

Mary Ball Washington:

The Mother of the Father of Our Country

by Michael Aubrecht



Mary Ball Washington

Robert Edge Pine



George Washington

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There is the well-known adage that goes, “Behind every great man is a great woman”—and American history is filled with ladies equally as remarkable as their famous male counterparts. Many of these women have been the spouses of celebrated gentlemen, while others followed in the footsteps of their remarkable fathers. Some have given birth to sons and raised them for greatness. One woman who nurtured perhaps our nation’s greatest citizen, soldier, and politician, was Mary Ball Washington. Hers is a story of independence—and fortitude.

Mary Ball was born in Lancaster County, Virginia, in 1708. Her father was a gentleman named Joseph Ball and her mother, Mary Johnson, was a widow. Unfortunately, Mary’s parents fell sick and prematurely succumbed to their maladies, leaving her fatherless at age three and motherless at age 13.

As an orphan, Mary was placed under the guardianship of George Eskridge, a local attorney and friend of the Ball family. For the next decade she lived with the Eskridge family, and it appears that Mary was cared for and raised well. She was educated, an avid reader, and a skilled equestrian.



Map of Mount Vernon made by George Washington

Library of Congress

By 1731, Mary was 23—an “old maid” by colonial standards. However, good fortune favored her when she met a strapping tobacco planter and entrepreneur named Augustine Washington. Augustine’s family, much like Mary’s, had been in the colonies since the mid-1600s. He was educated and had been schooled in England. Augustine was a well-established widower, 14 years Mary’s senior, and the father of three children—Lawrence, Augustine, and Jane.

After a brief courtship, the two were married and initially lived on a beautiful plantation called Popes (or Pope’s) Creek. At the onset of their marriage, the Washingtons were not extravagantly wealthy, but they would grow in net worth as Augustine’s success grew. In February of 1732, Mary gave birth to a son—the first of six children (one of the six would die in infancy). Augustine and Mary named the first child “George” after George Eskridge, Mary’s adopted father.

Four years later, the family moved to Hunting Creek (later christened Mount Vernon), and in 1738, Augustine purchased a farm (later known as Ferry Farm) near Fredericksburg so that he could be closer to his iron business. It was at Ferry Farm where the tall tales that would become part of Washington’s legacy originated: from George confessing to chopping down a cherry tree to skipping a silver dollar across the Rappahannock River. After settling at this new homestead, Mary kept busy overseeing the day-to-day operations of the farm and tending to her children.

Sadly, tragedy struck Mary’s life again in 1743 when Augustine unexpectedly passed away at age 49. The woman who had been orphaned in her early teens was now widowed at 35, with five children to care for. George was only 11 years old at the time. In accordance with Augustine’s will,



“The President was deeply affected. His head rested upon the shoulder of his parent, whose aged arm feebly, yet fondly, encircled his neck.”



Mount Vernon was left to George's half-brother, Lawrence, while Ferry Farm was left to George. Provision was made for Mary to receive the benefit of the crops for five years and possession of the farm property until George came of age.

Although tumultuous years followed, Mary was said to have remained a vigilant parent. Historians have traced George's epic honesty and fortitude to the influence of his parents, and some have even credited his mother alone with his rise to greatness. According to the publication *Archiving Early America*:

“To Mary Ball Washington we owe the precepts and example that governed her son throughout his life. The moral and religious maxims found in her favorite manual—‘Sir Matthew Hale’s Contemplations’—made an indelible impression on George’s memory and on his heart, as she read them aloud to her children. That small volume, with his mother’s autograph inscribed, was among the cherished treasures of George Washington’s library as long as he lived. When George was 14 years old, his half-brother Lawrence obtained a midshipman’s warrant for him in the English naval service. George made plans to embark on-board a man-of-war, then in the Potomac. His baggage was already on the ship. But at the last minute his mother refused to give her consent, preventing her son from a life that would have cut him off from the great career he would eventually pursue. A noted biographer described her action as the debt owed by mankind to the mother of Washington.”

It was rumored that Mary gave George a beautiful penknife as a consolation gift for hindering his naval aspirations and playfully had it engraved, “Always Obey your Superiors.”

Mary remained in mourning and lived at Ferry Farm for more than 45 years after the death of her husband. She never remarried and was by all accounts a self-supportive woman; however, she was obliged to rely on George's generosity for financial support once he came of age. As George's military and political career prospered, his mother continued to be a meager farmer.

Years passed and the relationship between Mary and George deteriorated. Although she was by no means poor, Mary regularly complained to others that she was destitute and neglected by her children, much to George's embarrassment. This led to animosity between mother and son. Yet despite this, George remained in contact with his mother and made it a point to mail her letters while deployed on military affairs. One preserved letter, dated 1755, was meant to reassure Mary of his safety and was signed, “Your most dutiful son.”

By age 64, Mary was too old to run the farm, and George purchased a home for her (now known as the Mary Washington House) in downtown Fredericksburg, where she lived for the remaining 17 years of her life. When the American Revolution began, George took command of the Continental Army and did not see his mother again for nearly ten years.

It was recorded that during this time, Mary's stubbornness began to rear its head. She requested that the Virginia House of Delegates provide her with an allowance—she

was, after all, the mother of the army's supreme commander. She then petitioned for a state pension and lower taxes. None of her requests were granted.

Despite the rift between mother and son, Mary's proudest moment might have come during a visit by her son to Fredericksburg in February of 1784. After being awarded the honors of the town, George responded by proclaiming Mary as "my reverend mother by whose maternal hand, early deprived of a father, I was led to manhood."

Five years later, President-elect Washington—en route from Mount Vernon to New York City for his inauguration—paid his last visit to his mother, four months before she died. It was reported that the two reunited and repaired their relationship. George Washington Parke Custis, the president's step-grandson and then adopted son, gave a moving account of Mary Ball Washington's last meeting with her son. He recalled:

"Immediately after the organization of the present Government, the Chief Magistrate [Washington] repaired to Fredericksburg to pay his humble duty to his mother, preparatory to his departure for New York. An affecting scene ensued. He told her I have come to bid you an affectionate farewell. So soon as the weight of public business which must necessarily attend the outset of a new Government can be disposed of, I shall hasten to Virginia, and—Here the matron interrupted with, And you will see me no more; my great age, and the disease which is fast approaching my vitals, warn me that I shall not be long in this world; I trust in God that I may be somewhat prepared for a better. But go, George, fulfill the high destinies which Heaven appears to have intended for you; go, my son, and may that Heaven's and a mother's blessing be with you always.'"

Custis went on to add that:

"The President was deeply affected. His head rested upon the shoulder of his parent, whose aged arm feebly, yet fondly, encircled his neck. That brow on which fame had wreathed the purest laurel

An Interview with Michael Aubrecht

Historian Michael Aubrecht has published multiple books on American's Civil War. However, he has a new blog titled "BLOG, or DIE" that focuses on the American Revolution. Aubrecht was kind enough to answer a few questions about the project.

Why did you start blogging about the American Revolution?

The title comes from the famous "Join, or Die" flag, based on the well-known political cartoon created by Benjamin Franklin and first published in his *Pennsylvania Gazette* on May 9, 1754. It is in the spirit of Franklin's call to action that this blog is dedicated. My focus deals specifically with the politics, rebellion, and military affairs that guided our nation's path toward securing liberty and freedom as well as how these events and their participants are remembered today.

You used to write exclusively about the Civil War. In your opinion, what makes the American Revolution more attractive and interesting to some history buffs than the Civil War?

It is completely unrealistic for me to believe that the Civil War will ever be completely removed from my life. In addition to my first five books dealing with that event, I also remain vice-chair of the National Civil War Life Foundation, copywriter for artist Mort Kunstler, and co-producer of the upcoming documentary, *The Angel of Marye's Heights*. That said, I found a renewed interest in the Revolution that completely redefined my career path and was shocked to find that I was in the minority among my fellow historians. This period of American history seems to have been neglected and perhaps that is what attracted me to it. Fortunately, there appears to be an evolving

Interview, Cont'd

interest in the Founding Fathers, and I think that the public's curiosity about the origins of our nation's birth is growing.

What has been the response to "BLOG, or DIE"?

I took a *big* chance by changing my focus, but thanks to the support of my readers, fellow historians and of course wonderful publications like *Patriots of the American Revolution*, people gave me a chance. The feedback has been great, and I have written some of my best features and delivered some of my most well-received talks to the largest audiences I've had to date. Professionally, I believe that I am being accepted as a more mature and serious historian.

What are some future topics you would like to cover on the blog?

I've written about some really neat topics to date including studies on race and remembrance at Monticello; the history of the Gadsden flag; Black Loyalists in New Brunswick; Jefferson's Statute of Religious Freedom; tar and feathering; Continental drummers; British uniforms; Washington's slaves; the Freemasons; and so on. But what I would love to do is write more personal pieces that examine the citizen soldiers of the day. The more I read about the amateur ranks of the Continental Army and the militias, the more I am amazed at what they accomplished. You had a volunteer force of farmers, printers, and blacksmiths going up against the finest trained and outfitted army in the world. And the volunteer force won! I also want to introduce my readers to some of the lesser-known historic sites in my area (Fredericksburg, Virginia) with hopes they will want to visit.

To read "BLOG, or DIE," please visit www.pinstripecpress.net/PPBlog

virtue ever gave to created man relaxed from its lofty bearing. That look which could have awed a Roman Senate in its Fabrician day was bent in filial tenderness upon the time-worn features of the aged matron. He wept. A thousand recollections crowded upon his mind, as memory, retracing scenes long passed, carried him back to the maternal mansion and the days of youth, where he beheld that mother, whose care, education and discipline caused him to reach the topmost height of laudable ambition. Yet, how were his glories forgotten while he gazed upon her whom, wasted by time and malady, he should part with to meet no more! Her predictions were but too true..."

Mary Ball Washington died from cancer at the age of 81 during her son's first year in office. She was buried at the Kenmore Plantation (then owned by Mary's daughter, Betty Washington Lewis). In 1833, a monument near her grave was dedicated to honor her. During the laying of the cornerstone, President Andrew Jackson said:

"Mary Washington acquired and maintained a wonderful ascendancy over those around her. This true characteristic of genius attended her through life, and she conferred upon her son that power of self-command which was one of the remarkable traits of her character. She conducted herself through this life with virtue and prudence worthy of the mother of the greatest hero that ever adorned the annals of history."

Unfortunately, this first marker (left incomplete due to the deaths of its sponsors) was destroyed during the Civil War, but another one was placed in 1893. It was formally dedicated by President Cleveland in May of 1894 and featured a simple inscription that paid tribute to what may be considered her greatest accomplishment: "Mary, the Mother of Washington."





The Kenmore Plantation

Library of Congress

Yet perhaps it was her beloved son, George, who most fittingly summed up the life of Mary Ball Washington when he said: “My mother was the most beautiful woman I ever saw. All I am I owe to my mother. I attribute all my success in life to the moral, intellectual, and physical education I received from her.”



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