

Teacher Development

George Washington, Pioneer Farmer

Oklahoma History Center, Education Department

This document explores George Washington's many roles:

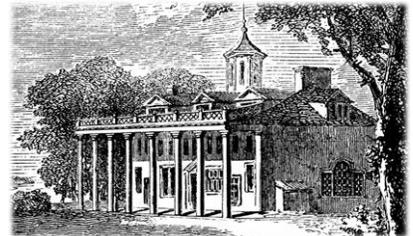
- Heir
- Pioneer
- Scientist
- Innovator
- Businessman
- Slave owner
- Soil conservationist
- Agricultural patriot
- Entrepreneur

Heir

George Washington was an important part of our history because of his personal qualities, but he might not have had the effect on American history if he had not inherited and married into land and slaves.

At age eleven Washington inherited ten slaves when his father died. At age twenty-seven, after inheriting Mount Vernon from his half-brother, he married Martha Custis, a very wealthy widow.

She brought with her 84 slaves and an estate of £30,000, which was a great deal of money. At the time Washington inherited Mount Vernon, it was an estate of 3,000 acres. With his inheritances and Martha's wealth, Washington had opportunities to exhibit his personal qualities and rise to a position of influence.



Pioneer

Washington tried ideas and methods in agriculture that were new and different. Some of the most important and fundamental aspects of American agriculture were first developed by George Washington.

Scientist

The scientific method that is so familiar today was being used by Washington in the eighteenth century. Washington was a great inquirer. He read published works and had



Test garden at Mount Vernon

intentional, meaningful discussions with others. Although Washington did not create the scientific method, he used it when others were prone to traditional methods, regardless of their efficacy.

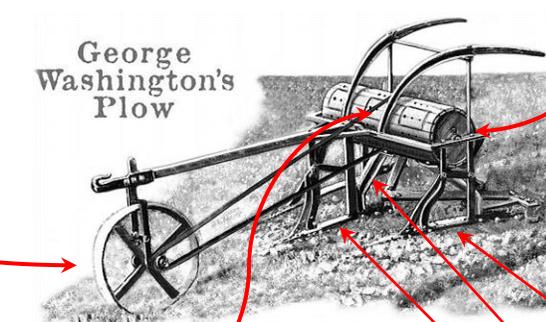
Washington was not satisfied with adhering to agricultural traditions. He was always looking for better ways to get things done. He was not afraid to admit that there could be a better way, and he used rigorous tests to find what methods were the most effective. That is, he used scientific methods.

Innovator

Three examples of Washington's accomplishments in innovation are the barrel plow, the sixteen-sided barn, and the introduction of the mule. He watched workers in the field planting seeds. What he saw was several workers each using a different tool. He thought that it would be better to accomplish the task with just one worker using one tool that would plow, smooth the planting bed, drop the seeds, and cover them in one pass. Using his own ideas and tools he built the barrel plow, which helped to complete multiple steps with only one worker with one tool.

A mule or a horse pulled the barrel plow.

As the mule pulled the plow, the wheel turned. The rotation of the wheel turned the belt that was attached to its hub.



The belt went over and around the barrel which held the seeds. As the belt turned, the barrel rotated.

The barrel had holes in it, and as it rotated, seeds fell through the holes and into the channels that carried them to the furrow below.

Three plow blades cut three furrows into the soil.

He designed the sixteen-sided barn to solve several problems. Before wheat can be used it has to be removed from the stalk in a process called threshing. Historically, wheat had been threshed outdoors. That method exposed the grain to dirt, wind, moisture, and theft. Washington moved the whole operation indoors into a barn that he designed. The barn had to be circular, and a sixteen-sided barn is nearly circular. The barn had



he was eleven years old. When he died in 1799, there were 317 slaves at Mount Vernon, but he personally owned only 124. The other 193 slaves belonged to his wife's estate.

The question is often raised about Washington's feelings on the subject of slavery. After all, the principles of the American Revolution and the American government do not seem to support the idea that it is correct for one American to own another. We know today that he was conflicted about slavery. Late in life, he felt that slavery was morally wrong and that it was not good for the nation. However, he was a businessman first and foremost, and he did not allow ideals to force his hand. Because of that, he did not free his slaves even though they had become a financial burden by 1799.

Washington was neither particularly good nor particularly bad to his slaves. As a businessman he expected the slaves to be very productive. If slaves ran away, he made every effort to have them returned. He provided them with food, clothing, and lodging, although those provisions were considered meager by some observers. He did not allow slaves to own dogs because the dogs could warn the slaves of surprise visits by supervisors.



The slaves who worked in the mansion lived here

On the other hand, he allowed slaves to marry and did not break up slave families. He allowed them to hunt, fish, and farm on his property during their free time. He paid them when he needed goods that they had produced for their own use. He allowed some slaves to go into town and sell goods that they had produced and to keep the money.

Soil Conservationist

Like other Virginia farmers, Washington produced tobacco because it could be sold for cash or traded for other goods. However, there were two costs to tobacco production. The first problem was that the tobacco plant pulls nutrients out of the soil. Tobacco takes so many of the nutrients out of the soil that within a few years, there is very little for a tobacco plant or any other plant to live on. Because nothing will grow, the soil washes away. At that point, the planter usually moved to another area where the soil was still rich in nutrients. Washington knew that a planter can't just keep abandoning a plot of exhausted soil and doing the same thing somewhere else, so he did something new. He quit raising tobacco, and he



started putting natural supplements on his fields in order to replace nutrients and keep the soil fertile.

Symbol Key For Crop Rotation

				
Manure	Clover	Barley	Pasture	Oats

					
Pulse: beans, peas	Corn	Potatoes	Rye	Wheat	Buckwheat

Number of the fields	1797	1798	1799	1800	1801	1802
1.	 and 	 and 		 or  and 	 or 	 and 
2.	 and 	 and 	 and 		 or  and 	 or 
3.	 or 	 and 	 and 	 and 		 or  and 
4.	 or  and 	 or 	 and 	 and 	 and 	

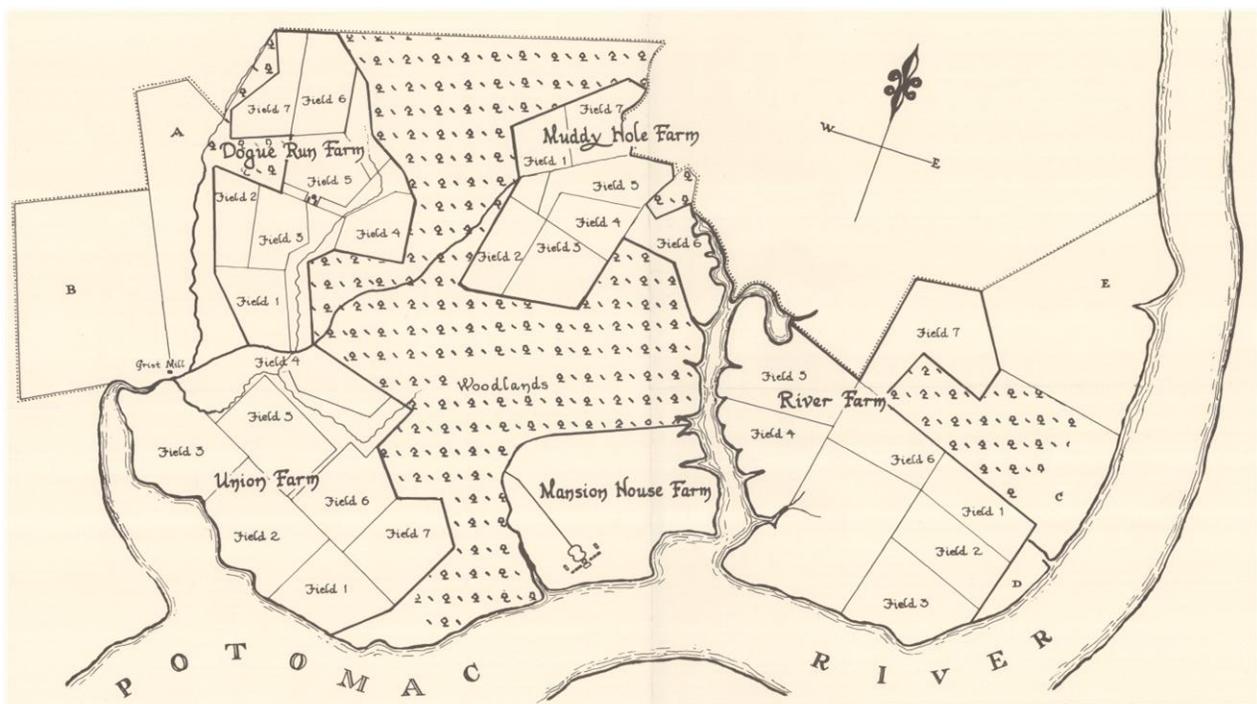
5.		or  and 	or  and 	and  and 	and  and 	and  and 
6.	and  and 		or  and 	or  and 	and  and 	and  and 

Agricultural Patriot

As Washington developed successful strategies in agriculture, he enthusiastically shared them with other farmers. Although his own success was his first priority, he was eager to share his success with others. As the use of mules proved to be successful, he encouraged others to use them. He sent his jackasses around the countryside to provide stud services which helped others to establish their mule assets. He shared his methods for crop rotation. When he found which breeds of sheep and hogs were most successful for him, he shared that information with others.

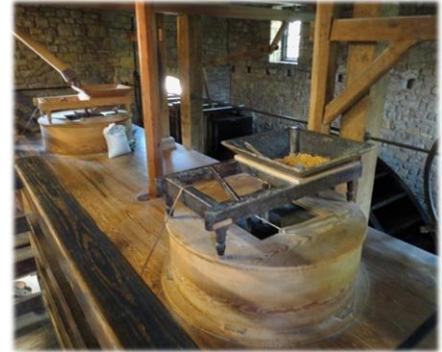
Washington believed that if the United States were to be strong at home and internationally then it must be strong agriculturally. He hoped that the US would become the bread basket of the world. To move things along in that direction, he shared every success he had with fellow farmers so that the nation would be strong.

Entrepreneur



One of the great successes at Mount Vernon was the fishery. The Potomac River flows along the southern border of Mount Vernon, and each spring all hands were put onto the job of harvesting herring and other fish. One year, the workers pulled in 1.5 million herring. The harvest was usually so abundant that there was enough collected to provide the meat portion for the slaves' food for a year. The surplus was sold and sent to the West Indies in Washington's ship the *Farmer*.

The gristmill was also very successful partly because it enabled Washington to mill all of his grains himself, but also because his neighbors brought their grain to Mount Vernon where it was ground for a fee to Washington. The mill was an automated marvel of its time. The flour produced at his mill was a very high quality which he sold locally and overseas. Additionally, the mill provided the milled grain that Washington's distillery used to make whiskey.



The distillery was the largest in the United States. Washington was easily able to sell his entire product for cash or for trade in goods that he



needed. An additional benefit of the distillery was that when the distiller was finished with the rye and corn used in whiskey production, it was fed to Washington's cattle and pigs. It was very nutritious and put a lot of weight on the livestock.

