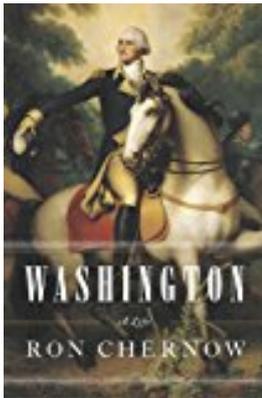


[PDF] Washington: A Life

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Description:

Ron Chernow Shares Surprising Facts About George Washington

--Washington was the only major founder who lacked a college education. John Adams went to Harvard, James Madison to Princeton, and Alexander Hamilton to Columbia, making Washington self-conscious about what he called his "defective education."

--Washington never had wooden teeth. He wore dentures that were made of either walrus or elephant ivory and were fitted with real human teeth. Over time, as the ivory got cracked and

stained, it resembled the grain of wood. Washington may have purchased some of his teeth from his own slaves.

--Washington had a strangely cool and distant relationship with his mother. During the Revolutionary War and her son's presidency, she never uttered a word of praise about him and she may even have been a Tory. No evidence exists that she ever visited George and Martha Washington at Mount Vernon. Late in the Revolutionary War, Mary Washington petitioned the Virginia legislature for financial relief, pleading poverty—and, by implication, neglect by her son. Washington, who had been extremely generous to his mother, was justly indignant.

--Even as a young man, Washington seemed to possess a magical immunity to bullets. In one early encounter in the French and Indian War, he absorbed four bullets in his coat and hat and had two horses shot from under him yet emerged unscathed. This led one Indian chief to predict that some higher power was guiding him to great events in the future.

--By age 30 Washington had survived smallpox, malaria, dysentery, and other diseases. Although he came from a family of short-lived men, he had an iron constitution and weathered many illnesses that would have killed a less robust man. He lived to the age of 67.

--While the Washingtons were childless—it has always been thought that George Washington was sterile—they presided over a household teeming with children. Martha had two children from her previous marriage and she and George later brought up two grandchildren as well, not to mention countless nieces and nephews.

--That Washington was childless proved a great boon to his career. Because he had no heirs, Americans didn't worry that he might be tempted to establish a hereditary monarchy. And many religious Americans believed that God had deliberately deprived Washington of children so that he might serve as Father of His Country.

--Though he tried hard to be fair and took excellent medical care of his slaves, Washington could be a severe master. His diaries reveal that during one of the worst cold snaps on record in Virginia—when Washington himself found it too cold to ride outside—he had his field slaves out draining swamps and performing other arduous tasks.

--For all her anxiety about being constantly in a battle zone, Martha Washington spent a full half of the Revolutionary War with her husband—a major act of courage that has largely gone unnoticed.

--Washington was obsessed with his personal appearance, which extended to his personal guard during the war. Despite wartime austerity and a constant shortage of soldiers, he demanded that all members of his personal guard be between 5'8" and 5'10"; a year later, he narrowed the range to 5'9" to 5'10."

--While Washington lost more battles than he won, he still ranks as a great general. His greatness lay less in his battlefield brilliance—he committed some major strategic blunders—than in his ability to hold his ragged army intact for more than eight years, keeping the flame of revolution alive.

--Washington ran his own spy network during the war and was often the only one privy to the full scope of secret operations against the British. He anticipated many techniques of modern espionage, including the use of misinformation and double agents.

--Washington tended his place in history with extreme care. Even amid wartime stringency, he got Congress to appropriate special funds for a full-time team of secretaries who spent two years copying his wartime papers into beautiful ledgers.

--For thirty years, Washington maintained an extraordinary relationship with his slave and personal manservant William Lee, who accompanied him throughout the Revolutionary War and later worked in the presidential mansion. Lee was freed upon Washington's death and given a special lifetime annuity.

--The battle of Yorktown proved the climactic battle of the revolution and the capstone of Washington's military career, but he initially opposed this Franco-American operation against the British—a fact he later found hard to admit.

--Self-conscious about his dental problems, Washington maintained an air of extreme secrecy when corresponding with his dentist and never used such incriminating words as 'teeth' or 'dentures.' By the time he became president, Washington had only a single tooth left—a lonely lower left bicuspid that held his dentures in place.

--Washington always displayed extremely ambivalence about his fame. Very often, when he was traveling, he would rise early to sneak out of a town or enter it before he could be escorted by local dignitaries. He felt beleaguered by the social demands of his own renown.

--At Mount Vernon, Washington functioned as his own architect—and an extremely original one at that. All of the major features that we associate with the house—the wide piazza and colonnade overlooking the Potomac, the steeple and the weathervane with the dove of peace—were personally designed by Washington himself.

--A master showman with a brilliant sense of political stagecraft, Washington would disembark from his coach when he was about to enter a town then mount a white parade horse for maximum effect. It is not coincidental that there are so many fine equestrian statues of him.

--Land-rich and cash-poor, Washington had to borrow money to attend his own inauguration in New York City in 1789. He then had to borrow money again when he moved back to Virginia after two terms as president. His public life took a terrible toll on his finances.

--Martha Washington was never happy as First Lady—a term not yet in use—and wrote with regret after just six months of the experience: "I think I am more like a state prisoner than anything else...And as I cannot do as I like, I am obstinate and stay home a great deal."

--When the temporary capital moved to Philadelphia in 1790, Washington brought six or seven slaves to the new presidential mansion. Under a Pennsylvania abolitionist law, slaves who stayed continuously in the state for six months were automatically free. To prevent this, Washington, secretly coached by his Attorney General, rotated his slaves in and out of the state without telling them the real reason for his actions.

--Washington nearly died twice during his first term in office, the first time from a tumor on his thigh that may have been from anthrax or an infection, the second time from pneumonia. Many associates blamed his sedentary life as president for the sudden decline in his formerly robust health and he began to exercise daily.

--Tired of the demands of public life, Washington never expected to serve even one term as president, much less two. He originally planned to serve for only a year or two, establish the legitimacy of the new government, then resign as president. Because of one crisis after another, however, he felt a hostage to the office and ended up serving two full terms. For all his success as president, Washington frequently felt trapped in the office.

--Exempt from attacks at the start of his presidency, Washington was viciously attacked in the press

by his second term. His opponents accused him of everything from being an inept general to wanting to establish a monarchy. At one point, he said that not a single day had gone by that he hadn't regretted staying on as president.

--Washington has the distinction of being the only president ever to lead an army in battle as commander-in-chief. During the Whiskey Rebellion of 1794, he personally journeyed to western Pennsylvania to take command of a large army raised to put down the protest against the excise tax on distilled spirits.

--Two of the favorite slaves of George and Martha Washington—Martha's personal servant, Ona Judge and their chef Hercules—escaped to freedom at the end of Washington's presidency. Washington employed the resources of the federal government to try to entrap Ona Judge in Portsmouth, New Hampshire and return her forcibly to Virginia. His efforts failed.

--Washington stands out as the only founder who freed his slaves, at least the 124 who were under his personal control. (He couldn't free the so-called 'dower slaves' who came with his marriage to Martha.) In his will, he stipulated that the action was to take effect only after Martha died so that she could still enjoy the income from those slaves.

--After her husband died, Martha grew terrified at the prospect that the 124 slaves scheduled to be freed after her death might try to speed up the timetable by killing her. Unnerved by the situation, she decided to free those slaves ahead of schedule only a year after her husband died.

--Like her husband, Martha Washington ended up with a deep dislike of Thomas Jefferson, whom she called "one of the most detestable of mankind." When Jefferson visited her at Mount Vernon before he became president, Martha said that it was the second worst day of her life—the first being the day her husband died.

(Photo of Ron Chernow © Nina Subin)

From Publishers Weekly In his introduction, veteran biographer Chernow is clear about his goals. Using the recent "explosion of research," he wants to render George Washington "real" and "credible," to replace "frosty respect" with "visceral appreciation." In many respects, Chernow succeeds. He gives us a Washington who starts with limited education and means and, through a remarkable combination of timely deaths, an incredible capacity for hard work, a shrewd marriage, astonishing physical hardiness and courage, a propensity for land speculation, and a gift for finding influential patrons, transforms himself into a soldier, well-to-do planter, local official, and eventually the only real choice to command the Continental army, preside over the Constitutional Convention, and serve as the first president. Chernow makes familiar scenes fresh (like the crossing of the Delaware) and expertly brings the provisional revolutionary and early Republican eras to life. Along the way, however, he mistakes "visceral" for ardent; while he never hides Washington's less than saintly moments or shirks the vexed question of slavery, he often seems to ignore the data he's collected. Examples of shady dealing are quickly followed by tales of Washington's unimpeachable ethics or impeccable political savvy. At times it feels as if Chernow, for all his careful research and talent for synthesis, is in the grip of a full-scale crush. The result is a good book that would have been great if better edited, and if Chernow had trusted that Washington's many merits, even when accompanied by his faults, would speak for themselves.

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