

George Washington: Father of the Nation

Students will learn who George Washington was and how he contributed to the creation and foundation of the United States. Specifically, students will learn about Washington's role in the American Revolution, and the example he set for future presidents. Additionally, while this will focus on George Washington, student will also begin to gain an understanding of different systems of government, and why America elected to be a democracy.

Objectives:

1. Students will learn who George Washington is and why he was important to our nation.
2. Students will learn George Washington's role in the creation of the United States and its system of government.
3. Students will be able to create a timeline of major events in George Washington's life.

Standards:

- 3.H.2.2 Explain the importance of famous American figures including, but not limited to, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Thomas Jefferson.
- 3.H.2.1 Generate questions about individuals and groups who have shaped significant historical changes and continuities.
- 3.C.2.1 Explain the meaning and importance of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.
- 3.C.2.2 Explain the basic political roles of leaders in the state and nation.
- 5.H.2.2 Identify and describe the roles of influential people during the American Revolution.
- 5.H.4.3 Explain probable causes and effects of events in the American Revolution.
- 5.C.1.1 Explain why the U. S. was established as a republic over other forms of governments.

Materials:

- George Washington Timeline worksheet
- George Washington coloring worksheet
- Pencil
- Colored pencils/crayons/markers

Step 1: Introduction

Begin with a discussion of George Washington to find out what students already know.

George Washington quick facts:

- Born February 22, 1732
- Died December 14, 1799
- Married to Martha Washington
- Two children who he adopted
- Commander in chief during the American Revolution (1775-1783)
- First president of the United States (1789 – 1797)

Step 2: Exploration

While going through, have students fill out the timeline worksheet provided

Timeline dates to focus on:

- 1732: Washington born in Virginia
- 1754: Washington begins his political career in the House of Burgesses
- 1775: Washington leads the Continental Army into the American Revolution
- 1781: Britain surrenders at the Battle of Yorktown
- 1789: Washington becomes 1st U.S. president
- 1797: Washington retires to Mount Vernon
- 1799: Washington dies at Mount Vernon

Summary of George Washington's life:

George Washington was born February 22, 1732 and grew up on a plantation in the British colony of Virginia. He was the oldest of 6 children, with 3 older half-siblings. When Washington was 11 his father died, and he helped his mother manage the plantation. He was likely educated by private tutors and finished his formal education at 15. He became a surveyor, exploring the Virginia wilderness. At the age of 20, he became a commander of the Virginia militia during the French and Indian War. Eventually he became commander of all the Virginia forces. In 1759 he resigned his commission, returned to Mount Vernon which he had inherited from his half-brother, and was elected to the House of Burgesses. That same year he married Martha Washington and accepted her two children as his own.

As a plantation owner Washington experienced the tariffs that England imposed on American colonists and came to support independence from England. He went as a representative to the First Continental Congress in 1774, and upon returning to the Second Continental Congress in 1775 was elected commander in chief of the Continental Army. While Washington struggled as a military strategist, he was well equipped at keeping the scattered army together and motivated. The American Revolution lasted 8 years, and with the assistance of the French army, the British ultimately surrendered to Washington in 1781 at the Battle of Yorktown, making Washington a hero to the nation. In 1783 with the signing of the Treaty of Paris, Washington retired to Mount Vernon, believing his duties were done. However, in 1787 he was asked to oversee the

Constitutional Convention, which would draft the Constitution, the governing document of the new American government.

As a result of his leadership in the American Revolution and the Constitutional convention, Washington was unanimously elected as the first president of the United States in 1789. He was hesitant at first to accept the role, but ultimately gave in to popular opinion. Washington set the precedence for how future presidents should act in many ways. Most significantly, after serving two terms Washington refused to be elected for a 3rd term, and retired home to Mount Vernon in 1797. The concept of the peaceful exchange of power was a new one, but one that has continued to this day. After a few years back home, Washington passed away due to a throat infection on December 14, 1799.

Expansion upon a few key events:

- House of Burgesses

“The House of Burgesses was an assembly of elected representatives from Virginia that met from 1643 to 1776. This democratically elected legislative body was the first of its kind in English North America. From 1619 until 1643, elected burgesses met in unicameral session with the governor and the royally appointed governor’s Council; after 1643, the burgesses met separately as the lower house of the General Assembly of Virginia. Each county sent two burgesses to the House; towns could petition to send a single representative, as Jamestown, Williamsburg, and Norfolk did. (The College of William and Mary also had representation in the House.) Most burgesses were also members of the gentry class, though the colonists they represented were usually small land-owners and tenant farmers. In 1774, when the House of Burgesses began to support resistance to the Crown, Virginia’s royal governor, John Murray, earl of Dunmore, dissolved it. The Virginia Constitution of 1776 created a new General Assembly that replaced the governor’s Council with an elected Senate and the House of Burgesses with an elected House of Delegates. The House of Burgesses is notable, however, for being the training ground of many of America’s Founding Fathers, including George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Richard Henry Lee, and Patrick Henry.” (Gottlieb 2020)

- Support of the Revolution

Washington owned a plantation, and therefore firsthand felt the effects of tariffs on American goods. In 1769 he had joined protests refusing to import taxable items from England. As time went on, he vocalized his belief that the colonies may not be able to settle their differences with England without armed conflict. When attending the First Continental Congress in Philadelphia in 1774, Washington impressed the other attendees both with his sense, his poise, and his military background. Upon attending the Second Continental Congress in 1775, Washington demonstrated his willingness to fight, and nominated by John Adams was unanimously elected Commander in Chief of the Continental army. Washington did have his work cut out for him however, as the Continental army was largely untrained, unruly, under supplied, and scattered across what were 13 separate colonies. They were also outnumbered. Washington faced many defeats throughout the 8 years of the Revolution, but a few key victories early on helped keep spirits up.

- Valley Forge (Winter of 1777-1778)

After a defeat in Philadelphia, Washington had his army retreated and hunker down for the winter in a place that would come to be known as Valley Forge. In the first few weeks they assembled a thousand cabins made of logs and mud. In December the food supply ran out, and with foraging expeditions that were often unsuccessful, the men had to make meals out of simple flour and water baked into a “cake”. The soldiers were also poorly clothed, and many suffered from frostbite. Due to unclean conditions, disease also was common, and at least 2,500 men died during that winter. Things finally began to improve in February with the arrival of new supplies and the arrival General Friedrich Baron von Steuben who helped to train the young army.

- British Surrender at the Battle of Yorktown

By the summer of 1781 the French had joined the war on the American’s side, and Washington wanted to combine forces to attack British forces in New York City. However, when he found out a French fleet was sailing to Virginia, he decided instead to combine forces to trap Lord Cornwallis and his forces stations in Yorktown, Virginia. The combined armies surrounded the British, and after 8 days Lord Cornwallis surrendered, effectively signaling an end to the American Revolution. It would take two more years before the Treaty of Paris (1783) could be signed.

- Presidency (1789-1797)

In May 1782, one of Washington’s officers wrote to him, encouraging him to take control of what seemed to be an ineffective Congress and make himself king. Washington replied, “No occurrence in the course of the war has given me more painful sensations... You could not have found a person to whom your schemes are more disagreeable.” He also discouraged a group of officers who wanted to overthrow Congress, and successfully reminded them of what they had been fighting for. After the last of British troops left the colonies, Washington almost immediately resigned his commission with the intention of retiring to Mount Vernon permanently.

However, after the country had struggled for a few years operating under the Articles of Confederation, Washington agreed to act as a Virginia delegate for the Constitutional Convention. He was immediately elected president of the Convention, and after the drafting of the Constitution joined in the signing, showing his support of a government rules by the nation’s people rather than nobles. In the next few months, the new Congress was elected, and the House of Representatives elected the first president. Unanimously they elected Washington. Despite his concerns at how effective he would be, Washington was sworn in on April 30, 1789.

Washington appointed his cabinet as well as other offices of government. He passed the Judiciary Act and appointed the first chief justice. Washington also traveled all over the United States in his first years, trying to foster a sense of national identity. Washington only expected to serve one term as president, but with the rise in the first two political parties, the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans, concerns about a split nation had Congress begging him to remain, and Washington was once again unanimously elected.

During his second term, Washington had to go against popular opinion and keep America out of the French Revolution. Many wanted to support France in its journey to create a democracy like the one in America, however Washington recognized that such involvement could destroy the young nation, particularly once Britain had declared war on France. Therefore, Washington went with a policy of neutrality for the sake of the nation and its economy.

In September 1796, Washington published his farewell address in the newspapers, signaling the end to his time as president. He attended the inauguration of John Adams as the second president, demonstrating that a peaceful transfer of power was possible. He also set the precedence for presidents to only serve two terms in office.

Step 3: Activity

Possible activities:

Coloring: George Washington coloring worksheet provided.

Writing Prompt: Imagine you are George Washington, and you have just been elected the first President of the United States. No one has ever held this position before, and many people doubt how effective this new government you have been elected to run will be. How are you feeling? Excited, nervous, hopeful, confident, anxious? What challenges do you think you will face as President, and how do you plan to overcome them? Draw on your knowledge of George Washington to support your answers.

Sources:

“George Washington's Life.” George Washington's Mount Vernon, <https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/biography>.

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