



*GEORGE WASHINGTON,  
THE FARMER*

**E**VERYONE KNOWS THE RECORD OF George Washington as a patriot, soldier, and statesman. It is not, perhaps, so generally known that his greatest pride was to have been named also America's first scientific farmer. If George Washington were distinguished for nothing else, he would still merit a place of honor in American history for his far sighted efforts to conserve the soil and forests for future generations, and for establishing the occupation of farming in the front rank of honorable professions.

In the year 1783, after eight years of unselfish leadership of the American people in their struggle for independence, Washington laid aside his sword and took up the plow. One afternoon, shortly after his return to his farm in Virginia, he was seated at the desk in his study, reading a detailed report of his crops. His overseer, John Alton, who had prepared the report, was watching him anxiously. . . .

GENERAL WASHINGTON: The entire corn crop destroyed by drought and chinch bugs . . . the tobacco dropping sharply in quality each year. . . .

JOHN ALTON: The report is discouraging, General Washington. I am sorry.

GENERAL WASHINGTON: Do not think I censure you, John. But I shall hold *myself* to blame if I don't take steps to remedy matters—at once!

JOHN ALTON: Excuse me, General, but even you can't do anything to improve on nature! When the drought comes, the corn is ruined—and as for tobacco—well, all the folks in Virginia know what tobacco does to the soil!

GENERAL WASHINGTON: Yes. Every planter knows that growing tobacco depletes the soil, yet none of us has done anything about it!

JOHN ALTON: Nothing to do but what we all do, General Washington! When the soil's worn out, till fresh fields in the wilderness. . . .

WILLIAM: (*Negro servant—at the door*) Excuse me, Marse George!

GENERAL WASHINGTON: Yes, William?

WILLIAM: Governor Randolph done come. He's talkin' wid Mis' Martha in de long room!

GENERAL WASHINGTON: Thank you, William. Will you ask him to come in here? Ask Mistress Martha to come too, if she wishes.

WILLIAM: Yassuh, Marse George.

JOHN ALTON: I'll be getting back to the farm, General. I'm sorry the report is so discouraging.

GENERAL WASHINGTON: It's not your fault, John. You have worked faithfully and well during these many years that I've been away. And your report will be helpful in making future plans. I'll talk with you at greater length in a few days.

JOHN ALTON: Thank you, General. And I might say, we're happy to have you back on the farm. Good day, sir.

WILLIAM: (*announcing*) Governor Randolph of Virginia!

GENERAL WASHINGTON: Randolph! Welcome to Mount Vernon!

GOVERNOR RANDOLPH: (*approaching*) I am happy to see you and Mistress Washington again, General Washington!

MARTHA WASHINGTON: I have tried to persuade Governor Randolph to stay with us overnight,

George, but he declares he must return to Alexandria before sundown!

GENERAL WASHINGTON: You must think poorly of our hospitality, Randolph.

GOVERNOR RANDOLPH: I'd like naught better than to remain, General, but the Assembly is in session, and I must return. Frankly, I have come on state business today. I've come to plead with you to accept those two blocks of stock. Surely you have reconsidered?

GENERAL WASHINGTON: I'm sorry, Randolph. I cannot accept such a gift.

GOVERNOR RANDOLPH: With the most generous of motives, the Virginia Assembly voted to give you blocks of stock in the Potomac and James River Companies. Your refusal to accept, places us in an embarrassing predicament. The members will be offended.

GENERAL WASHINGTON: I am deeply grateful to them, Randolph, but such a gift savors too much of a pension! I am capable of supporting myself and my family! I'd lose all self-respect if I accepted your generous gift.

GOVERNOR RANDOLPH: But, General Washington—this is in no sense a pension! It means only that Virginia is proud of you.

GENERAL WASHINGTON: Randolph, I refused payment from the federal government for my war-time services . . .

GOVERNOR RANDOLPH: Everyone in America knows that, General! They know too that you lost most of your fortune . . . they know you have no dependable source of income . . . no profession. . . .

GENERAL WASHINGTON: No *profession*, did you say, Governor Randolph?

MARTHA WASHINGTON: (*laughing*) Take care, Governor! You have offended my husband!

GOVERNOR RANDOLPH: I meant no offense, General. But it is an evident fact that the bulk of your fortune is gone . . . you are neither a doctor nor a lawyer. . . .

GENERAL WASHINGTON: I may not be a doctor or lawyer, Randolph, but I do have a profession.

GOVERNOR RANDOLPH: A profession?

GENERAL WASHINGTON: And I intend to make it the most honorable profession in this land! I am a farmer, Governor, and proud of it!

GOVERNOR RANDOLPH: Farming—a profession? But it is so uncertain! One year crops prosper and the next they fail!

GENERAL WASHINGTON: I intend to spend the rest of my life learning why they prosper and why they fail! I plan to earn a living here on this plantation without a pension from the government!

GOVERNOR RANDOLPH: It appears to me, General, you have set yourself a more serious task than that of leading our American troops to victory!

GENERAL WASHINGTON: Successful farming is a

serious task, Randolph, and it's of vital importance to the future of this country! The future of our country! Governor Randolph! I have changed my mind! I'll accept those shares of stock!

MARTHA WASHINGTON: You accept?

GOVERNOR RANDOLPH: Ah! I hoped you would be persuaded! They will assure you an excellent income, General!

GENERAL WASHINGTON: I'll accept on one condition, Randolph!

GOVERNOR RANDOLPH: What is that?

GENERAL WASHINGTON: On the understanding that every penny of profit shall go for some public purpose—say education.

GOVERNOR RANDOLPH: What? You mean . . . you won't make use of the income?

GENERAL WASHINGTON: It is my earnest wish that our future citizens shall have better opportunities for education than I had . . . and their education can be in agricultural matters as well as cultural! To what better use, could the Virginia Assembly put those shares of stock?

GOVERNOR RANDOLPH: I have often heard you speak of a national university, General Washington! There is no doubt that the Assembly will hail your generous decision with approval!

George Washington deeded those shares of stock to the cause of public education. They were given to

Liberty Hall Academy in Rockbridge County—an institution which later became Washington and Lee University!

Meanwhile Washington continued to face the serious problem of establishing his three-thousand acre plantation on a paying basis. He corresponded with noted agriculturists in England, and at length, he arrived at a number of startling and far reaching decisions, which he ordered his overseers to put into effect at once.

A few days after these drastic orders had been issued, Dr. James Craik, Washington's personal physician and friend, was seated on the verandah at Mount Vernon, when John Alton, Washington's overseer, approached. . . .

JOHN ALTON: Doctor Craik, may I have a word in private with you? I'm John Alton overseer of the Neck plantation.

DOCTOR CRAIK: How do you do, Alton? Do you mean your words are not for General Washington's ears?

JOHN ALTON: Yes, sir. That's just what I do mean, sir. The other overseers asked me to speak for them, too.

DOCTOR CRAIK: What's this? Rebellion?

JOHN ALTON: No, sir. Naught of that sort. We—we wish to ask you, Doctor, to speak to General Washington to save him from himself!

DOCTOR CRAIK: To save him? Speak up, man! What does this mean?

JOHN ALTON: It's them wild ideas he come back from the war with, sir.

DOCTOR CRAIK: Wild ideas? Take care!

JOHN ALTON: Every man on the plantation worships General Washington. We all know that for eight years he worked day and night fighting the British . . . and the men who half froze to death at Valley Forge say that one winter alone was enough to make any man crazy!

DOCTOR CRAIK: If you're implying that General Washington is crazy . . . !

JOHN ALTON: Not exactly, sir . . . but you're his doctor . . . you were with him in the regiment . . . you could reason with him about these wild schemes for farming. . . .

DOCTOR CRAIK: Wild schemes?

JOHN ALTON: Doctor Craik, only three days ago, he gave orders to stop planting tobacco altogether!

DOCTOR CRAIK: Well, what of it? I'm not a farmer. I don't understand.

JOHN ALTON: Tobacco and corn are Virginia's only money crops, Doctor Craik. The whole world knows General Washington came back from the war a poor man . . . he needs money . . . he needs to make his living on his plantation . . . but instead of planting more tobacco . . . he's giving it up!

DOCTOR CRAIK: He must have good reasons!

JOHN ALTON: He says tobacco ruins the soil! 'Tis true, but he has three thousand acres here . . . and many more not under cultivation. Why should he worry about wasting land? He says in fifty or a hundred years the soil at Mount Vernon will be worthless.

DOCTOR CRAIK: In fifty or a hundred years?

JOHN ALTON: Yes, sir. He could make money with tobacco today, but he worries about something that might happen in fifty years, when we'll all be dead!

DOCTOR CRAIK: What has he ordered you to plant in place of tobacco?

JOHN ALTON: Outlandish things that grow in all the countries of the world! Siberian wheat—buckwheat—seeds from China—Irish potatoes—carrots—peas—and that ain't all! He's planning to waste hundreds of acres in grasslands!

DOCTOR CRAIK: Grassland . . . for cattle?

JOHN ALTON: Yes, sir. For cattle, and to make the soil richer! He says cattle need good pastures, though in my opinion, they've always done well enough on weeds!

DOCTOR CRAIK: Alton! General Washington has always spoken of you as one of his most faithful assistants. He has implicit confidence in you!

JOHN ALTON: I'm proud of his trust in me, Doctor. That's why I came to you today. I hate to see

him try out them wild schemes and die a poor man. I want to save him!

DOCTOR CRAIK: Because you are a loyal servant to General Washington, I'll say nothing to him of this conversation. But I'm ashamed of you!

JOHN ALTON: Ashamed of me, Doctor?

DOCTOR CRAIK: Yes. There's only one way you can repay his confidence in you . . .

JOHN ALTON: What's that, sir?

DOCTOR CRAIK: By having equal faith in him! During the war, there were many men who criticized him . . . there were many who said his military tactics would lead the country to certain defeat . . . but he triumphed, did he not?

JOHN ALTON: Of course, sir! The greatest General that ever lived!

DOCTOR CRAIK: And while I know little of farming, I'll wager my last cent his ideas and experiments in agriculture will be equally successful! I'll warrant you'll be ashamed of having doubted him for a moment! In five years, or less, you'll be grateful to me for not having told General Washington of your lack of confidence in his judgment!

JOHN ALTON: I . . . I didn't think of it that way, sir!

DOCTOR CRAIK: If I were you, I'd get back to the farm and start planting that Siberian wheat!

George Washington was one of the first men in

the South to realize that the single crop system of farming was depleting the soil and rendering it useless for future generations. Despite the horrified protests of his neighbors, he virtually abandoned the production of Virginia's money crop—tobacco. He was one of the first converts to the theory of rotation of crops, and one of the first to experiment with fertilizers. But two short years after his return home, he was called to Philadelphia to preside over the constitutional convention.

In July of the year 1787, during a recess of the convention, he proposed to his friend, Gouverneur Morris, a trip to Valley Forge. Morris took along his fishing rod, but Washington's interest was not in trout. On their drive through the beautiful Pennsylvania countryside, he had observed a well cultivated farm, and leaving Gouverneur Morris beside a trout stream, he turned and rode back toward this farm. He dismounted and hailed a lad who was sowing seed close to the road. . . .

GENERAL WASHINGTON: Can you spare a few minutes, my boy? I'd like to ask some questions about farming!

BOY: Questions, sir?

GENERAL WASHINGTON: Yes. Do you cultivate buckwheat?

BOY: Aye, sir. Only last week we finished sowing the seed.

GENERAL WASHINGTON: Ah! That interests me. I am a farmer, too, and I've been anxious to learn the proper season for sowing buckwheat.

BOY: My father thinks you get best results from sowing from the tenth to twentieth of July!

GENERAL WASHINGTON: I'll remember that. Do you plow the fields more than once?

BOY: Oh yes, sir. Two plowings at the very least—and the same number of harrowings!

GENERAL WASHINGTON: And may I ask what is your average crop to the acre?

BOY: Twenty-five bushels, sir.

GENERAL WASHINGTON: Twenty-five? You have been far more successful than I! Two plowings, you say? And how much seed do you allow to an acre?

BOY: Three pecks to the acre, sir.

GENERAL WASHINGTON: What fertilizer do you use?

BOY: We're getting good results with plaster of paris, sir.

GENERAL WASHINGTON: I'm glad to hear that! Two years ago, I began to experiment with plaster of paris. I'm the only man in my neighborhood who uses it, but I'm convinced it's excellent. When I return home, I shall tell my neighbors about your fine farm, and recommend that they follow your methods.

BOY: Your home isn't in Pennsylvania, is it, sir?

GENERAL WASHINGTON: No, I come from Virginia. I am deeply grateful to you, my boy. I should

feel honored if you and your father would visit my plantation some day. I live on the Potomac.

BOY: Thank you, sir. Doubtless I'll never journey so far, though. We are kept busy from sun-up to nightfall on the farm.

GENERAL WASHINGTON: I know that only too well. I, too, rise at sun-up. There are not enough hours in the day when one is a farmer.

GOUVERNEUR MORRIS: (*approaching on horse back*) General Washington! You gave me a fright! I missed you and feared an accident!

GENERAL WASHINGTON: Forgive me, Morris. You were so deeply engrossed in fishing I did not think to tell you I was coming to seek advice of this lad.

BOY: General Washington! Are you truly—General Washington? Forgive me—I didn't know!

GENERAL WASHINGTON: I *was* General Washington, my boy. I am a plain farmer now . . . to the end of my days, I hope! I feel privileged to have talked with you. This is the finest farm I have ever seen!

BOY: Oh thank you, General.

GENERAL WASHINGTON: If ever you come to Virginia, I shall attempt to repay your kindness. And I'd like to show you my deep plow—it is my own invention. I am truly proud of that accomplishment! Good day, my boy, and thank you.

BOY: Good day, General Washington!

(shouting hysterically as Washington and Morris ride away) Father! Father!

FATHER: (from a distance) What is it, John?

BOY: Father! General George Washington was here!

FATHER: General Washington?

BOY: (breathlessly) Aye! He talked with me and he invited us to visit him at Mount Vernon and he said this is the finest farm he has ever seen. To think it was General Washington and I talked to him as one would talk to—to *any* neighbor!

It was not until September of that year 1787 that the Constitutional Convention was concluded. Once again, George Washington returned to his farm in Virginia, convinced that this time he would never leave. Another year passed—a year in which he arose before the sun and worked unceasingly to improve the condition of his crops and to perfect the breed of his cattle. In 1788, his close friend, James Madison, came to visit him at Mount Vernon. Washington welcomed him warmly, and discussed jubilantly the condition of his plantation. . . .

GENERAL WASHINGTON: Tomorrow you must ride with me to inspect my five farms, Madison.

JAMES MADISON: With pleasure, sir.

GENERAL WASHINGTON: There's no finer wheat grown in Virginia than mine! And my grist mill is so

successful that neighbors are bringing their wheat here to be ground!

JAMES MADISON: Indeed!

GENERAL WASHINGTON: And I want you to see my new farm implements from England! They're bringing excellent results! Forgive me for boasting, Madison, but my overseers thought I was crazy when I gave up growing tobacco and experimented with new methods and with a variety of crops!

JAMES MADISON: I have never known a man so engrossed in farming!

GENERAL WASHINGTON: It's the most satisfying occupation in the world! It is honorable, amusing, and with judicious management, profitable!

JAMES MADISON: I had always thought it a precarious business!

GENERAL WASHINGTON: It need not be! I'll die content if I feel I have bequeathed a few constructive ideas to the future farmers of America!

JAMES MADISON: You are truly content, then, to remain a private citizen—a farmer?

GENERAL WASHINGTON: No man has ever been more sincere than I in saying that he has turned his back on public life forever. I served my country to the best of my ability during the war—but now, at my time of life, I feel that my greatest service is as a farmer.

JAMES MADISON: There are men who would dispute that!



GENERAL WASHINGTON: I am proving to my neighbors that the single crop system is ruinous—that fertilizer is essential to the soil—that young trees must be planted to replace those which have been cut down—that cattle need good pastureland! Such victories are less spectacular than those of war—but they are equally important to our nation!

JAMES MADISON: General Washington, you make it difficult for me to tell you why I am here. I scarcely know how to broach the subject.

GENERAL WASHINGTON: Have you brought bad news, Madison?

JAMES MADISON: It is news which will disturb you, I fear.

GENERAL WASHINGTON: Best tell me at once.

JAMES MADISON: I bring an invitation—almost a command—to leave your farm for a third time!

GENERAL WASHINGTON: To leave—at my time of life?

JAMES MADISON: Alexander Hamilton and I have spent these past weeks sounding public opinion. I bring you the results of our inquiries.

GENERAL WASHINGTON: Yes?

JAMES MADISON: We find there is only one man whom the American people will accept as their first president—only one man who is loved and respected by old and young—rich and poor—farmer and merchant—that man, General Washington, is you!

GENERAL WASHINGTON: Are you sure of this,

Madison? You are one of my closest friends—you may be prejudiced. . . .

JAMES MADISON: I am such a friend of yours, I'd never mention the matter if there were any doubt in my mind. You are indispensable. Upon your decision, to a great degree, rests the future of our country. You will not refuse to accept the responsibility?

GENERAL WASHINGTON: (*slowly*) No man in the world could place personal preference above public duty.

JAMES MADISON: Hamilton said that would be your decision. Few men will ever know the personal sacrifice you are making. And yet—to you, have been given honors which rarely fall to the lot of one man. You are a man of destiny, Washington—and yet, I know you speak the truth—when you say you would have preferred to live and die a simple farmer!

When the votes of the electors had been counted on April 6, 1789, it was found that George Washington had unanimously been elected as president of the United States.

On April 30, 1789, the streets of New York City were thronged with spectators. General Washington had just been escorted in triumphal procession from his house on Cherry Street to Federal Hall to take the oath of office. On the balcony of his house di-

rectly opposite Federal Hall, Alexander Hamilton, soon to be the first Secretary of the Treasury, stood with several guests. . . .

FIRST GUEST: Isn't it exciting, Colonel Hamilton? General Washington must be the happiest man in the world today!

ALEXANDER HAMILTON: Happiest, Madame?

FIRST GUEST: Yet he entered Federal Hall so solemnly. His eyes looked almost sad! Doubtless he feels the weight of responsibility.

ALEXANDER HAMILTON: He is America's Cincinnatus.

SECOND GUEST: Cincinnatus? Who is that, Colonel Hamilton? Your words are so often above the heads of us poor ladies!

ALEXANDER HAMILTON: Cincinnatus, my dear young lady, was a farmer-hero of ancient Rome—who was twice called from his plow to serve his country! According to the legend, he defeated the enemy in a single day—entered Rome in triumph with large spoils, and that very night returned to his farm.

FIRST GUEST: But I don't understand. Do you mean that General Washington would prefer to remain on his farm?

SECOND GUEST: General Washington a farmer? You are joking, Colonel Hamilton. He's a soldier and statesman!

ALEXANDER HAMILTON: If you had seen General Washington's last letter to me before the electoral vote was taken, you would not say I am joking!

FIRST GUEST: But there's not a man in America who would not exchange places with him today! The first President of the United States! Why, my husband says his every word—his every official act will set an example for future presidents to follow!

SECOND GUEST: Why, yes! Anyone can be a farmer!

ALEXANDER HAMILTON: But General Washington has unusual ideas about farming. He calls it the noblest of all professions and insists it requires constant study and experiment. I tell you, he is setting one precedent here today that I pray God all future Americans will follow!

FIRST GUEST: You are unusually solemn, Colonel Hamilton. What do you mean?

ALEXANDER HAMILTON: It is a precedent which will go far toward making this the greatest country on earth! It's the deed of a true patriot—he is placing public duty before all personal ambition!

SECOND GUEST: You mean that he honestly does not want the honor of being first President of the United States?

ALEXANDER HAMILTON: He would have declined had there been one other man whom the people would have accepted as President!

FIRST GUEST: Really? Then I sympathize with

him—yet there is no other man I could wish to see take the oath of office today!

SECOND GUEST: Here comes Chancellor Livingston out to the balcony. Will he administer the oath now, Colonel Hamilton?

ALEXANDER HAMILTON: I presume so. It was Washington's desire that the oath be administered in full view of all the people!

FIRST GUEST: There he is! I am so excited!

SECOND GUEST: I wonder if General Washington is as nervous as I am!

FIRST GUEST: Hush! The Chancellor is about to speak! See! Mr. Otis holds the Bible!

CHANCELLOR LIVINGSTON: (*in loud voice*) You do solemnly swear that you will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States and will, to the best of your ability, preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States?

GENERAL WASHINGTON: (*firmly*) I, George Washington, do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States and will, to the best of my ability, preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States. . . . So help me God!

CHANCELLOR LIVINGSTON: Long live George Washington, President of the United States!

Four years later, as all the world knows, George Washington accepted a second term of office because

of insistent public demand, but he was firm in refusing a third term. In the year 1797, he returned to his beloved Mount Vernon where he passed the last two remaining years of his life. In his final message to Congress he recommended the establishment of a federal department of agriculture as being of vital importance to the nation. Like Cincinnatus, warrior-hero of ancient Rome, he performed his duties to the state cheerfully and without complaint, but the first and true love of his life remained his farm on the Potomac. In the words of Light-Horse Harry Lee, he was "first in war—first in peace—first in the hearts of his countrymen." He was also one of America's first scientific farmers.