

George Washington

First U.S. President, Commander

By Gilbert Stuart

George Washington was the first president of the United States, Commanding General during the American Revolution and remains as one of the most influential and famous figures in American history. His contribution extends far beyond perhaps any other in the history of the United States. He was involved twice in Germantown's contribution to American history. In 1777 during the Revolution he led the American Army in the Battle of Germantown. In 1793 to escape the Yellow Fever Epidemic, the capitol was moved from Philadelphia to Germantown. In the house of Germantown resident Colonel Franks, Washington lived and met with his cabinet, including Thomas Jefferson, Edmund Randolph, and Alexander Hamilton. Washington played an important role and his contributions are crucial to understanding Germantown's place in American history.

Washington was born in Westmoreland County Virginia on February 22, 1732. His father was a wealthy farmer. Washington was schooled at home, and at age 17 began his first job as surveyor of Culpeper County, Va. In 1752, he inherited the family estate of Mount Vernon, which would be his beloved home throughout the rest of his life. Washington was appointed adjunct of the southern district of Virginia, and given the rank of Major. He hoped to join the British Army, some day, and fought in the French and Indian War. During the War, Washington proved his great ability as a commander. In 1758 the French were defeated. Despite his military success, Washington gave up his commission and became a farmer. He married Martha Dandridge Custis, a wealthy widow.

By 1774, however, Washington had become a key supporter of the colonial cause and was elected to the First Continental Congress. The next year, the Second Continental Congress voted Washington to be the commander of their army, and Washington's military career was born anew. He led the Continental Army against the mighty British Army as they began their fight for independence.

Revolution

Washington led his army against the British and their commander Sir William Howe. The "shot heard around the world" was fired at Lexington in 1774 and the War began. The Battle of Bunker Hill gave the Americans great confidence, soon challenged by the mighty British Army on Long Island, Harlem Heights, and White Plains, New York. Washington retreated to Manhattan and bought some time. He crossed the Delaware and found victory against the British in Trenton, New Jersey and later in Princeton. Washington chased the British back to New York and Washington went into winter quarters in Morristown, New Jersey. Howe's army landed at Head of Elk and moved toward Philadelphia. The British triumphed at Brandywine, and Washington moved his troops to protect Philadelphia. The British took Germantown and camped there, awaiting the Americans. Washington formulated his plan and his troops in for the attack...

The Battle of Germantown

On October 2nd, Washington conceived a bold plan of attack on Howe's 9,000 troop garrison stationed in Germantown. It called for the simultaneous advance of four different units of troops — moving by night. At dawn, the four columns were to converge not far from General Howe's headquarters and catch the British by surprise. The morning started well for the Americans who had the British retreating. But Washington's plan went astray when one of his four columns lost its bearings in a dense fog and thick smoke. Others columns failed to coordinate effectively. The British defense was particularly strong at a Germantown mansion named Cliveden where dozens of soldiers had taken refuge. Valuable time was lost while the Americans under Henry Knox bombarded the house. Those inside did not surrender because they feared that Anthony Wayne's men, still furious over the Paoli Massacre, would kill them anyway. In the end, bad luck and poor timing forced Washington to retreat to Whitemarsh with the British in pursuit. The Battle was an American defeat but it served to boost morale and self-confidence. They believed the defeat was the result of bad luck, not poor tactics. The Americans suffered 152 losses, 521 wounded, and over 400 captured. The British casualties numbered 537 plus 14 captured.

End of the War

The British took Philadelphia and the Americans camped for the winter at Valley Forge. There they regrouped and received training by several skilled Europeans. They emerged from Valley Forge with new determination and a much improved army, militarily. Further, in 1778, France signed a treaty with the Americans, and began supplying supplies and naval assistance. The now strong Americans and the powerful French Navy clashed with the British

at Yorktown. There the British surrendered and the Treaty of Paris was signed on September 3, 1783. The War was over and the United States of America was born.

After the War

Washington resigned as commander and retired to his estate at Mount Vernon. The new United States adopted the Articles of Confederation, but its founders realized the necessity to draft a new document as their Constitution. A convention was held and Washington presided and was very involved in the process. After much heated debate, on several occasions almost forcing the convention to be adjourned, the delegates ratified the United States Constitution. Washington was elected president of the United States on February 4, 1789. John Adams of Massachusetts was elected vice president. In April Washington took the oath of office in New York City, where the seat of government was still provisionally maintained. Washington supported adding a Bill of Rights to the original Constitution to specify the rights of individual citizens, but he opposed attempts to eliminate Congress's power to levy taxes and to regulate commerce with foreign nations and among the states. To Washington these provisions formed the basis of fiscal stability and solid national credit. He supported Alexander Hamilton's proposal for a national bank, and appointed Hamilton to his cabinet, along with Thomas Jefferson, Edmund Randolph and Henry Knox. Washington was very popular and served a second term in 1792.

The Germantown White House

In 1793, the Yellow Fever Epidemic struck hard in the capitol of Philadelphia. In November of that year, Washington and his cabinet removed to Germantown, which became the capitol until the epidemic was over. Washington stayed in the house of Colonel Franks, which became the Germantown White House. There he met with his cabinet and conducted business. Washington returned to Franks' House a year later and vacationed there with his wife.

Later Years

Washington decided to declare neutrality when France declared war on Britain, Spain and Netherlands. Edmund Randolph succeeded Jefferson as Secretary of State. The Whiskey Rebellion broke out in Western Pennsylvania, but was put down by New Jersey, Maryland, and Virginia militias. After this event, Washington saw the need for a standing army. Washington sent Chief Justice John Jay to make a treaty with Britain, providing assurance against another war breaking out. In 1796, Washington declared that he would not serve a third term. He attended the inauguration of John Adams then retired to Mount Vernon. On December 14, 1799 Washington awoke with an inflamed throat. His condition worsened, despite the doctor's efforts, and Washington died at 11:00 that night.