

Chapter One

THE YOUTH OF GEORGE WASHINGTON

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In 1841 the celebrated novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne wittily remarked that George Washington “was born with his clothes on and his hair powdered, and made a stately bow on his first appearance in the world” (Wills (1994) 194). For many Americans in the 19th and early 20th centuries it was difficult to imagine that the revered Father of our nation had ever been a child, romping around in the Rappahannock River, practicing his penmanship in copybooks, and wooing girls. The severe lack of legitimate documentation of his youth did not aid this understanding. Tremendous gaps in surviving records have allowed eager hagiographical mythmakers like Mason Weems to fill in Washington’s early life with didactic and entertaining stories that praise the great man he would become. Many of those stories – the most famous being young Washington chopping down the cherry tree – have permeated the American memory and become acknowledged as fact. This is all much to the chagrin of many 20th and 21st century Washington historians who have ignored Weems entirely and looked at a wide variety of sources and studies to cobble together a more complete and truthful picture of Washington’s youth. The resulting image is a young man with a voracious sense of ambition who yearned to be free of life at the family farm and rise above his middling status. Young George Washington desired greatness and exploited circumstances and connections to achieve it – though not even he could have dreamed the greatness he would attain.

If we do not know much about the young George Washington, we know even less about his parents. His father, Augustine Washington, was born in 1694 to Lawrence Washington and Mildred Warner. In 1715 or 1716 he

married Jane Butler, who died unexpectedly on November 24, 1729 after bearing him three children: Lawrence, Augustine, Jr (or “Austin,” as he was known), and Jane. A year and a half later, in 1731, Augustine married Mary Ball, an orphan who brought middling property to the marriage. The value of Augustine’s land and investments put his growing family within the wealthiest 10% of Virginians, but they were in the second tier of the gentry, a level below the stately Lees, Byrds, and Fairfaxes. Augustine seems to have been an ambitious man, however, intent on moving up the socio-economic ladder. He served as a Justice of the Peace, sheriff, and church warden and sent Lawrence and Austin to the Appleby School in England to receive educations befitting gentlemen. He also acquired numerous properties throughout the region, including a plantation in Stafford County, 2,500 acres along the Potomac known as Little Hunting Creek, and a managing interest in an iron foundry built on his land.

Mary Ball Washington, born in the winter of 1708–1709, was 23-years old when she married Augustine. After the deaths of both of her parents she had lived under the guardianship of George Eskridge, a highly-respected lawyer, landowner, and burgess. It appears that when she gave birth to her first child she chose to honor her guardian by naming her son after him. And so, on February 22, 1732 George Washington was born.¹ At this time the Washingtons lived in Westmoreland County, Virginia at a farm known as Popes Creek. In 1735 Augustine relocated his growing family sixty miles northward to Little Hunting Creek and in 1738 they moved again, this time to a 260-acre plantation on the Rappahannock River across from the burgeoning town of Fredericksburg. By this time Mary had given birth to all six of her children: George, Elizabeth, Samuel, John Augustine, Charles, and Mildred, the latter dying soon after in 1740.

The Washingtons lived comfortably at the new property, named Ferry Farm due to its proximity to the boat that took people across the Rappahannock. An inventory of their possessions lists curtained beds, silver spoons, napkins, tablecloths, and some 50 slaves, but the home’s primary value was its nearness to Fredericksburg, a growing town that offered tremendous investment opportunities for someone as ambitious as Augustine. Fredericksburg also gave young George his first glimpse of a real town and he likely took the ferry to explore all it had to offer.

In 1738, Lawrence Washington returned from England and George met his half-brother for the first time. He was 20 or 21 (his exact date of birth is unknown), graceful and refined after years of thorough schooling. George was quite taken with his brother and admired and revered his polish and worldliness. That reverence expanded in late 1740 when Lawrence was commissioned captain of a Virginia company being raised for the British army’s campaign in Cartagena. Britain was embroiled in a conflict with Spain – known as the War of Jenkins’ Ear – over trade in the Caribbean and launched this operation to obtain one of Spain’s principal ports. Though he

did not actually participate in the battle, Lawrence sent home a detailed account of the fighting and made sure to emphasize that he had quickly learned to disregard the roar of the cannons. It is unclear whether Lawrence's adventure awakened a military spirit in the then nine-year old George, but it seems likely that his deep admiration for his brother would have inspired him to follow in his footsteps, wherever they led.

In the spring of 1743 George was visiting his cousins in the Chotank district of the Potomac when he received word that his father was very ill. He returned home immediately, in time to see his father pass away on April 12. Augustine's death had a profound impact on George, though likely not due to any particular emotional closeness between the two. In the few years before his death, Augustine had been overseas, spending much time in England consulting with partners on his financial interests. Rather, Augustine's death directly affected George's education and created circumstances that forced his childhood to come to a rapid end.

Augustine's hard work and investments allowed him to bequeath land to each of his six sons, but the bulk of the property went to the eldest. Lawrence received Little Hunting Creek, his father's interest in the foundry, town lots in Fredericksburg, and the largest share of slaves. By comparison, George received Ferry Farm – a property 1/5 the size of Little Hunting Creek and much less fertile – three lots in Fredericksburg, a half interest in an undeveloped tract in Stafford County (land so bad and unfertile that he never tried to develop it) and ten slaves. On its own, Ferry Farm would allow George to be a second-class planter, but not until he turned 21 and could inherit the property outright. For the time being all of George's inheritance would remain under the control of his mother. And so would George. Even though Mary Washington's youth and property made her attractive to potential suitors, she never remarried. It is unclear why she did this, though one possibility is that she did not want to run the risk of a new husband distributing her family's property among his children and leaving hers without. Whatever her reasons, Mary's decision forced the 11-year old George, as the oldest male at Ferry Farm, to absorb the family burdens and assist his mother with the maintenance of the plantation. This new day-to-day duty, plus the family's newly diluted income, made it impossible for George to go overseas to receive a formal education like his eldest brothers had. Whatever education he would receive would be basic, disjointed, and sporadic.

Historians and biographers have posited many different theories about the alternative and informal education young George received during this period. Some have stated that he was taught by one of Augustine's tenants, a man by the name of Mr. Hobby. Others have suggested that he attended Reverend James Marye's school in Fredericksburg, but there is very little direct evidence to validate either of these statements. David Humphreys' *Life of General Washington* states that George was educated by a domestic tutor, but no further information is given (Zagarri (1991) 6). What is known

for sure is that from the ages of 10 to 13 George completed exercises in geometry and trigonometry, calculated money conversions and interest, and copied poems and legal forms. Over 200 pages of these exercises and documents have survived and they very clearly indicate that young Washington's education was focused on learning the basic financial and agricultural understandings of a planter (see PGW, *Colonial*, 1: 1–4).

Noticeably absent from those surviving documents are lessons in philosophy, languages like Latin and French, and books of classical and English literature, all of which were the hallmarks of an 18th-century gentleman's liberal education. We do not know how the 10–13-year old George felt about not receiving instruction in these areas. We do know how he felt later, however. In 1785 he referred to his education as “defective” and refused to write his memoirs because he believed he did not have the talent (PGW, *Confederation*, 3:148–151). Later, he turned down all invitations to France because he did not want to speak through an interpreter. He felt intellectually inferior when in the company of Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, James Madison, and many of the other founders. Whereas his peers had studied the arts and humanities and gone to college, he had scratched out texts and solved practical geometry problems. He had to work exceptionally hard to master his native language, let alone a second one. But his own sense of academic inadequacy inspired him to desire the best for his family. In a letter to Jonathan Boucher about the education of his step-son, John Parke Custis, Washington lamented the fact that Custis was “unacquainted with several of their classical authors ... ignorant of Greek ... knows nothing of French...little or nothing acquainted with arithmetic and totally ignorant of the mathematics,” of which, “nothing can be more essentially necessary to any person possessed of a large landed estate” (PGW, *Colonial*, 8: 495).

Whatever the type and amount of schooling Washington experienced, he received it at a time when he was living at home with his mother. Much has been written about Mary Ball Washington, ranging from adoring presentations of her as the ideal republican mother to ruthless critiques of her as an unrelenting shrew. 19th-century hagiographers intent on idolizing the woman who raised the father of the nation, created the former interpretation, one that 20th-century historians took great pains to destroy. They, in contrast, promoted the latter image, one based on Washington's frustrated letters and references to Mary from the 1780s. Historians have recently refuted that interpretation as well, declaring that while George and his mother's relationship may have been strained in the later years of her life, it is unfair to also assume that it had always been like that (see Warren (1999) 5795–5796).

This is not to suggest, however, that Mary Washington in the 1740s was a passive and subdued woman who did what she was told. Instead, she was a 34-year old widow with five children, in charge of a plantation and a

few dozen slaves. To ensure that Ferry Farm ran in working order she had to be stern, determined, and exacting; and under her guidance, young George learned firsthand what it was like to give orders and see to it that they were followed. The farm reports that the Washingtons demanded from their overseers are incredibly detailed and suggest that the farm was run with great precision and discipline. But the similar management styles and personalities that allowed Ferry Farm to succeed likely created tension between Mary and her son. George was, after all, entering his adolescence and undoubtedly preferred to explore the countryside and visit his brothers than to stay home with his mother and younger siblings.

Upon inheriting the Little Hunting Creek property Lawrence renamed it Mount Vernon in honor of his admiral from the Cartagena campaign. The house was exciting, fancy, and bustling and not stifling, rough, and overly disciplined like Ferry Farm. George became a frequent visitor at Mount Vernon and Lawrence regaled him with stories from his brief stint as a soldier, making him an infinitely more welcome housemate than Mary (of whom, one of his cousins claimed, he was more afraid than his own parents) (Conkling (1858) 22). George still harbored a tremendous amount of respect and admiration for his brother who reciprocated through taking an active interest in seeing George succeed.

In September 1746 Lawrence informed George that he wanted him to apply for an open position of midshipman aboard a royal ship currently anchored at Alexandria. Much later in his life Washington acknowledged that he had had little desire to go to sea, but that at the time he recognized his brother's authority and influence and resolved to fulfill his wish (Zagarri (1991) 7). As he was only 14, however, the final decision rested with Mary. Initially, she did not veto the proposal, but Robert Jackson, a Fredericksburg friend and neighbor of the Washingtons, believed that she was just waiting for someone to give her a good reason to reject it. "I find that one word against [George's] going has more weight than ten for it," he wrote to Lawrence (PGW, *Colonial*, 1:54). Mary finally appealed to her older brother Joseph, a successful merchant and lawyer living in London, and got exactly what she wanted to hear. In his response dated May 19, 1747, Joseph quipped that if George were to join the navy he might as well be apprenticed to a common tinsmith. As a colonial and not a Briton, Joseph continued, George would be used "like a negro, or rather, like a dog" and he very bluntly added that "as for any considerable preferment ... there are always too many grasping for it here, and he has none" (Warren (1999) 5808). Joseph's response was exactly what Mary was looking for. She decided against George becoming a sailor and the subject was never mentioned again.

A few years earlier, in July 1743, Lawrence married Ann Fairfax, the daughter of Colonel William Fairfax and niece of Thomas, Lord Fairfax. The union made Mount Vernon all the more attractive to young George

as it made him a welcome guest at the Fairfaxes' nearby estate, Belvoir. Located four miles downstream from Mount Vernon, Belvoir, with its stately brick facade, two floors, nine rooms, and outbuildings, was the pinnacle of life among the Virginia gentry. George spent a great deal of time at the estate over the next few years and witnessed firsthand the prestige and privilege of elite landowners. He was by no means poor, but he did not live on the same level as the Fairfaxes. With his second-tier upbringing and informal education, George did not quite fit into Belvoir's elite image – but that did not deter or embarrass him. He was very much his father's son and as he entered his adolescence began to demonstrate a prominent streak of ambition and drive that inspired him to hone his rugged and informally educated self into a refined and polished gentleman.

One of the easiest changes George could make was to upgrade his appearance. In 1748 he drafted a diary entry entitled "Memorandum of What Clothes I Carry into Fairfax" and listed the necessary items for his upcoming visit to Belvoir. Shortly afterward he drafted another memo, this one giving very specific instructions about a new frock coat he wanted made. It was "not to have more than one fold in the Skirt and the top to be made just to turn in and three Button Holes" (PGW, *Colonial*, 1:46). George took steps to look the part, but he also needed to act it. At least five years earlier he had, as part of a writing exercise, copied out the "Rules ... of Civility & Decent Behaviour in Company and Conversation," a book of etiquette that originated with French Jesuits in the sixteenth century. While it does not seem that he consciously sought to heed the rules when he first wrote them out, it is possible that he referred to them at this time. The rules outlined such crucial aspects to gentility as dress, posture, manner, and attitude. They spoke to a level of refinement that George had not experienced as a boy running around Ferry Farm, but that he would need if he wanted to continue visiting Belvoir.

Polishing his manners and presenting a respectable figure was also significant to George as he began to take an interest in women. Sometime in 1749 or 1750 he wrote to his cousin Robin that while there was a "very agreeable Young Lady" at Belvoir, her presence "revives my former Passion for your Low Land Beauty." It is unclear who this girl or what the nature of her relationship with George was, but it is certain is that she left a profound impact on him. In the same letter he wrote that the only way to end his heartache was "by burying that chaste and troublesome Passion in the grave of oblivion or eternall forgetfulness" (PGW, *Colonial*, 1: 41). Despite his heartache over the "Low Land Beauty," (PGW, *Colonial*, 1:41) however, the "agreeable" lady at Belvoir certainly intrigued George and he mentioned her in two further letters. It is likely that this young woman was Mary Cary, the sister of Sarah "Sally" Cary Fairfax (PGW, *Colonial*, 1:43). George probably first met the sisters in December 1748 before Sally's marriage to George William Fairfax, son of Colonel William Fairfax. Sally was a beautiful and vivacious 18-year old, just two years older than George.

They exchanged a number of letters throughout the 1750s that reveal that George was quite taken with her – much more so than her sister – but historians agree that despite Sally's playful return of the flirtation, George probably never acted upon his feelings.

The Fairfaxes offered George much more than the dream of wealth, prestige, and gentility, however. They offered patronage and connections and the means through which that dream could be achieved. Lawrence reaped the benefits of marrying into the family, gaining a seat in the House of Burgesses, accumulating much land, and becoming Adjutant General of the Virginia militia. He encouraged George to take advantage of the marriage as well. Colonel Fairfax saw great potential in him and even participated in Lawrence's plan to have George join the navy. William had served in the navy and with the infantry in Spain and like Lawrence, it is possible that he later inspired George to pursue a career in the military. At this time, though, the Colonel inspired George to become a prominent landowner. All he had to do was look at the Colonel, the five million acres he managed for his cousin, Thomas, Lord Fairfax, and the opulence of Belvoir to know that land was the means to great wealth and esteem.

George took his first step on the road to distinction by becoming a surveyor. It was the most logical choice. Socially, surveying was a respectable profession for young potential landowners. Practically, it would allow him to make a good deal of money in a short amount of time and enable him to scout the best lands ahead of everyone else. In addition, his father's old tools were locked in a shed behind Ferry Farm, so he would not have to buy new instruments. Surveying was also a profession that suited his skills. Surviving documents suggest that he was meticulous and exacting, good at math, and had some level of instruction in the craft (see PGW, *Colonial*, 1:1–4; and Chase (1998) 163–169). He conducted at least three practice surveys at Mount Vernon, the most remarkable of which is strikingly laid atop a compass rose and completed two weeks after his sixteenth birthday.

In early 1748 George began a brief apprenticeship with James Genn, the surveyor for Prince William County. Around this time George first introduced himself to the great Proprietor, Thomas, Lord Fairfax, who had crossed the Atlantic to view his land holdings. As the Proprietor was staying at Belvoir, George could not resist the opportunity to meet someone from the British peerage. Additionally, George had to have thought that a favorable impression on someone as invested in land speculation as the Proprietor could be advantageous to his burgeoning career as a surveyor. He was right. Shortly afterward, Thomas, Lord Fairfax, commissioned Genn to lead a surveying expedition to the South Branch of the Potomac. George William Fairfax, the dashing and well-educated son of Colonel Fairfax – and husband of Sally – would serve as the Proprietor's representative. At 23 he was seven years George's senior, but the two young men had struck up a friendship and George was invited along on the expedition.

George could not refuse the offer, which would provide him with surveying experience at the hands of the Fairfaxes, and take him farther from home than he had ever ventured before. It also offered the tall and rugged 16-year old the possibility of adventure on the frontier. George kept a diary during the journey, and early on related a story that emphasized his inexperience with the outdoors. As he was preparing for bed one night he removed his clothes and climbed into his cot, only to find that it consisted of no more than straw and a threadbare blanket, covered in bugs and vermin. He jumped out of the bed and put his clothes back on, resolving to sleep in the “open Air” whenever a proper bed was unavailable. George ruefully acknowledged that he was not “so good a Woodsman as the rest of my Company” (PGW, *Diaries*, 1:9).

One week later the expedition encountered a party of Indians returning from a battle. This was likely the largest group of Indians George had ever seen, and he subsequently wrote a lengthy description of the war dance they performed after sharing the surveyors’ alcohol. Throughout the next three weeks George described crossing rivers on horseback, sleeping in a tent while rain and wind howled around him, dining without tablecloths or utensils, and having to improvise when provisions ran out. By April 9 he and George William Fairfax had left the expedition, and they returned to their respective homes on April 13 (PGW, *Diaries*, 1:13–23). It is unclear why they left, though it is possible that the novelty of living in the wilderness had worn off and they were both anxious to return to the bountiful food, clean beds, and roofs at Mount Vernon and Belvoir.

In 1749 George assisted surveyors as they laid out the new city of “Belhaven,” later to be known as Alexandria. Lawrence was one of the city’s trustees and likely played a role in getting him the job. Similarly, that July, George was appointed the surveyor of Culpeper County. At 17 years old he was the youngest official surveyor in Virginia history and he had Colonel Fairfax to thank. As a member of the governor’s council, the colonel had likely recommended George for the position. As the county surveyor, George could work as he pleased and spent most of his time conducting surveys for the Fairfaxes who, along with Lawrence, had engaged in a new speculative endeavor called the “Ohio Company.” They had received a land grant of 500,000 acres from the king and hoped to return a profit by attracting settlers and building a fort and Indian trading post. The venture allowed George to return to the frontier, only this time as a fully qualified surveyor. The family’s involvement in the Ohio Company also introduced George to the business of land investment and ownership, and in October 1750 he made his first significant land purchase: 1,500 acres on Bullskin Creek in the Shenandoah Valley. He also tried to sell two of the three Fredericksburg lots he had inherited from his father, but to no avail.

George recognized and appreciated the impact the Fairfaxes had on his life and encouraged his siblings to get to know them, just as Lawrence had

encouraged him. In 1755 he wrote to his younger brother, John Augustine, that he was pleased to hear that he had begun to visit Belvoir. He advised him to visit often, as the Fairfaxes had the power to be very helpful to “us young beginner’s” (PGW, *Colonial*, 1:289). “To that Family I am under many obligation<s> particularly to the old Gentleman,” George wrote (PGW, *Colonial*, 1:290). The gentleman was no doubt Colonel Fairfax. But George, so keenly aware of the importance of knowing powerful people, was not satisfied receiving the patronage of the Fairfaxes alone and actively expanded his circle of benefactors. On November 4, 1752 he entered the newly established Fredericksburg Masonic Lodge. He joined as one of five apprentices and within the year rose to the position of Master Mason. Much has been written about this affiliation, but it appears that he joined the fraternity for the connections and prestige it offered. The brotherhood provided an opportunity for the ambitious 20-year old to rub shoulders with the most prominent men in Fredericksburg, if not northern Virginia.

In 1749, just as George was beginning to earn his own money and blossom into independent adulthood, Lawrence contracted tuberculosis. His illness was so severe that he had to relinquish his seat in the House of Burgesses, and George would have to dedicate a considerable amount of his time to caring for him. In the summer of 1750 the brothers visited the therapeutic springs in Berkeley, West Virginia and while the baths ultimately made no improvement on Lawrence’s condition, George was able to conduct a few surveys in the region and earn a little money on the side. Then, on September 28, 1751, in the midst of the fall surveying season, the brothers set sail for Barbados with the hope that the tropical air would solve Lawrence’s cough. George kept a diary of the 37-day passage, making note of the winds, the ship’s course, and passing merchant vessels. He also wrote about the island, marveling at the foliage and fruit, noting what ships passed by, and commenting on the island’s fort and drilling soldiers. He attended a production of “George Barnwell, a Tragedy,” very possibly his first experience with theater, and was entertained by the island’s dignitaries – all the while Lawrence followed his island doctor’s orders and stayed indoors. Two weeks after he arrived, however, George contracted smallpox and had to put his exploring aside for three weeks while he recovered. The disease would leave pockmarks on his nose but ultimately would have the overwhelmingly positive impact of making him immune. Smallpox would assail the Continental Army in 1775 and 1776 but would thankfully spare the Commander in Chief. His experience with the disease and subsequent immunity may have inspired his advocacy of the inoculation of all Continental troops – one of Washington’s most crucial and significant orders during the Revolutionary War.

Leaving his brother to continue with his treatment, George set sail for Virginia on December 21, 1751. After an initial bout with seasickness he

dined with the captain on Christmas Day and made ground a month later on January 26, 1751. This would be the last ocean voyage he would ever take. Immediately upon his return he hired a horse and rode to Williamsburg to present himself to Governor Robert Dinwiddie. After the meeting George included Dinwiddie on his ever-growing list of benefactors, and the governor would prove to be a powerful advocate for George in the next few years. Upon his return home, George continued surveying and bought more land, pushing his holdings to over 2,000 acres. But he had to stop once again when he contracted pleurisy. The sickness also interrupted another one of George's ventures: courtship. On May 20, 1752 he wrote to William Fauntleroy, explaining that as soon as he recovered his strength he would again wait on his daughter, "Miss Betsy," in the hope that she would change her mind about his proposal (PGW, *Colonial*, 1:49). No response has ever been found and it is possible that, despite the patronage of the Fairfaxes and his ambition and drive, the Fauntleroy's rebuffed George's advances because he wasn't wealthy or prestigious enough.

Lawrence died on July 26, 1752, and George's fortunes changed forever. He served as the executor of Lawrence's estate and inherited three parcels of land in Fredericksburg. Lawrence left the 2,100-acre Mount Vernon property to his infant daughter, but stipulated that George would inherit it, along with his other Fairfax county properties, should she die without an heir and George outlive his widow, Ann. Within the next two years Ann remarried and her daughter died, allowing George to rent Mount Vernon until he could inherit it in full upon Ann's death in 1761.

Land was not the only thing George looked to inherit. At the time of his death, Lawrence was serving as the Adjutant General for the Virginia militia. Despite his complete lack of military experience, George actively sought his brother's vacant position and as one historian has suggested, demonstrated a sense of entitlement and ambition that was "completely in the Fairfax tradition" (Flexner (1965–72:1–2). Furthermore, George may also have seen the position as a way to launch a career in the military and fulfill a lingering martial interest inspired through his interactions with Lawrence and Colonel Fairfax. Despite his lack of proper qualifications he was ultimately successful and received one of four new adjutancies carved out of Lawrence's old position. But George remained unsatisfied. He had received the adjutancy of the southern district of Virginia, the least prestigious out of the four sections. He had his eye instead on the adjutancy of the Northern Neck and was so preoccupied with obtaining it that he likely did not fulfill any of his duties in the southern district. Rather, he spent his time appealing to his benefactors and pleading his case to the man who was the likely candidate to receive the Northern Neck adjutancy, William Fitzhugh. A veteran of Cartagena heralding from one of Virginia's most prominent families, Fitzhugh was a fitting choice for the appointment, but that did not deter young George from relentlessly pursuing it.

Fitzhugh had recently married Ann Frisby Rousby of Maryland and moved to her family's estate in Calvert County, Maryland. This move cast doubt over whether or not he would receive the Northern Neck appointment, and George sought to position himself as the logical next choice should he not. Fitzhugh proposed that he accept the appointment on the promise that he would build and sometimes reside at a new home in Virginia, but in a letter to Governor Dinwiddie George suggested that the Governor err on the side of caution and instead appoint a current and reliable Virginia resident – himself. Rather than try to compensate for his inexperience, he displayed ambition and self-confidence that bordered on arrogance by promoting himself as the *best* candidate: "I am sensible my best endeavours will not be wanting, and doubt not, but by a constant application to fit myself for the Office, could I presume Your Honour had not in view a more deserving Person I flatter myself I should meet with the approbation of the Gentlemen of the Council" (PGW, *Colonial*, 1: 50). Fitzhugh ultimately prevailed, but not for long. On February 12, 1753 George wrote to William Nelson, the president of the governor's council, applying once more for the adjutancy of the Northern Neck. Fitzhugh was out, though no documentation exists to suggest why or how (PGW, *Colonial*, 1: 55). George succeeded on his second try, and as the Adjutant of the Northern Neck became Major George Washington. His primary duty was to train the county militia officers who would then train their companies, but this meant that the inexperienced young officer had to learn drill first. That was only just the beginning, however. Whether he had sought the adjutancy out of a sense of entitlement or a genuine interest in military affairs, the timing of his appointment, on the eve of the French and Indian War, quickly thrust him headfirst into military tactics and strategy.

Under the auspices of the Ohio Company, the British laid claim to the Ohio valley. Problematically, the French did as well. Tensions over the land had been simmering for years, but came to a head when the diplomats who crafted the treaty that ended the War of Austrian Succession were unable to create an agreement over territorial matters. The French reacted by sending forces south from Canada and building two forts near the mouth of Lake Erie. Fearing that the French would continue to move south and gain control over the Ohio River, the valuable land around it, and the lucrative fur trade, Governor Dinwiddie sought to intervene. As an investor in the Ohio Company he also had a very personal financial reason to ensure the land remained in British control. He thereafter lobbied London for permission to erect a series of forts in the Ohio country and received approval from the King in August 1753.

The King's orders also required the governor to send an envoy to the French to deliver an ultimatum: leave or be driven off by force. Seeing an opportunity for honor and military advancement, the likes of which no Virginian of his generation had yet achieved, George set off for Williamsburg

at once and volunteered to lead the expedition. Once again he applied for something that he was not qualified for. While it is true that he had some knowledge of the Ohio country from his surveying days, he had no diplomatic or political experience, had only been the Adjutant of the Northern Neck district for a few months, and, perhaps most importantly, had never been in battle. But that did not deter him. Years later he wrote to his brother that he volunteered because he did not think that anyone else would (PGW, *Colonial*, 1:351–353). Whether that was true or not, Dinwiddie and his council accepted George's offer and he set off for his journey the same day. What followed was an opportunity for young George to return once more to the wilderness, not as a surveyor but as a major in the Virginia militia. His interactions with Indians were no longer intrigued observations of a fascinated youth, but of diplomatic partnerships and negotiations. And the intelligence and reports he brought back to Dinwiddie and his council would soon send him back to the wilderness, a return that would set into motion the first major war on the American continent.

From the little information that we have it appears that in many ways George Washington was a normal young man of the age. He rode around on horseback; confidently, but unsuccessfully, courted women; and played whist and loo with his siblings. But on the whole, he was not a typical young man. There was far more to him than that. By his 22nd birthday he owned over 4,000 acres of land, had served as a county surveyor, was employed as adjutant of the Northern Neck, and was quickly making a name for himself among the Virginia elite. He would not have achieved these things if he had not been positively affected by events beyond his control and been introduced to the Fairfax family, but these beneficial circumstances were compounded and enhanced by his own desires for greatness. George harbored a tremendous sense of ambition and determination for personal social and economic advancement that truly set him apart from his peers. In the Fairfaxes he saw what he wanted to achieve and set out to attain it. By all accounts he surpassed even his own expectations.

As a young man, however, George Washington was by no means perfect. To excel in his ambitious course of self-improvement, he demanded a great deal from himself. He was his biggest critic, but he was unable to handle criticism from others and developed a defensiveness that manifested itself in rudeness, arrogance, and ingratitude. By 22, he had worked too hard and was too close to reaching the levels of success and wealth he had desired for so long to see it all slip away at the hand of a negative report or missed promotion. So when his early military career was frustratingly plagued by failure and loss, he reacted instinctively to defend himself. In a 1755 letter to his brother Austin he angrily recounted the military fiascos he had encountered in the previous two years: "I then was appointed with trifling Pay to conduct an handful of Men to the Ohio. What did I get by this? Why, after putting myself to a considerable expence in equipping and providing Necessarys

for the Campaigne – I went out, was soundly beaten, lost them all – came in, and had my Commission taken from me” (PGW, *Colonial*, 1:352). Throughout the French and Indian War he quibbled over pay and policy to ensure he received the compensation he believed he deserved; resigned his commission as colonel of the Virginia Regiment rather than take a reduction in rank, pay, and, in his mind, honor; repeatedly threatened to resign other commissions when he felt dishonored; and wrote self-exonerating letters that blamed everyone but himself for the British army’s failures. He had counted Governor Dinwiddie as a friend and benefactor for some time and yet in 1756 and 1757 he disparaged Dinwiddie in letters to both his political enemy and political superior (see PGW, *Colonial*, 3:323–333, 4: 79–93). In 1758 he wrote a series of letters criticizing General John Forbes’ handling of the expedition that bears his name. When one of these letters fell into Forbes’ hands he wrote that George’s behavior was a “shame” and “no ways like a Soldier” (Sayen (1999) 25). In both instances George must have believed that he would be rewarded by bringing the failures of other men to light and revealing how he would have done things differently to achieve better results.²

George’s behavior during this period is perhaps best described by what one historian termed his “juvenile bravado” (Chernow (2010) 41). He was a driven young man who had achieved a great deal in a short amount of time, and was clearly over-confident and cocky as a result. But he would not stay that way. While his youthful drive and ambition set him on the path to his future military command, prestige, and wealth, those traits faded once he achieved the goals he had set as a fascinated visitor to Belvoir, and the ambitious, slightly arrogant, and entitled George Washington of 1754 gave way to the fulfilled and venerable George Washington of 1774 and beyond.

NOTES

1. This date is in accordance with the Gregorian calendar, the dating method that replaced the Julian calendar in 1752. Under the Julian calendar (or “Old Style,” as it is commonly referred), George’s birthday was February 11, 1731.
2. For an excellent in-depth discussion of Washington’s less than admirable moments, see Sayen, William Guthrie (Winter 1999), “George Washington’s ‘Unmannerly’ Behavior: The Clash between Civility and Honor”, *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 107: 5–36.

LIST OF FURTHER READINGS

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