

# GEORGE WASHINGTON'S MOUNT ★ VERNON

## FACTS AND FALSEHOODS ABOUT GEORGE WASHINGTON

Did George Washington have wooden teeth?

- He had false teeth, but they were not made of wood. As a matter of fact, the materials used in his false teeth were probably more uncomfortable than wood. In one set of teeth, his dentist, Dr. John Greenwood, used a cow's tooth, one of Washington's teeth, hippopotamus ivory, metal and springs. They fit poorly and distorted the shape of his mouth.

Did George Washington chop down a cherry tree?

- Probably not. The story was invented by Parson Mason Weems who wrote a biography of George Washington shortly after Washington's death. Since so little is known about Washington's childhood, Weems invented several anecdotes about Washington's early life to illustrate the origins of the heroic qualities Washington exhibited as an adult. Introduced to countless schoolchildren as a moral tale in the McGuffey Reader textbook, the parable has become a persistent part of American mythology.

Did George Washington throw a silver dollar across the Potomac River?

- No. This myth is often told to demonstrate his strength. The Potomac River is over a mile wide and even George Washington was not that good an athlete! Moreover, there were no silver dollars when Washington was a young man. His step-grandson, George Washington Parke Custis, reported in his memoirs that Washington once threw a piece of slate "about the size and shape of a dollar" across the Rappahannock River near Fredericksburg, Virginia. The Rappahannock River at the site of the Washington family homestead today measures only 250 feet across, a substantial but perhaps not impossible distance to throw.

Did George Washington wear a wig?

- No. Even though wigs were fashionable, Washington kept his own hair, which he wore long and tied back in a queue, or ponytail. He did, however, powder his hair as was the custom of the time.

Is George Washington buried under the U.S. Capitol?

- No, although Congress built a vault under the Capitol building for this purpose. In his will, Washington specified that he wished to be buried at Mount Vernon and that a new tomb should be constructed. His heirs honored his wish, and the vault at the U.S. Capitol remains empty to this day.

How many children did George Washington have?

- None. George Washington had no children of his own, although he did help raise two of Martha's children from her first marriage and two of her grandchildren at Mount Vernon.

What college did George Washington attend?

- He did not attend college. The death of his father ended Washington's formal schooling, however he believed strongly in formal education. In his will, he left money and/or stocks to support three educational institutions.

Other than General, what job did George Washington's hold before he was president?

- Farmer. Washington, who believed that America should become a "granary to the world", sought to improve many aspects of farming. His advanced crop rotations, use of fertilizers, experimentation with crops, and innovative farm equipment made him one of the "pioneers" of modern agriculture.

### Did George Washington free his slaves?

- Yes. Washington's attitude toward slavery gradually changed as he grew older and especially as he fought for liberty in the American Revolution. In his will, he freed those slaves belonging to him (about 124) and his estate paid for the care of former Mount Vernon slaves for decades after his death. At least nine early presidents owned slaves, but only one - Washington - freed all of his slaves. The remaining slaves at Mount Vernon belonged to the estate of Mrs. Washington's first husband and were known as dower slaves. By law, Washington had no legal rights to free those individuals. They were eventually inherited by Mrs. Washington's descendants upon her death in 1802.

### How many votes did George Washington get in the first presidential election?

- Only 69. At that time, there was no popular vote for president, only the votes of the electoral college, which was made up of representatives from each state. The 69 votes Washington received, however, represented one vote from each elector - thereby making George Washington the only president in history to have been unanimously elected.

### Did George Washington live in the White House?

- No. George Washington was the only U.S. President who did not live in the White House, which was not completed until after his death. During his two terms as president, the capital of the United States was located first in New York and then in Philadelphia. George Washington played a large role, however, in the development of the new Federal City named after him, and in overseeing the design of both the Capitol Building and the White House.

### After winning the Revolutionary War, did George Washington visit England?

- No. Washington only visited one foreign country, Barbados in the West Indies, which he traveled to at the age of 19 with his older half-brother, Lawrence. They made the trip hoping that the warm climate would help improve Lawrence's failing health. Unfortunately, Lawrence died within a year.

## Why is Washington's birthday celebrated as "Presidents' Day"?

- Declared a federal holiday by the government in 1885, George Washington's Birthday has culturally morphed into "Presidents' Day." In 1968, the "Monday Holiday Law" was enacted by the United State Congress to provide for uniform annual observances of public holidays. George Washington's Birthday is slated to be recognized on the third Monday in February. Soon after the law was enacted in 1971, it was referred to as "Presidents' Day". Ever since, popular culture has perpetuated the myth that the holiday was designated also to honor Abraham Lincoln or presidential officeholders in general. Officially, however, the holiday has never changed.