the great misfortune I have met with in the loss of my late Husband ... As I now have the Administration of his Estate and the management of his Affairs of all sorts I shall be glad to continue the correspondence which Mr. Custis carried on with you.

(Fields, 1994: xx)

Domestic Tranquility

Like Daniel Custis, George Washington, too, probably knew Martha well before they married, although no firm documentation exists on the matter (Fields, 1994: 445, 447). The two young Virginians lived not far from each other, were of roughly the same age (she was one year his senior), and likely attended some of the same social events in Williamsburg during the popular winter social season (Watson, 2000b). However, she was much higher on the social scale than Washington, whose father died when he was young and who lacked the advantage of a higher education or opportunity to travel.

As a young military officer, Washington was highly ambitious and the prospects of marrying a wealthy, established woman would have attracted him (Anthony, 1990). Indeed, as a young man Washington had unsuccessfully attempted to court daughters of prominent families. He also nurtured an infatuation with an older, wealthy woman named Sally Cary Fairfax, who happened to be married to one of his neighbors (Brady, 1996). For her part, it is probable that Martha, on account of social norms and gender roles of the time, would have been eager to remarry rather quickly. It would help to have someone who could manage the estate and business and could serve as a father to her young children.

Unfortunately no letters survive about their courtship (Fields, 1994). Many years later, however, Martha's grandson, George Washington Custis, did tell the story of how the two met in 1758 (Watson, 2002). According to his account, Washington, a young colonial military officer at the time, was traveling to Williamsburg on business when he stopped to rest and water his horse near the home of a prominent neighbor and associate of the Custis widow by the name of Chamberlayne. Washington was invited to dine at the Chamberlayne home but declined, invoking the urgency of getting to Williamsburg for a meeting of great importance to his career. However, the young officer changed his mind when Chamberlayne informed him that his house guest that day was one of the wealthiest widows in the colony.

Although there is no record of what Martha Custis and George Washington said to each other at the Chamberlayne estate, it is known that they began courting immediately and that Washington ordered a wedding ring and a new suit for the affair rather quickly. They were married on January 6, 1759 at the White House, the Custis family home that Martha had inherited. Washington secured for himself not just a bride but extensive land holdings, a fortune,

and a family. Washington wrote to a friend about his marriage and his new wife:

I am now I believe fixd at this Seat with an agreeable Consort for life and hope to find more happiness in retirement than I ever experienced amid a wide and bustling World.

(Fields, 1994: xxi)

Although they seemed to be physically and emotionally mismatched—he was tall and she was short; he was ambitious and she was private, he was bold and she was cautious—the couple also had much in common. They did not gamble, remained loyal to their marriage, refrained from excessive use of alcohol, and were free from the many social vices that plagued some other prominent families. Both were early risers who worked hard and were concerned with having a good reputation. They prioritized their home and family life and made a formidable team. It is no surprise that the Washingtons quickly became prominent citizens in Virginia.

Although through her first marriage Martha had inherited a considerable amount of land and a few homes and properties, the couple lived at Mount Vernon, a home owned by Washington's older half-brother, Lawrence Washington. George Washington inherited the residence in 1761 after Lawrence's death and after Lawrence's widow remarried. It would be the center of their solid, four-decade long union.

The plantation prospered, allowing the Washingtons to make several improvements and renovations to the home. They also enlarged the home and estate, which was necessary on account of the many visitors to Mount Vernon. Among the attractions of the home were its scenic location overlooking the Potomac River and Mrs. Washington's reputation as a gracious host and skilled cook. She was known for having a sweet tooth, and one of her favorite recipes was a "great cake" made with forty eggs, a

shocking amount of sugar and butter from today's perspective, and a fruit filling that could serve dozens of guests (Watson, 2000a). She was also known for her baked hams. Washington's nephew even once observed: "Mrs. Washington's charitable disposition increases in the same proportion as her meat house" (Fields, 1994: xxi). In these efforts, and in feeding the incessant flow of visitors, Martha had assistance from her many slaves: more than half of Mount Vernon's enslaved population came from the Custis estate (Brady, 2006).

One of the challenges to the Washingtons' happiness was their inability to have children. Although Mrs. Washington's two surviving children from her first marriage lived at Mount Vernon and were treated by George Washington as if they were his own, husband and wife longed to have children together (Bryan, 2002). Historian W. S. Randall (1997) suggests that previous exposure to mumps or smallpox may have left Washington sterile; reproductive specialist John K. Amory (2004) suggests that tuberculosis was the likely culprit. In 1773 tragedy struck again: Martha's daughter Patsy, who had long suffered from health problems, collapsed at the dinner table with an epileptic seizure and died. The Washingtons had spent years trying countless cures for Patsy, including alternative treatments, but none proved effective. Washington described the impact of losing Patsy in succinct and sad terms: "[The death] reduced my poor wife to the lowest ebb of misery" (Fields, 1994: xxii).

Martha's anguish was noted by her husband and by many friends and family members. In fact the loss of a third child so impacted her that she remained in mourning for months and never fully recovered to full happiness. She was even unable to attend her son Jacky's wedding to Eleanor "Nelly" Calvert in the following year, though she appears to have long looked forward to his marrying. Given all the loss in her life, it is perhaps understandable that

Mrs. Washington expressed tendencies toward hypochondria, constantly dwelling on the health and illnesses of friends and family. In one of her letters, written to her sister and expressing concern for her two children, Martha admitted:

I carried my little Pat with me and left Jacky at home for a trial to see how well I could stay without him[;] though we were gon [*sic*] but a fortnight I was impatient to get home. If I at any time heard the dogs barke or a noise out, I thought thair [*sic*] was a person sent for me. I often fancied he was sick or some accident happened to him so that I think it is impossible for me to leave him.

(Fields, 1994: xxii)

Heroine of the Revolution

George and Martha Washington's domestic tranquility at their beloved Mount Vernon was interrupted by the historic events unfolding around them. George Washington's public career began in the years leading up to the Revolutionary War, when he served as a member of the Virginia House of Burgesses and was chosen as a delegate to the First and Second Continental Congresses in 1774 and 1775. As difficult as it was for Mrs. Washington to deal with these demands, they were nothing by comparison to what was about to happen to the couple. With the prospect of war on the horizon, Washington was selected to lead the fledgling continental army against the British and was appointed general. This commitment caused him to be away from Mount Vernon and his wife for eight long years throughout the latter half of the 1770s and the early 1780s, until his command ended in 1783.

One of the few surviving letters that the couple exchanged dates to the period of Washington's appointment as commander of the continental army. Writing to Martha in 1775 and addressing her by her nickname, the new general shared his concerns

about the assignment and about being away from her:

You may believe me my dear Patsy, when I assure you, in the most solemn manner, that, so far from seeking this appointment I have used every endeavor in my power to avoid it, not only from my unwillingness to part with you and the Family, but from the consciousness of its being a trust too great for my Capacity and that I should enjoy more happiness and felicity in one month with you, at home, than I have the most distant prospect of reaping abroad, if my stay were to be Seven times Seven years.

(Fields, 1994: xxiii)

The war also posed grave personal threats to them both, as the specter of the British sacking Mount Vernon was ever present and prompted General Washington to worry about both his wife's safety and his home being plundered or destroyed. At one point he pondered asking her to evacuate the residence, on account of rumors in 1775 that British soldiers or the royal governor in Virginia would sack the home. While General Washington was furious that the British should contemplate such a crime and he worried about what to do, Mrs. Washington dismissed threats to her safety and went about her business as if the war had not begun. At the same time she put the revolutionary cause ahead of her own happiness, privacy, and safety. The general's nephew, Lund Washington, wrote that Martha was fearless and refused to panic because "she does not believe she is in any danger" (Anthony, 1990: 41–42).

Not only did Mrs. Washington make do without her husband at home, she oversaw the home and the thriving plantation during the war, much as she had done after her first husband passed away. Each winter of the war she also traveled hundreds of miles, in difficult weather conditions and across unpaved trails, in order to join her husband in his winter camps (Watson, 2000a). As the commanding officer's wife, she endured

attacks on her reputation and on her husband's leadership of the war. At the outset of the war, false rumors were spread among the general's critics that Mrs. Washington had abandoned her husband and was living far away from him, and that she was a Tory. One newspaper referred to her as a "warm loyalist." Mrs. Washington defended herself and proved her critics wrong, writing: "My mind is made up; my heart is in the cause" (Anthony, 1990: 40).

In Cambridge, Valley Forge, Morristown, Newburgh, and elsewhere during the Revolutionary War she was a fixture of camp life, propping up her husband's sagging spirits every winter. Martha assisted her husband with his correspondence, and her surviving letters reveal that he entrusted her with secrets. She regularly dined with generals and knew about battle plans and the movement of troops. The general's wife also busied herself cooking and sewing for the soldiers, visiting the wounded, and encouraging women in the communities near the winter headquarters to provide food and clothing for the army. In doing so, she brought a sense of home life and normalcy to the camp. Visitors to camp and soldiers frequently commented on her domestic skills and positive influence on her husband (Watson, 2000a). She made friends with the other wives in the camp as well (Bryan, 2002).

Not surprisingly, she was popular among soldiers. One soldier wrote of her in his diary: "Mrs. Washington combines in an uncommon degree great dignity of manner with the most pleasing affability" (Fields, 1994: xxiii). The beloved wife of General Washington was even hailed as "Lady Washington" by the army, and a special unit was organized bearing the name "Lady Washington's Dragoon." Yet extant letters show the challenges she faced in camp, as well as her courage. Writing about her experience, Mrs. Washington admitted:

Some days we have a number of cannon and shells from Boston and Bunkers Hill,

but it does not seem to surprise any one but me; I confess I shudder every time I hear the sound of a gun ... I [have] never seen anything of war ... but I endeavor to keep my fears to myself as well as I can.

(Fields, 1994: xxiii)

Mrs. Washington stoically withstood the shattering changes in her life brought on by the conflict, even though she was an intensely private individual who longed only to have her husband home with her at Mount Vernon. Indeed, she once described herself quaintly as "an old-fashioned Virginia housekeeper, steady as a clock, busy as a bee, and cheerful as a cricket" (Fields, 1994: 304, letter from June 1797). Despite the quotation's accuracy, it also understates her courage and contributions to the war, which indeed led to "fatigue ... too much for me to bear" later on (quoted in Bryan, 2002: 265). Throughout, she remained humble and unaffected by fame.

During the years of the Revolution, Martha became a grandmother: son Jacky and his wife Nelly had four children. The first two were Elizabeth, born in 1774 and nicknamed "Eliza," and Martha, born in 1777, named after her famous grandmother, and nicknamed "Patty." The younger two grandchildren would eventually be adopted and raised by Mrs. Washington: Eleanor (1779–1852), nicknamed "Nelly," and George Washington (1781–1857), known by all as "Wash" or "Tub." Just as she had done with her own children, Martha doted on the grandchildren and drew strength from them during her husband's long absences and throughout the strife of war. Her daughter-in-law and her children frequently stayed at Mount Vernon—an occurrence that delighted Martha, who always enjoyed having a house full of children and neighbors (Watson, 2002).

Constantly one to worry about health, Mrs. Washington was overly protective of the father of her grandchildren: Jacky, her sole remaining child. In consequence, even

though her husband was serving as commander of the colonial forces and countless young men from the region were fighting in the war, Martha would not agree to allow her son to join the war effort. The matter produced tension in the home. Finally, at the end of the conflict, Jacky joined General Washington as an aide in his camp, serving safely at his side and away from the front lines of combat. Tragically, he contracted a fever that afflicted the camp. Martha rushed to be by her son's side, but she arrived too late. Jacky died in 1781.

The First First Lady

After the passing of Jacky Custis, her sole remaining child, Mrs. Washington adopted his two youngest children and raised them as her own. This was not an uncommon practice at the time, especially in families such as the Washingtons', who had the financial means and the space available to raise the children at home. The older two Custis children remained with their mother, who eventually remarried. Although Mrs. Washington was delighted to finally have her husband back home at Mount Vernon with the war over, the quiet retirement she longed for was not to be. The victorious general had emerged as the foremost man of his times. This meant that countless visitors, dignitaries, and well-wishers came to the bustling home, which now often resembled a bed-and-breakfast rather than a private residence (Watson, 2002).

The return to domestic life would also be short-lived for both husband and wife, as George Washington's services were repeatedly required during the 1780s. In 1787, he was chosen to return to Philadelphia to lead the gathering of the Framers at the Constitutional Convention. Less than two years later, after being elected to serve as the young republic's first president, the general set off for New York City to take the oath of the office. Martha worried again about her

husband's health and the challenges facing both the new nation and its president elect. Yet she once again subordinated her personal interests to the call of public service.

The Washingtons were the only presidential couple in US history not to live in the building now known as the White House. James and Dolley Madison were forced to temporarily vacate the home after the British burned the capital city in 1814 during the War of 1812, and Harry and Bess Truman also had to live elsewhere in the city during the building's complete renovation in the late 1940s and early 1950s. However, both couples resided in the White House for at least a part of their time in office. But the capital city, now named after the country's first president, was still being purchased, designed, and built during the time of Washington's presidency. As a result, New York City served as a temporary capital in the earliest days of the republic.

The new president elect departed for the inaugural festivities prior to his wife, who arrived later with her two grandchildren. While en route to New York City, she was surprised by the extent of public affection for her shown by large crowds, which celebrated her arrival in each town with monarchical cheers of "Long live Lady Washington!" Always humble and unaffected by such accolades, the new first lady dismissed the attention by saying: "it is as if I am a very great some body" (Anthony, 1990: 43). Yet on occasion she graciously stood from her carriage and thanked the crowds. The trip to the inauguration marked possibly the first time Mrs. Washington addressed a public gathering and the first time when a woman was the focus of stories in newspapers, in the colonies or in the new country. These experiences occasioned in Mrs. Washington self-awareness and a sense that she was now a public figure.

George Washington had little in the way of precedents or customs to guide him when he entered the inaugural presidency. The office was new, the ideal of a republic was

untested, and Article II of the US Constitution said very little about the day-to-day functioning of a chief executive. Therefore the new president ended up forging many of the customs and practices that continue to define the office to the present time. However, Mrs. Washington had even less in the way of guidelines that could assist her in determining the role of the president's spouse and nation's hostess. First ladyship was not an office per se, duties or responsibilities related to it were not mentioned in the constitution or during the Constitutional Convention, and the public was not sure what to expect of the new first family (Caroli, 1987). Indeed, when President Washington took the oath of office, two states had yet to ratify the constitution, uncertainty was widespread about the new office and the new nation, and Mrs. Washington was still en route from Virginia. As she traveled to join her husband, Martha was filled with anxiety. She arrived in New York City on May 28, 1789.

Serving the New Nation

Numerous challenges awaited the first couple even before the inauguration. There were, for instance, questions as to what title should be used to address the president and his wife. The formal title for the president was still being debated up through his inauguration, until George Washington settled for the simple title of "Mr. President" rather than "His Excellency," "Your Majesty," or another more royal moniker. Nor were the country's citizens or visiting dignitaries sure how to address the president's wife (Caroli, 1987; Watson, 2000a). She would soon come to be known as "Lady Washington" or simply "Mrs. Washington," despite the more regal preferences of many public officials and newspapers (Fields, 1994: xxv). The term "First Lady" would not be in common use for some decades.

Meanwhile the public and official George Washington faced conflicting expectations about the proper tone for the president's receptions and about how the Washingtons should interact with the public. In terms of protocol and accessibility of the first couple, George and Martha Washington wisely decided to balance the seemingly irreconcilable goals of democratic simplicity, which befitted the new republic, with the need to make sure that the nation was seen to have proper credibility in the eyes of the world. The most visible component of how the first couple and the new government would be perceived was the act of official social hosting. Of course, on account of sex-role norms that remained in place for generations, domestic and social responsibilities largely fell upon women. Mrs. Washington would thus play a role in crafting the social atmosphere of the inaugural administration. Although she had never been to Europe, Martha had ample experience in the art of entertaining and hosting, as people from foreign capitals might expect; and she had been to formal affairs in Williamsburg. Her every action and inaction helped shape the standard to be used by all future first ladies (Watson, 2000a).

A full array of social events were offered to the public, American politicians, and visiting dignitaries. President Washington took out an advertisement in a New York City newspaper to announce the calling hours for individuals wanting to pay their respects to the first couple. The Washingtons made themselves available on Tuesdays and Fridays, from 2:00 to 3:00 in the afternoon. Matters of business could be brought to their attention every day, save for Sundays. A reception or "levee" for men, but hosted by both George and Martha Washington, was held every Tuesday afternoon; and Mrs. Washington presided on Fridays at evening parties of a type known as the "drawing room." The latter was open to men and women. Both types of events were well attended and Mrs. Washington managed to

find that elusive balance between two seemingly irreconcilable objectives. These receptions were elegant, yet accessible; they offered the formality expected of a nation's political leader but often served food prepared from local recipes, designed to satisfy the American palate (Anthony, 1990; Caroli, 1988).

Initially Mrs. Washington was not consulted about social arrangements and about the calendar. The details were organized even before she arrived in New York City for the inauguration, having been decided by one of the president's secretaries who had visited Europe. However, it was the first lady who set the tone and presided over the affairs. All manner of social issues remained before Martha, even the most mundane. At the end of her first event, it became apparent that no one knew how such events would formally conclude or how guests would take their leave from the first couple. However, Martha stood up and established a new custom: she would exit first. The first lady announced to all who gathered: "The General always retires at nine, and I generally precede him." She then promptly walked out of the room (Fields, 1994: xxvi).

Her duties started immediately. On her first full morning in the city, Mrs. Washington was met by dozens of curious women gathered in carriages, who were hoping to see her at the temporary Cherry Street home. The very next day she hosted her first formal social reception. Once again, many people came to get a glimpse of her sitting in her high-backed chair to greet the new republic's citizens. She also tried to return all social calls within three days, a custom whereby prominent women would visit and leave a "calling card." It was proper for the recipient to return the gesture in a timely manner (Anthony, 1990).

While Martha played a critical role in the social sphere of the presidency, the same does not appear to be true in matters of politics. She supported her husband's federalist policies but does not seem to have tried to

shape them or to have engaged others in political discussions. Nonetheless, she remained very popular among veterans from the Revolutionary War. Her husband's former soldiers often visited her and she was known to advocate on their behalf, even interceding to help them gain employment or providing money when they were in need.

In their free time, the first couple attended church, hosted friends at their private residence, and enjoyed carriage rides with their grandchildren Nelly and Wash. Yet there never seemed to be enough free time to suit either of them. It was a busy and challenging eight years. Mrs. Washington estimated: "I have not had one half hour to myself since the day of my arrival" (quoted in Fields, 1994: xxvi). She also felt constrained in that, every time she went out in public, people recognized her and newspapers reported on everything, from her shopping to her grandchildren. Because the first lady was an intensely private individual, she felt burdened by the onslaught of attention, such as when she complained:

I am more like a state prisoner than anything else, there is certain bounds [*sic*] set for me which I must not depart from—and as I can not doe as I like I am obstinate and stay at home a great deal.

(Brady, 1996: 9–10)

Another challenge facing the first lady was her husband's health. George Washington was in his late fifties and early sixties during their presidential years, an advanced age at the time. Martha described her feelings when her husband was elected by saying: "I think it was much too late for him to go in to publick life again" (Brady, 1996: 8). Even though he was a robust man, Washington did have health problems during his presidency. Always one to be concerned about illness, Martha Washington worried that she would lose her husband. Such was the case when he had surgery to remove a growth from his left leg that

doctors worried might be cancerous. Martha did everything possible to calm her husband and to ensure his full recovery; she even cordoned off parts of nearby streets and placed straw on the road in front of the president's home in order to quiet the hooves of horses and the wheels of passing carriages.

Mrs. Washington did not enjoy serving as first lady. She found the rules governing social protocol to be stifling at best. She even referred to the social events of the presidency as "empty ceremonies of mere etiquette" (Anthony, 1990: 42). She confided in a dear friend that she was now too old and uninterested in the "innocent gaieties of life" in the capital city, and had "long since placed all the prospects of my future worldly happiness in the still enjoyments of the fireside at Mount Vernon" (Fields, 1994: xxvii). Indeed Martha saw her efforts as more of a duty than a choice, let alone a manifestation of her passion. And, telling a friend about her experience as first lady, she said that, although the position was not entirely "a burden,"

I am only fond of what comes from the heart ... [and] sometimes think the arrangement is not quite as it ought to have been; that I, who had much rather be at home, should occupy a place which a great many younger and gayer women would be prodigiously pleased.

(Fields, 1994: 224)

Martha also felt lonely in New York City because she did not have many close friends there. The situation improved for her when the capital was relocated to Philadelphia in the fall of 1790. The Washingtons made the move and lived in a home on Market Street. It was there that Mrs. Washington helped initiate another custom. Soon after moving to Philadelphia, she opened her home to the public for a grand New Year's Day reception with food and beverages. She also welcomed guests on Christmas Day. The practice of the first family hosting an open reception on

each New Year's Day lasted until Herbert Hoover—who, bitter from his loss to Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1932 election and with the country in the grips of the Great Depression, cancelled the event in January 1933. Given the long struggle with economic recovery and World War II, which followed, President Roosevelt did not revive the custom.

Philadelphia was much more to Mrs. Washington's liking. Not only was it somewhat closer to Mount Vernon, but she had several good friends in the city, including the mayor and his wife. The remainder of her husband's time in office was thus made far more pleasant. Her life in Philadelphia was also made more bearable by the nine enslaved African servants in their household, as well as by a number of German indentured servants who replaced some of the slaves, in keeping with norms in the abolitionist Quaker city. This was a tricky issue for the Washingtons, since Philadelphia required slaves to be freed after six months of residence, and Martha was compelled to keep theirs moving back and forth to Mount Vernon to avoid the mandatory manumission. But in this northern city some of them escaped, including her personal maid Oney Judge, much to the first lady's dismay.

With George Washington's reelection in 1792, Martha once again had to put duty before personal interest, though her hope had always been "to grow old in solitude and tranquility together" (Brady, 1996: 8). Throughout the eight years of her husband's presidency she remained popular and was perhaps even more beloved than during the revolutionary period. She received a steady stream of well-wishers and "fans," and was arguably the most well-known and admired woman in the country. Even the critical Abigail Adams was struck, comparing Mrs. Washington most favorably to the British monarchy: "[I was] much more deeply impressed than I ever [was] before their Majesties of Britain" (Fields, 1994: xix).

Worthy Partner

After her husband's second term as president ended in 1797, Mrs. Washington was pleased to finally be back home in Virginia and finished with public life. She noted her joy at being home in one letter, saying: "We once more (and I am very sure never to quit it again) got seated under our own Roof, more like new beginners than old established residents" (Brady, 1996: 12). However, her wish for privacy and domestic tranquility was once again interrupted, this time by the necessity of greeting and hosting the large crowds of visitors who traveled to Mount Vernon to see the famous Washingtons or to pay their regards. Many of these well-wishers expected to be entertained, fed, and even housed, and Martha found herself again serving as host.

The Washingtons noted in a letter that they had not dined alone since 1785 (Brady, 1996: 13)! Late in life even the retired president seems to have tired of the constant onslaught of visitors, complaining: "Unless someone pops in unexpectedly, Mrs. Washington and I will do what has not been (done) by us in nearly 20 years—that is set down to dinner by ourselves" (Fields, 1994: xxv).

Among the visitors were politicians, generals, and dignitaries from Europe such as the Marquis de Lafayette, who had developed a close friendship with the president during the American Revolution. The new president and first lady, John and Abigail Adams, were guests of the Washingtons, as were James and Dolley Madison. Martha graciously hosted a veritable "who's who" of the era at Mount Vernon (Anthony, 1990; Watson, 2000a). She also found herself overwhelmed by the amount of mail she received and was awarded by Congress the franking privilege of free mailing in order to cover the cost of correspondence.

Their four-decade-long partnership came to an end on December 14, 1799, less than three years after George Washington had left office, when he died after catching

pneumonia while riding on an inspection of his farms in chilly, wet weather. After losing her husband, Martha found herself faced with requests from public officials to have the president's remains interned at the United States Capitol Building. She was not pleased, as she wanted him buried at the estate where they had spent their lives together. She painfully understood that they both belonged to the public. Happily, her wishes were ultimately honored and both George and Martha Washington were placed to rest at Mount Vernon.

The Washingtons were the first in what would become a long line of influential and active presidential couples. Although Mrs. Washington was a private person who longed for a quiet home life with her family, the demands of public life continually tested her sense of duty. As she noted in her correspondence, throughout her long years of service she would "much rather be at home." The nation's first first lady even referred to those challenging presidential years as her "lost days" (Watson, 2000a: 38). Yet throughout it all she served loyally and with great grace and dignity, on account of her devotion to her husband and her strong sense of duty.

One of her former slaves at Mount Vernon remembered her in these words: "The General was only a man, but Mrs. Washington was perfect" (Fields, 1994: xix). She also remained remarkably humble and unaffected by fame. Abigail Adams once described her as follows:

Mrs. Washington is one of those unassuming characters which create Love & Esteem. A most becoming pleasantness sits upon her countenance & an unaffected deportment which renders her the object of veneration & Respect.

(Brady, 1996: 10)

Martha Washington lived for two and a half years beyond her husband's passing. The grief of losing him greatly impacted her and she never again stepped foot in the

bedroom they shared at Mount Vernon. She moved instead to a small room in the building for the remainder of her days. The widow did draw comfort, as she always had, from having her grandchildren around and from receiving many friends at the home. She also accommodated the requests from crowds of visitors who came to Mount Vernon to pay their respects to the late, much beloved president. On occasion, she even clipped from one of her husband's letters his signature and gave it to her guests, as a souvenir from the "Father of His Country." Within a year of his death, in accordance with his wishes, she freed all of her husband's slaves, but none of her own; these she handed down to her children.

Mrs. Washington's obituary in one newspaper described her as a "worthy partner" for the foremost man of his times. Indeed the military commander Baron von Steuben wrote of her: "She reminded me of the Roman matrons of whom I had read so much, I thought that she well deserved to be the companion and friend of the greatest man of the age" (Field, 1994: xxiv). She passed away quietly at home on May 22, 1802 of a "severe fever." She was seventy years of age.

Lady Washington remains an iconic figure. She has been depicted in books, paintings, and engravings, and was the first woman in American history to appear on a postage stamp and, in the nineteenth century, on the country's currency—when her image graced the one-dollar silver certificate in 1886. While still obscure to many, Martha Washington remains one of the most admired women in American history (Watson, 2000a). Her status as an iconic figure and heroine of American history has been secured.

Scholarship on Martha Washington

Serious scholarship on the first ladies is a relatively recent phenomenon. Not until the 1980s and 1990s did books appear that examined the roles and duties as well as the challenges and contributions of the wives of

presidents (Watson, 2000a). These books include important early works by Carl Sferrazza Anthony (1990) and Betty Caroli (1987) and an edited collection of essays from Lewis L. Gould, titled *American First Ladies: Their Lives and Their Legacy* (Gould, 1996). In the 2000s scholarly research on the first ladies began to appear at academic conferences, as the topic of doctoral dissertations, and in academic journals. As a result, the field of study has matured and it is now recognized as worthy of study and as part of a subfield within such academic areas as presidency studies, political science, US history, women's studies, and others.

Helping to both facilitate and promote the study of the first ladies, most presidential libraries have organized and made available their first ladies' public papers and White House social files. Relatedly, the National First Ladies' Library opened in Ohio. Another critical element in this study is that biographies have been published on most of the first ladies, including a series of books edited by Gould and another by Robert P. Watson. Scholars have also collected and edited the papers of first ladies. An invaluable contribution to the study of Martha Washington's life and public service was made by Joseph Fields, who organized and published all of Mrs. Washington's surviving letters in 1994.

Yet, despite these developments in the study of first ladies, the first first lady has received surprisingly little attention. Indeed she remains a relatively enigmatic figure and few books or articles have been written about her, although of late new ones are appearing, as noted below. Moreover, Mrs. Washington's identity remains largely tied to that of her husband's (Watson, 2000a). Whether because George Washington was the foremost man of his momentous times, or on account of the sparse documentation that remains about her, or because historians have inadvertently promoted the image of Washington as a self-made man—in the words of Joseph Ellis (2005: 38), "Washington could only rely on the hard core of his own merit"—the result is that Martha Washington is rarely distinctly

remembered. Yet she was the source for much of her husband's success—financially, socially, and politically; and her contributions to his achievements were significant. Her own accomplishments and role as an individual apart from the great president call out for greater study. This situation is often true of first ladies who served prior to the twentieth century, with the possible exception of Abigail Adams, Dolley Madison, and Mary Todd Lincoln.

Given the status of George Washington and the enduring interest in him, it would seem that more attention would have been placed on Mrs. Washington than has been the case. There are, however, a few new studies that have recently appeared on her life, notably those of Helen Bryan (2002) and Patricia Brady (2006). Bryan's focus is on Martha's years as first lady. Although Brady explores her full life, the book's scholarly apparatus is limited. Scholars have weighed in Mrs. Washington and their polls, as well as popular ones that attempt to rate or rank first ladies, consistently place her as one of the most admired and best first ladies in US history. Yet elsewhere she is often portrayed simply as a grandmotherly hostess or solely as the wife of the first president. However, as this chapter has suggested, she was a vastly more intriguing and complex woman than she is usually presented to have been, and a definitive, scholarly biography on her life remains to be written.

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