



#4 1999

The Inquisitive Nature Of George Washington

The military and political writings and actions exhibited by George Washington provide us with a glimpse of his way of thinking in regard to those aspects of his career as the *Father Of Our Country*. The history of his military career, both during the French and Indian War and later during the American Revolutionary War, was well documented at the time, and is now available in numerous books. His political views and beliefs served as the blueprint by which the office of the President of the United States was established. Few citizens of the United States of America, unless they are affecting a *devil's advocate* stance, question the integrity, the leadership skills and the sense of honor exhibited by George Washington in the course of his public roles as general and president. For that reason, there is little point, other than for documentation purposes, to delve into those facets of the life of George Washington. Instead, for this third installment in honor of the Bicentennial of George Washington's death, I will discuss certain items of interest that pertain to the inquisitive nature of the man.

George Washington was a assiduous diarist; he kept journals from a very early age. He was also an inveterate saver of documents. That is very fortunate for us. We have been provided with a great wealth of material through which we may search in order to discover the personality of the gentleman farmer from Virginia.

George Washington received training in the art of surveying at the College of William and Mary. At the age of seventeen he was named to the position of surveyor of Culpeper County. His career as a surveyor took him over much of

the Virginia frontier. Through the course of his life, Washington surveyed approximately two hundred and twenty-six tracts of land in Culpeper and Augusta Counties, Virginia and Frederick County, Maryland. The tracts he surveyed contained a total of more than 84,000 acres. Between the date of his first survey, in 1747, and the last one during the year of his death, 1799, and because of his travels during the War and his presidency, Washington is believed to have traveled over, and seen, practically all of the colonies.

He was interested in all things scientific. On 13 February, 1764 he wrote an entry into his diary which stated that "*We have been curiously entertained of late with the description of an Engine lately constructed (I believe in Switzerland, and undergone some Improvements since in England) for taking up Trees by the Roots...*" On 03 September, 1787 he wrote that he had "*Visited a Machine at Doctr. Franklin's (called a Mangle) for pressing, in place of Ironing, clothes from the wafh. Which Machine from the facility with which it difpatches bufinefs is well calculated for Table cloths and such articles as have not pleats and irregular foldings and would be very useful in all large families.*" The actions of Winlaw's threshing machine captured his attention in January of 1790. On 22 January, 1790 Washington visited Baron de Polnitz to see the threshing machine in action. He wrote of the machine's attributes. "*Upon the whole, it appears to be an eafier, more expeditious, and much cleaner way of getting out grain than by the ufual mode of threfhing...*" In 1797 he attempted to build a threshing machine based upon plans he obtained

from William Booker; the result was not satisfactory to him, and it was discarded.

An attempt at invention that came to fruition, which is interesting for us to note is that of the "drill plough". Washington wrote an entry in his diary on 19 March, 1760 that he

had made "several efforts to make a plow after a new model ~ partly of my own contriving... (which) answered very well in the Field in the lower Pafture." The plow was described by Mr. Washington in a letter to John Chestnut, of Camden, South Carolina on 26 June 1791:

In conformity to my promise, when I saw you in Camden, I have selected one of my drill plows, which will be sent to Norfolk, whence it will be forwarded to Charlestown, directed to you, and addressed to the care of General Pinckney.

The original intention of the drill plough, on the principle of that which is sent to you, was to plant the grain or feed in rows, at equal distance to be determined by the space at which the holes were made from each other, their number for corn was only four. But in sowing grain and some other kinds of grain in drills the holes were increased to the number now in the barrel.

The application of this plough to the planting of indigo will, in my opinion, be productive of dispatch, regularity, and an abridgement of labour.

The continuity in which the indigo feed is sown, in the same row, will require an additional number of holes, the proportioning of which, and their size, in order that the feed may issue in proper and equal quantity, may occasion some waste at first; the loss of feed in determining them will be no object, compared with the advantages, when the just size and number of the holes are ascertained.

You will perceive that the plough which is sent, is drawn by a single tree; but they may likewise be made with shafts, the barrels may be extended to six feet, or to such length as to answer for any number of rows, that may be thought necessary, compartmented as to prevent an accumulation of the feed at either end. You will have occasion to prefix a ploughshare to each row of holes, and proportion your force of horses or oxen to the draft.

The footstock to which the truck wheel is fixed, and which may be raised depressed, is intended to regulate the depth of the plough's insertion into the ground.

The band which crosses the barrel in a certain direction, was placed, when the grain was to be deposited at equal distances, to prevent its emission at more holes than one; in sowing the indigo feed it will not be wanted.

The harrow will be proportioned to the plough or ploughs, and so constructed as effectually to cover the feed, without adding more than is unavoidable to the weight.

Thomas Jefferson received a letter from George Washington written on 26 September,

1785, in which he noted a project in which he had taken an interest in 1776. He stated:

I am sorry I cannot give you full information respecting Capt. Bufnals projects for the destruction of Shipping... Bufnel is a man of great Mechanical powers, fertile of invention, and master in execution. He came to me in 1776 recommended by Governor Trumbull (now dead) and other respectable characters who were profelites to his plan. Although I wanted faith myself, I furnished him with money, and other aids to carry it into execution. He laboured for sometime ineffectually, and though the advocates for his scheme continued sanguine he never did succeed. One accident or another always intervening. I then thought, and still think, that it was an effort of genius; but that a combination of too many things were requisite, to expect much success from the enterprise against an enemy, who are always upon guard.

That he had a Machine so contrived as to carry a man under water at any depth he chose, and for a considerable time and distance, with an apparatus charged with Powder which he could fasten to a Ships bottom or side and

give fire to in a given time (Sufft for him to retire) by means whereof a fhip could be blown up, or funk, are facts which I believe admit of little doubt; but then, where it was to operate againft an enemy, it is no eafy matter to get a perfon hardy enough to encounter the variety of dangers to which he muft be expofed. 1 from the novelty 2 from the difficulty of conducting the machine, and governing it under water on Acct. of the Currents, &ca. 3 the confequent uncertainty of hitting the object of deftination, without rifing frequently above water for frefh obfervation, wch., when near the Vefsel, would expofe the Adventurer to a difcovery, and to almoft certain death. To thefe caufes I always afcribed the non-performance of his plan, aas he wanted nothing that I could furnifh, to fecure the fucefs of it..

If the success of the submarine could not be accomplished in his lifetime, Washington was at least pleased that another maritime invention was indeed a success. He was interested in a mechanically powered boat which a Mr. Rumsey invented. In his journal on 06 September, 1784 he noted that he had been showed a model of a boat "for afcending rapid currents by mechanifm..." The boat's mechanism was not explained, but Washington noted that the powered boat would be useful on inland waterways where an effort was required to propel watercraft against the current. He also was a witness to the initial attempts being made to propel boats by steam. In November, 1785 he noted in his journal that: "In the evening (04 November) a Mr. Jno. Fitch came in to propofe a draft and model of a Machine for promoting Navigation, by means of a steam."

Navigation by way of the rivers and oceans was not the only means of transportation that interested George Washington. In 1793 the French aeronaut Jean Pierre Blanchard made the first hot air balloon ascent in the young country

of the United States of America. So excited by the idea of air travel, Washington awarded to the Frenchman a "passport". It stated that "Thefe are therefore to recommend to all citizens of the United States, and others, that in his pafsage, defcent, return or journeying elfewhere, they oppofe no hindrance or moleftation to the faid Mr. Blanchard..."

One final item shall be mentioned. In his cash memorandum book on 17 May, 1784, Washington wrote an entry that he had paid £1.13.p4 for "a cream machine for ice". That machine was no doubt an early example of an ice cream churn. It was a long held tradition that Dolly Madison had invented the dessert in the 1810s. Some historians claim that it was Thomas Jefferson who first brought the frozen dessert to the United States from France in 1789. The entry in Washington's memorandum book would indicate that he had enjoyed "iced" cream at least thirty years prior to Mrs. Madison's claim and five years prior to Mr. Jefferson's.

...Regarding The Death Of The President Of The United States Of America...

George Washington's presidency ended on 04 March, 1797. He returned to Mount Vernon, as he had in 1783 at the conclusion of the War, with hopes of settling down to the life of the *gentleman farmer*. It was a life that would entail managing the affairs of the farm and overseeing some thirty black labourers. The Mount Vernon Estate contained four farms which adjoined the "Mansion House Farm". In all, the Estate encompassed "1,207 acres of ploughable land; 879 of which, are in feven fields, nearly of a fize, and under good fences; 212 acres (in one enclofure) are, generally in a common grafs pafture; and 116 acres more, are

in five grafs lots, and an orchard (of the beft grafted fruit) all of them contiguous to the dwelling houfe and barn. On the premifes, are a comfortable dwelling houfe (in which the Overlooker refides) having three rooms below, and one or two above..."

On 12 December, 1799 Mr. Washington made his usual rounds on horseback to inspect the estate. He wrote in his diary that snow began to fall at about ten o'clock in the morning; that it soon turned to hail; and then it settled into a cold rain. When he arrived at the house, roughly five hours after he had gone out, his hair and neck were wet from his

exposure to the snow, hail and rain. By the next morning, there was about three inches of snow on the ground. Because of the depth of the snow and the fact that he had started to experience a bit of sore throat, he decided to remain in doors. The sore throat seemed to be a minor irritant; he read aloud from the newspapers during the evening of the 13th.

Shortly after midnight on the morning of 14 December, 1799 he awoke Martha and told her that his throat had become so sore that he could hardly speak. His breathing was difficult. He would not let his dear wife get up in the cold room to summon help, though. He waited until sunrise and then summoned his secretary, Tobias Lear and an overseer, whom he asked to be bled by. It was the prevailing belief at that time, that illnesses were the result of "bad humours" in the blood. The act of "bleeding" someone afflicted by illness was believed to allow those "bad humours" to flow out of the body.

A half a pint of blood was taken from a vein in Mr. Washington's arm by the overseer.

At about nine o'clock James Craik, the family's doctor, arrived. He diagnosed the illness as *inflammatory quinsy* and bled him once more. Two more doctors, who had been called for consultation arrived, and Mr. Washington was bled a third, and then a fourth time. By the afternoon, Mr. Washington thanked the doctors for their attention, but asked that they leave him. He told them "...let me go off quietly; I cannot laft long".

According to an account left by Mr. Lear, the ex-general and president remained clear of mind throughout the remainder of the day. At about ten o'clock that evening he motioned to Lear that he wished to speak to him, but was too weak to speak above a whisper. He told Lear "I am juft going. Have me decently buried, and do not let my body be put into the vault in lefs than two days after I am dead." He asked Mr. Lear if he understood him, and Lear answered "Yes". He said "Tis well" and in a moment withdrew his hand from Lear's and drew breath no more.

◊◊◊◊◊◊ 1999 Constitution Day Dinner ◊◊◊◊◊◊

The 1999 Constitution Day Dinner will be held on Saturday, September 11, 1999 at the Ramada Hotel. The Dinner will begin at 12:00noon, and consist of the following: Romaine Salad with Caesar Dressing; an 8oz Delmonico Steak; Baked Potato with Sour Cream and Chives; and Chocolate Cake with Peanut Butter Icing.

Following the dinner, William J. Haberstroh, former District Attorney of Blair County, will provide some comments relative to the subject of Constitution Day. We also plan to present several awards to deserving recipients at this dinner meeting.

The cost of the dinner will be \$12. As usual, you may either send a check to the Treasurer, Larry D. Smith at the following address: RR#1, Box 704-A, East Freedom, PA 16637 - or - you may choose to pay at the door. In any event, please respond to Larry Smith by Wednesday evening, September 8, with the number that plan to attend in your party so that we may inform the Ramada staff of the number to be in attendance. You may call Larry Smith at 224-6408 (office phone with answering machine) and leave a message, or call Bernard Smith at 695-5400

4th Quarterly Meeting ~ Blair County Chapter

The 4th Quarterly Meeting of the Blair County Chapter, SAR will be held on Saturday, October 23, 1999 at the Kings Family Restaurant in downtown Altoona. The meeting will begin at 12:00 noon. Please plan to attend.

A Reminder About The Blair County Chapter Website

The Blair County Chapter has a website on the Internet at:
<http://www.motherbedford.com/BlairSAR.htm> Please visit it and feel free to submit ideas for additional information you would like to see presented on it.