BALDWIN JAMES

FOUR GREAT AMERICANS: WASHINGTON, FRANKLIN, WEBSTER, LINCOLN

James Baldwin

Four Great Americans: Washington, Franklin, Webster, Lincoln

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Содержание

James Baldwin
Four Great Americans: Washington, Franklin, Webster, Lincoln / A Book for Young Americans

THE STORY OF GEORGE WASHINGTON

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I.—WHEN WASHINGTON WAS A BOY

When George Washington was a boy there was no United States. The land was here, just as it is now, stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific; but nearly all of it was wild and unknown.

Between the Atlantic Ocean and the Alleghany Mountains there were thirteen colonies, or great settlements. The most of the people who lived in these colonies were English people, or the children of English people; and so the King of England made their laws and appointed their governors.

The newest of the colonies was Georgia, which was settled the year after George Washington was born.

The oldest colony was Virginia, which had been settled one hundred and twenty-five years. It was also the richest colony, and more people were living in it than in any other.

There were only two or three towns in Virginia at that time, and they were quite small.

Most of the people lived on farms or on big plantations, where they raised whatever they needed to eat. They also raised tobacco, which they sent to England to be sold.

The farms, or plantations, were often far apart, with stretches of thick woods between them. Nearly every one was close to a river, or some other large body of water; for there are many rivers in Virginia.

There were no roads, such as we have nowadays, but only paths through the woods. When people wanted to travel from place to place, they had to go on foot, or on horseback, or in small boats.

A few of the rich men who lived on the big plantations had coaches; and now and then they would drive out in grand style behind four or six horses, with a fine array of servants and outriders following them. But they could not drive far where there were no roads, and we can hardly understand how they got any pleasure out of it.

Nearly all the work on the plantations was done by slaves. Ships had been bringing negroes from Africa for more than a hundred years, and now nearly half the people in Virginia were blacks.

Very often, also, poor white men from England were sold as slaves for a few years in order to pay for their passage across the ocean. When their freedom was given to them they continued to work at whatever they could find to do; or they cleared small farms in the woods for themselves, or went farther to the west and became woodsmen and hunters.

There was but very little money in Virginia at that time, and, indeed, there was not much use for it. For what could be done with money where there were no shops worth speaking of, and no stores, and nothing to buy?

The common people raised flax and wool, and wove their own cloth; and they made their own tools and furniture. The rich people did the same; but for their better or finer goods they sent to England.

For you must know that in all this country there were no great mills for spinning and weaving as there are now; there were no factories of any kind; there were no foundries where iron could be melted and shaped into all kinds of useful and beautiful things.

When George Washington was a boy the world was not much like it is now.

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II.—HIS HOMES

George Washington's father owned a large plantation on the western shore of the Potomac River. George's great-grandfather, John Washington, had settled upon it nearly eighty years before, and there the family had dwelt ever since.

This plantation was in Westmoreland county, not quite forty miles above the place where the Potomac flows into Chesapeake Bay. By looking at your map of Virginia, you will see that the river is very broad there.

On one side of the plantation, and flowing through it, there was a creek, called Bridge's Creek; and for this reason the place was known as the Bridge's Creek Plantation.

It was here, on the 22d of February, 1732, that George Washington was born.

Although his father was a rich man, the house in which he lived was neither very large nor very fine—at least it would not be thought so now.

It was a square, wooden building, with four rooms on the ground floor and an attic above.

The eaves were low, and the roof was long and sloping. At each end of the house there was a huge chimney; and inside were big fireplaces, one for the kitchen and one for the "great room" where visitors were received.

But George did not live long in this house. When he was about three years old his father removed to another plantation which he owned, near Hunting Creek, several miles farther up the river. This new plantation was at first known as the Washington Plantation, but it is now called Mount Vernon.

Four years after this the house of the Washingtons was burned down. But Mr. Washington had still other lands on the Rappahannock River. He had also an interest in some iron mines that were being opened there. And so to this place the family was now taken.

The house by the Rappahannock was very much like the one at Bridge's Creek. It stood on high ground, overlooking the river and some low meadows; and on the other side of the river was the village of Fredericksburg, which at that time was a very small village, indeed.

George was now about seven years old.

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III.—HIS SCHOOLS AND SCHOOLMASTERS

There were no good schools in Virginia at that time. In fact, the people did not care much about learning.

There were few educated men besides the parsons, and even some of the parsons were very ignorant.

It was the custom of some of the richest families to send their eldest sons to England to the great schools there. But it is doubtful if these young men learned much about books.

They spent a winter or two in the gay society of London, and were taught the manners of gentlemen—and that was about all.

George Washington's father, when a young man, had spent some time at Appleby School in England, and George's half-brothers, Lawrence and Augustine, who were several years older than he, had been sent to the same school.

But book-learning was not thought to be of much use. To know how to manage the business of a plantation, to be polite to one's equals, to be a leader in the affairs of the colony—this was thought to be the best education.

And so, for most of the young men, it was enough if they could read and write a little and keep a few simple accounts. As for the girls, the parson might give them a few lessons now and then; and if they learned good manners and could write letters to their friends, what more could they need?

George Washington's first teacher was a poor sexton, whose name was Mr. Hobby. There is a story that he had been too poor to pay his passage from England, and that he had, therefore, been sold to Mr. Washington as a slave for a short time; but how true this is, I cannot say.

From Mr. Hobby, George learned to spell easy words, and perhaps to write a little; but, although he afterward became a very careful and good penman, he was a poor speller as long as he lived.

When George was about eleven years old his father died. We do not know what his father's intentions had been regarding him. But possibly, if he had lived, he would have given George the best education that his means would afford.

But now everything was changed. The plantation at Hunting Creek, and, indeed, almost all the rest of Mr. Washington's great estate, became the property of the eldest son, Lawrence.

George was sent to Bridge's Creek to live for a while with his brother Augustine, who now owned the old home plantation there. The mother and the younger children remained on the Rappahannock farm.

While at Bridge's Creek, George was sent to school to a Mr. Williams, who had lately come from England.

There are still to be seen some exercises which the lad wrote at that time. There is also a little book, called *The Young Man's Companion*, from which he copied, with great care, a set of rules for good behavior and right living.

Not many boys twelve years old would care for such a book nowadays. But you must know that in those days there were no books for children, and, indeed, very few for older people.

The maxims and wise sayings which George copied were, no doubt, very interesting to him—so interesting that many of them were never forgotten.

There are many other things also in this *Young Man's Companion*, and we have reason to believe that George studied them all.

There are short chapters on arithmetic and surveying, rules for the measuring of land and lumber, and a set of forms for notes, deeds, and other legal documents. A knowledge of these things was, doubtless, of greater importance to him than the reading of many books would have been.

Just what else George may have studied in Mr. Williams's school I cannot say. But all this time he was growing to be a stout, manly boy, tall and strong, and well-behaved. And both his brothers and himself were beginning to think of what he should do when he should become a man.

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IV.—GOING TO SEA

Once every summer a ship came up the river to the plantation, and was moored near the shore.

It had come across the sea from far-away England, and it brought many things for those who were rich enough to pay for them.

It brought bonnets and pretty dresses for George's mother and sisters; it brought perhaps a hat and a tailor-made suit for himself; it brought tools and furniture, and once a yellow coach that had been made in London, for his brother.

When all these things had been taken ashore, the ship would hoist her sails and go on, farther up the river, to leave goods at other plantations.

In a few weeks it would come back and be moored again at the same place.

Then there was a busy time on shore. The tobacco that had been raised during the last year must be carried on shipboard to be taken to the great tobacco markets in England.

The slaves on the plantation were running back and forth, rolling barrels and carrying bales of tobacco down to the landing.

Letters were written to friends in England, and orders were made out for the goods that were to be brought back next year.

But in a day or two, all this stir was over. The sails were again spread, and the ship glided away on its long voyage across the sea.

George had seen this ship coming and going every year since he could remember. He must have thought how pleasant it would be to sail away to foreign lands and see the many wonderful things that are there.

And then, like many another active boy, he began to grow tired of the quiet life on the farm, and wish that he might be a sailor.

He was now about fourteen years old. Since the death of his father, his mother had found it hard work, with her five children, to manage her farm on the Rappahannock and make everything come out even at the end of each year. Was it not time that George should be earning something for himself? But what should he do?

He wanted to go to sea. His brother Lawrence, and even his mother, thought that this might be the best thing.

A bright boy like George would not long be a common sailor. He would soon make his way to a high place in the king's navy. So, at least, his friends believed.

And so the matter was at last settled. A sea-captain who was known to the family, agreed to take George with him. He was to sail in a short time.

The day came. His mother, his brothers, his sisters, were all there to bid him good-bye. But in the meanwhile a letter had come to his mother, from his uncle who lived in England.

"If you care for the boy's future," said the letter, "do not let him go to sea. Places in the king's navy are not easy to obtain. If he begins as a sailor, he will never be aught else."

The letter convinced George's mother—it half convinced his brothers—that this going to sea would be a sad mistake. But George, like other boys of his age, was headstrong. He would not listen to reason. A sailor he would be.

The ship was in the river waiting for him. A boat had come to the landing to take him on board.

The little chest which held his clothing had been carried down to the bank. George was in high glee at the thought of going.

"Good-bye, mother," he said.

He stood on the doorstep and looked back into the house. He saw the kind faces of those whom he loved. He began to feel very sad at the thought of leaving them.

"Good-bye, George!"

He saw the tears welling up in his mother's eyes. He saw them rolling down her cheeks. He knew now that she did not want him to go. He could not bear to see her grief.

"Mother, I have changed my mind," he said. "I will not be a sailor. I will not leave you."

Then he turned to the black boy who was waiting by the door, and said,

"Run down to the landing and tell them not to put the chest on board.

Tell them that I have thought differently of the matter and that I am going to stay at home."

If George had not changed his mind, but had really gone to sea, how very different the history of this country would have been!

He now went to his studies with a better will than before; and although he read but few books he learned much that was useful to him in life. He studied surveying with especial care, and made himself as thorough in that branch of knowledge as it was possible to do with so few advantages.

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V.—THE YOUNG SURVEYOR

Lawrence Washington was about fourteen years older than his brother George.

As I have already said, he had been to England and had spent sometime at Appleby school. He had served in the king's army for a little while, and had been with Admiral Vernon's squadron in the West Indies.

He had formed so great a liking for the admiral that when he came home he changed the name of his plantation at Hunting Creek, and called it Mount Vernon—a name by which it is still known.

Not far from Mount Vernon there was another fine plantation called Belvoir, that was owned by William Fairfax, an English gentleman of much wealth and influence.

Now this Mr. Fairfax had a young daughter, as wise as she was beautiful; and so, what should Lawrence Washington do but ask her to be his wife? He built a large house at Mount Vernon with a great porch fronting on the Potomac; and when Miss Fairfax became Mrs. Washington and went into this home as its mistress, people said that there was not a handsomer or happier young couple in all Virginia.

After young George Washington had changed his mind about going to sea, he went up to Mount Vernon to live with his elder brother. For Lawrence had great love for the boy, and treated him as his father would have done.

At Mount Vernon George kept on with his studies in surveying. He had a compass and surveyor's chain, and hardly a day passed that he was not out on the plantation, running lines and measuring his brother's fields.

Sometimes when he was busy at this kind of work, a tall, white-haired gentleman would come over from Belvoir to see what he was doing and to talk with him. This gentleman was Sir Thomas Fairfax, a cousin of the owner of Belvoir. He was sixty years old, and had lately come from England to look after his lands in Virginia; for he was the owner of many thousands of acres among the mountains and in the wild woods.

Sir Thomas was a courtly old gentleman, and he had seen much of the world. He was a fine scholar; he had been a soldier, and then a man of letters; and he belonged to a rich and noble family.

It was not long until he and George were the best of friends. Often they would spend the morning together, talking or surveying; and in the afternoon they would ride out with servants and hounds, hunting foxes and making fine sport of it among the woods and hills.

And when Sir Thomas Fairfax saw how manly and brave his young friend was, and how very exact and careful in all that he did, he said: "Here is a boy who gives promise of great things. I can trust him."

Before the winter was over he had made a bargain with George to survey his lands that lay beyond the Blue Ridge mountains.

I have already told you that at this time nearly all the country west of the mountains was a wild and unknown region. In fact, all the western part of Virginia was an unbroken wilderness, with only here and there a hunter's camp or the solitary hut of some daring woodsman.

But Sir Thomas hoped that by having the land surveyed, and some part of it laid out into farms, people might be persuaded to go there and settle. And who in all the colony could do this work better than his young friend, George Washington?

It was a bright day in March, 1748, when George started out on his first trip across the mountains. His only company was a young son of William Fairfax of Belvoir.

The two friends were mounted on good horses; and both had guns, for there was fine hunting in the woods. It was nearly a hundred miles to the mountain-gap through which they passed into the country beyond. As there were no roads, but only paths through the forest, they could not travel very fast.

After several days they reached the beautiful valley of the Shenandoah. They now began their surveying. They went up the river for some distance; then they crossed and went down on the other side. At last they reached the Potomac River, near where Harper's Ferry now stands.

At night they slept sometimes by a camp-fire in the woods, and sometimes in the rude hut of a settler or a hunter. They were often wet and cold. They cooked their meat by broiling it on sticks above the coals. They ate without dishes, and drank water from the running streams.

One day they met a party of Indians, the first red men they had seen. There were thirty of them, with their bodies painted in true savage style; for they were just going home from a war with some other tribe.

The Indians were very friendly to the young surveyors. It was evening, and they built a huge fire under the trees. Then they danced their war-dance around it, and sang and yelled and made hideous sport until far in the night.

To George and his friend it was a strange sight; but they were brave young men, and not likely to be afraid even though the danger had been greater.

They had many other adventures in the woods of which I cannot tell you in this little book —shooting wild game, swimming rivers, climbing mountains. But about the middle of April they returned in safety to Mount Vernon.

It would seem that the object of this first trip was to get a general knowledge of the extent of Sir Thomas Fairfax's great woodland estate—to learn where the richest bottom lands lay, and where were the best hunting-grounds.

The young men had not done much if any real surveying; they had been exploring.

George Washington had written an account of everything in a little note-book which he carried with him.

Sir Thomas was so highly pleased with the report which the young men brought back that he made up his mind to move across the Blue Ridge and spend the rest of his life on his own lands.

And so, that very summer, he built in the midst of the great woods a hunting lodge which he called Greenway Court. It was a large, square house, with broad gables and a long roof sloping almost to the ground.

When he moved into this lodge he expected soon to build a splendid mansion and make a grand home there, like the homes he had known in England. But time passed, and as the lodge was roomy and comfortable, he still lived in it and put off beginning another house.

Washington was now seventeen years old. Through the influence of Sir Thomas Fairfax he was appointed public surveyor; and nothing would do but that he must spend the most of his time at Greenway Court and keep on with the work that he had begun.

For the greater part of three years he worked in the woods and among the mountains, surveying Sir Thomas's lands. And Sir Thomas paid him well—a doubloon ($8.24) for each day, and more than that if the work was very hard.

But there were times when the young surveyor did not go out to work, but stayed at Greenway Court with his good friend, Sir Thomas. The old gentleman had something of a library, and on days when they could neither work nor hunt, George spent the time in reading. He read the *Spectator* and a history of England, and possibly some other works.

And so it came about that the three years which young Washington spent in surveying were of much profit to him.

The work in the open air gave him health and strength. He gained courage and self-reliance. He became acquainted with the ways of the backwoodsmen and of the savage Indians. And from Sir Thomas Fairfax he learned a great deal about the history, the laws, and the military affairs of old England.

And in whatever he undertook to do or to learn, he was careful and systematic and thorough. He did nothing by guess; he never left anything half done. And therein, let me say to you, lie the secrets of success in any calling.

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VI.—THE OHIO COUNTRY

You have already learned how the English people had control of all that part of our country which borders upon the Atlantic Ocean. You have learned, also, that they had made thirteen great settlements along the coast, while all the vast region west of the mountains remained a wild and unknown land.

Now, because Englishmen had been the first white men to see the line of shore that stretches from Maine to Georgia, they set up a claim to all the land west of that line.

They had no idea how far the land extended. They knew almost nothing about its great rivers, its vasts forests, its lofty mountains, its rich prairies. They cared nothing for the claims of the Indians whose homes were there.

"All the land from ocean to ocean," they said, "belongs to the King of England."

But there were other people who also had something to say about this matter.

The French had explored the Mississippi River. They had sailed on the Great Lakes. Their hunters and trappers were roaming through the western forests. They had made treaties with the Indians; and they had built trading posts, here and there, along the watercourses.

They said, "The English people may keep their strip of land between the mountains and the sea. But these great river valleys and this country around the Lakes are ours, because we have been the first to explore and make use of them."

Now, about the time that George Washington was thinking of becoming a sailor, some of the rich planters in Virginia began to hear wonderful stories about a fertile region west of the Alleghanies, watered by a noble river, and rich in game and fur-bearing animals.

This region was called the Ohio Country, from the name of the river; and those who took pains to learn the most about it were satisfied that it would, at some time, be of very great importance to the people who should control it.

And so these Virginian planters and certain Englishmen formed a company called the Ohio Company, the object of which was to explore the country, and make money by establishing trading posts and settlements there. And of this company, Lawrence Washington was one of the chief managers.

Lawrence Washington and his brother George had often talked about this enterprise.

"We shall have trouble with the French," said Lawrence. "They have already sent men into the Ohio Country; and they are trying in every way to prove that the land belongs to them."

"It looks as if we should have to drive them out by force," said George.

"Yes, and there will probably be some hard fighting," said Lawrence; "and you, as a young man, must get yourself ready to have a hand in it."

And Lawrence followed this up by persuading the governor of the colony to appoint George as one of the adjutants-general of Virginia.

George was only nineteen years old, but he was now Major Washington, and one of the most promising soldiers in America.

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VII.—A CHANGE OF CIRCUMSTANCES

Although George Washington spent so much of his time at Greenway Court, he still called Mount Vernon his home.

Going down home in the autumn, just before he was twenty years old, he found matters in a sad state, and greatly changed.

His brother Lawrence was very ill—indeed, he had been ill a long time. He had tried a trip to England; he had spent a summer at the warm springs; but all to no purpose. He was losing strength every day.

The sick man dreaded the coming of cold weather. If he could only go to the warm West Indies before winter set in, perhaps that would prolong his life. Would George go with him?

No loving brother could refuse a request like that.

The captain of a ship in the West India trade agreed to take them; and so, while it was still pleasant September, the two Washingtons embarked for Barbadoes, which, then as now, belonged to the English.

It was the first time that George had ever been outside of his native land, and it proved to be also the last. He took careful notice of everything that he saw; and, in the little note-book which he seems to have always had with him, he wrote a brief account of the trip.

He had not been three weeks at Barbadoes before he was taken down with the smallpox; and for a month he was very sick. And so his winter in the West Indies could not have been very pleasant.

In February the two brothers returned home to Mount Vernon. Lawrence's health had not been bettered by the journey. He was now very feeble; but he lingered on until July, when he died.

By his will Lawrence Washington left his fine estate of Mount Vernon, and all the rest of his wealth, to his little daughter. But George was to be the daughter's guardian; and in case of her death, all her vast property was to be his own.

And so, before he was quite twenty-one years old, George Washington was settled at Mount Vernon as the manager of one of the richest estates in Virginia. The death of his little niece not long afterward made him the owner of this estate, and, of course, a very wealthy man.

But within a brief time, events occurred which called him away from his peaceful employments.

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VIII.—A PERILOUS JOURNEY

Early the very next year news was brought to Virginia that the French were building forts along the Ohio, and making friends with the Indians there. This of course meant that they intended to keep the English out of that country.

The governor of Virginia thought that the time had come to speak out about this matter. He would send a messenger with a letter to these Frenchmen, telling them that all the land belonged to the English, and that no trespassing would be allowed.

The first messenger that he sent became alarmed before he was within a hundred miles of a Frenchman, and went back to say that everything was as good as lost.

It was very plain that a man with some courage must be chosen for such an undertaking.

"I will send Major George Washington," said the governor. "He is very young, but he is the bravest man in the colony."

Now, promptness was one of those traits of character which made George Washington the great man which he afterward became. And so, on the very day that he received his appointment he set out for the Ohio Country.

He took with him three white hunters, two Indians, and a famous woodsman, whose name was Christopher Gist. A small tent or two, and such few things as they would need on the journey, were strapped on the backs of horses.

They pushed through the woods in a northwestwardly direction, and at last reached a place called Venango, not very far from where Pittsburg now stands. This was the first outpost of the French; and here Washington met some of the French officers, and heard them talk about what they proposed to do.

Then, after a long ride to the north, they came to another fort. The French commandant was here, and he welcomed Washington with a great show of kindness.

Washington gave him the letter which he had brought from the governor of Virginia.

The commandant read it, and two days afterward gave him an answer.

He said that he would forward the letter to the French governor; but as for the Ohio Country, he had been ordered to hold it, and he meant to do so.

Of course Washington could do nothing further. But it was plain to him that the news ought to be carried back to Virginia without delay.

It was now mid-winter. As no horse could travel through the trackless woods at this time of year, he must make his way on foot.

So, with only the woodsman, Gist, he shouldered his rifle and knapsack, and bravely started home.

It was a terrible journey. The ground was covered with snow; the rivers were frozen; there was not even a path through the forest. If Gist had not been so fine a woodsman they would hardly have seen Virginia again.

Once an Indian shot at Washington from behind a tree. Once the brave young man fell into a river, among floating ice, and would have been drowned but for Gist.

At last they reached the house of a trader on the Monongahela River. There they were kindly welcomed, and urged to stay until the weather should grow milder.

But Washington would not delay.

Sixteen days after that, he was back in Virginia, telling the governor all about his adventures, and giving his opinion about the best way to deal with the French.

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IX.—HIS FIRST BATTLE

It was now very plain that if the English were going to hold the Ohio Country and the vast western region which they claimed as their own, they must fight for it.

The people of Virginia were not very anxious to go to war. But their governor was not willing to be beaten by the French.

He made George Washington a lieutenant-colonel of Virginia troops, and set about raising an army to send into the Ohio Country.

Early in the spring Colonel Washington, with a hundred and fifty men, was marching across the country toward the head waters of the Ohio. It was a small army to advance against the thousands of French and Indians who now held that region.

But other officers, with stronger forces, were expected to follow close behind.

Late in May the little army reached the valley of the Monongahela, and began to build a fort at a place called Great Meadows.

By this time the French and Indians were aroused, and hundreds of them were hurrying forward to defend the Ohio Country from the English. One of their scouting parties, coming up the river, was met by Washington with forty men.

The French were not expecting any foe at this place. There were but thirty-two of them; and of these only one escaped. Ten were killed, and the rest were taken prisoners.

This was Washington's first battle, and he was more proud of it than you might suppose. He sent his prisoners to Virginia, and was ready now, with his handful of men, to meet all the French and Indians that might come against him!

And they did come, and in greater numbers than he had expected. He made haste to finish, if possible, the fort that had been begun.

But they were upon him before he was ready. They had four men to his one. They surrounded the fort and shut his little Virginian army in.

What could Colonel Washington do? His soldiers were already half-starved. There was but little food in the fort, and no way to get any more.

The French leader asked if he did not think it would be a wise thing to surrender. Washington hated the very thought of it; but nothing else could be done.

"If you will march your men straight home, and give me a pledge that they and all Virginians will stay out of the Ohio Country for the next twelve months, you may go," said the Frenchman.

It was done.

Washington, full of disappointment went back to Mount Vernon. But he felt more like fighting than ever before.

He was now twenty-two years old.

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X.—THE FRENCH AND INDIAN WAR

In the meanwhile the king of England had heard how the French were building forts along the Ohio and how they were sending their traders to the Great Lakes and to the valley of the Mississippi.

"If we allow them to go on in this way, they will soon take all that vast western country away from us," he said.

And so, the very next winter, he sent over an army under General Edward Braddock to drive the French out of that part of America and at the same time teach their Indian friends a lesson.

It was in February, 1755, when General Braddock and his troops went into camp at Alexandria in Virginia. As Alexandria was only a few miles from Mount Vernon, Washington rode over to see the fine array and become acquainted with the officers.

When General Braddock heard that this was the young man who had ventured so boldly into the Ohio Country, he offered him a place on his staff. This was very pleasing to Washington, for there was nothing more attractive to him than soldiering.

It was several weeks before the army was ready to start: and then it moved so slowly that it did not reach the Monongahela until July.

The soldiers in their fine uniforms made a splendid appearance as they marched in regular order across the country.

Benjamin Franklin, one of the wisest men in America, had told General Braddock that his greatest danger would be from unseen foes hidden among the underbrush and trees.

"They may be dangerous to your backwoodsmen," said Braddock; "but to the trained soldiers of the king they can give no trouble at all."

But scarcely had the army crossed the Monongahela when it was fired upon by unseen enemies. The woods rang with the cries of savage men.

The soldiers knew not how to return the fire. They were shot down in their tracks like animals in a pen.

"Let the men take to the shelter of the trees!" was Washington's advice.

But Braddock would not listen to it. They must keep in order and fight as they had been trained to fight.

Washington rode hither and thither trying his best to save the day. Two horses were shot under him; four bullets passed through his coat; and still he was unhurt. The Indians thought that he bore a charmed life, for none of them could hit him.

It was a dreadful affair—more like a slaughter than a battle. Seven hundred of Braddock's fine soldiers, and more than half of his officers, were killed or wounded. And all this havoc was made by two hundred Frenchmen and about six hundred Indians hidden among the trees.

At last Braddock gave the order to retreat. It soon became a wild flight rather than a retreat; and yet, had it not been for Washington, it would have been much worse.

The General himself had been fatally wounded. There was no one but Washington who could restore courage to the frightened men, and lead them safely from the place of defeat.

Four days after the battle General Braddock died, and the remnant of the army being now led by a Colonel Dunbar, hurried back to the eastern settlements.

Of all the men who took part in that unfortunate expedition against the French, there was only one who gained any renown therefrom, and that one was Colonel George Washington.

He went back to Mount Vernon, wishing never to be sent to the Ohio Country again.

The people of Virginia were so fearful lest the French and Indians should follow up their victory and attack the settlements, that they quickly raised a regiment of a thousand men to defend their colony. And so highly did they esteem Colonel Washington that they made him commander of all the forces of the colony, to do with them as he might deem best.

The war with the French for the possession of the Ohio Country and the valley of the Mississippi, had now fairly begun. It would be more than seven years before it came to an end.

But most of the fighting was done at the north—in New York and Canada; and so Washington and his Virginian soldiers did not distinguish themselves in any very great enterprise.

It was for them to keep watch of the western frontier of the colony lest the Indians should cross the mountains and attack the settlements.

Once, near the middle of the war, Washington led a company into the very country where he had once traveled on foot with Christopher Gist.

The French had built a fort at the place where the Ohio River has its beginning, and they had named it Fort Duquesne. When they heard that Washington was coming they set fire to the fort and fled down the river in boats.

The English built a new fort at the same place, and called it Fort Pitt; and there the city of Pittsburg has since grown up.

And now Washington resigned his commission as commander of the little Virginian army. Perhaps he was tired of the war. Perhaps his great plantation of Mount Vernon needed his care. We cannot tell.

But we know that, a few days later, he was married to Mrs. Martha Custis, a handsome young widow who owned a fine estate not a great way from Williamsburg, the capital of the colony. This was in January, 1759.

At about the same time he was elected a member of the House of Burgesses of Virginia; and three months later, he went down to Williamsburg to have a hand in making some of the laws for the colony.

He was now twenty-seven years old. Young as he was, he was one of the richest men in the colony, and he was known throughout the country as the bravest of American soldiers.

The war was still going on at the north. To most of the Virginians it seemed to be a thing far away.

At last, in 1763, a treaty of peace was made. The French had been beaten, and they were obliged to give up everything to the English. They lost not only the Ohio Country and all the great West, but Canada also.

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XI.—THE MUTTERINGS OF THE STORM

And now for several years Washington lived the life of a country gentleman. He had enough to do, taking care of his plantations, hunting foxes with his sport-loving neighbors, and sitting for a part of each year in the House of Burgesses at Williamsburg.

He was a tall man—more than six feet in height. He had a commanding presence and a noble air, which plainly said: "This is no common man."

He was shrewd in business. He was the best horseman and the best walker in Virginia. And no man knew more about farming than he.

And so the years passed pleasantly enough at Mount Vernon, and there were few who dreamed of the great events and changes that were soon to take place.

King George the Third of England, who was the ruler of the thirteen colonies, had done many unwise things.

He had made laws forbidding the colonists from trading with other countries than his own.

He would not let them build factories to weave their wool and flax into cloth.

He wanted to force them to buy all their goods in England, and to send their corn and tobacco and cotton there to pay for them.

And now after the long war with France he wanted to make the colonists pay heavy taxes in order to meet the expenses of that war.

They must not drink a cup of tea without first paying tax on it; they must not sign a deed or a note without first buying stamped paper on which to write it.

In every colony there was great excitement on account of the tea tax and the stamp act, as it was called.

In the House of Burgesses at Williamsburg, a young man, whose name was Patrick Henry, made a famous speech in which he declared that the king had no right to tax them without their consent.

George Washington heard that speech, and gave it his approval.

Not long afterward, news came that in Boston a ship-load of tea had been thrown into the sea by the colonists. Rather than pay the tax upon it, they would drink no tea.

Then, a little later, still other news came. The king had closed the port of Boston, and would not allow any ships to come in or go out.

More than this, he had sent over a body of soldiers, and had quartered them in Boston in order to keep the people in subjection.

The whole country was aroused now. What did this mean? Did the king intend to take away from the colonists all the liberties that are so dear to men?

The colonies must unite and agree upon doing something to protect themselves and preserve their freedom. In order to do this each colony was asked to send delegates to Philadelphia to talk over the matter and see what would be the best thing to do.

George Washington was one of the delegates from Virginia.

Before starting he made a great speech in the House of Burgesses. "If necessary, I will raise a thousand men," he said, "subsist them at my own expense, and march them to the relief of Boston."

But the time for marching to Boston had not quite come.

The delegates from the different colonies met in Carpenter's Hall, in Philadelphia, on the 5th of September, 1774. Their meeting has since been known as the First Continental Congress of America.

For fifty-one days those wise, thoughtful men discussed the great question that had brought them together. What could the colonists do to escape the oppressive laws that the King of England was trying to force upon them?

Many powerful speeches were made, but George Washington sat silent. He was a doer rather than a talker.

At last the Congress decided to send an address to the king to remind him of the rights of the colonists, and humbly beg that he would not enforce his unjust laws.

And then, when all had been done that could be done, Washington went back to his home at Mount Vernon, to his family and his friends, his big plantations, his fox-hunting, and his pleasant life as a country gentleman.

But he knew as well as any man that more serious work was near at hand.

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XII.—THE BEGINNING OF THE WAR

All that winter the people of the colonies were anxious and fearful. Would the king pay any heed to their petition? Or would he force them to obey his unjust laws?

Then, in the spring, news came from Boston that matters were growing worse and worse. The soldiers who were quartered in that city were daily becoming more insolent and overbearing.

"These people ought to have their town knocked about their ears and destroyed," said one of the king's officers.

On the 19th of April a company of the king's soldiers started to Concord, a few miles from Boston, to seize some powder which had been stored there. Some of the colonists met them at Lexington, and there was a battle.

This was the first battle in that long war commonly called the Revolution.

Washington was now on his way to the North again. The Second Continental Congress was to meet in Philadelphia in May, and he was again a delegate from Virginia.

In the first days of the Congress no man was busier than he. No man seemed to understand the situation of things better than he. No man was listened to with greater respect; and yet he said but little.

Every day, he came into the hall wearing the blue and buff uniform which belonged to him as a Virginia colonel. It was as much as to say: "The time for fighting has come, and I am ready."

The Congress thought it best to send another humble petition to the king, asking him not to deprive the people of their just rights.

In the meantime brave men were flocking towards Boston to help the people defend themselves from the violence of the king's soldiers. The war had begun, and no mistake.

The men of Congress saw now the necessity of providing for this war.

They asked, "Who shall be the commander-in-chief of our colonial army?"

It was hardly worth while to ask such a question; for there could be but one answer. Who, but George Washington?

No other person in America knew so much about war as he. No other person was so well fitted to command.

On the 15th of June, on motion of John Adams of Massachusetts, he was appointed to that responsible place. On the next day he made a modest but noble little speech before Congress.

He told the members of that body that he would serve his country willingly and as well as he could—but not for money. They might provide for his necessary expenses, but he would never take any pay for his services.

And so, leaving all his own interests out of sight, he undertook at once the great work that had been entrusted to him. He undertook it, not for profit nor for honor, but because of a feeling of duty to his fellow-men. For eight weary, years he forgot himself in the service of his country.

Two weeks after his appointment General Washington rode into Cambridge, near Boston, and took formal command of his army.

It was but a small force, poorly clothed, poorly armed; but every man had the love of country in his heart. It was the first American army.

But so well did Washington manage matters that soon his raw troops were in good shape for service. And so hard did he press the king's soldiers in Boston that, before another summer, they were glad to take ship and sail away from the town which they had so long infested and annoyed.

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XIII.—INDEPENDENCE

On the fourth day of the following July there was a great stir in the town of Philadelphia. Congress was sitting in the Hall of the State House. The streets were full of people; everybody seemed anxious; everybody was in suspense.

Men were crowding around the State House and listening.

"Who is speaking now?" asked one.

"John Adams," was the answer.

"And who is speaking now?"

"Doctor Franklin."

"Good! Let them follow his advice, for he knows what is best."

Then there was a lull outside, for everybody wanted to hear what the great Dr. Franklin had to say.

After a while the same question was asked again: "Who is speaking now?"

And the answer was: "Thomas Jefferson of Virginia. It was he and Franklin who wrote it."

"Wrote what?"

"Why, the Declaration of Independence, of course."

A little later some one said: "They will be ready to sign it soon."

"But will they dare to sign it?"

"Dare? They dare not do otherwise."

Inside the hall grave men were discussing the acts of the King of England.

"He has cut off our trade with all parts of the world," said one.

"He has forced us to pay taxes without our consent," said another.

"He has sent his soldiers among us to burn our towns and kill our people," said a third.

"He has tried to make the Indians our enemies," said a fourth.

"He is a tyrant and unfit to be the ruler of a free people," agreed they all.

And then everybody was silent while one read: "We, therefore, the representatives of the United States of America, solemnly publish and declare that the united colonies are, and of right ought to be, *free and independent states*"

Soon afterward the bell in the high tower above the hall began to ring.

"It is done!" cried the people. "They have signed the Declaration of Independence."

"Yes, every colony has voted for it," said those nearest the door. "The King of England shall no longer rule over us."

And that was the way in which the United States came into being. The thirteen colonies were now thirteen states.

Up to this time Washington and his army had been fighting for the rights of the people as colonists. They had been fighting in order to oblige the king to do away with the unjust laws which he had made. But now they were to fight for freedom and for the independence of the United States.

By and by you will read in your histories how wisely and bravely Washington conducted the war. You will learn how he held out against the king's soldiers on Long Island and at White Plains; how he crossed the Delaware amid floating ice and drove the English from Trenton; how he wintered at Morristown; how he suffered at Valley Forge; how he fought at Germantown and Monmouth and Yorktown.

There were six years of fighting, of marching here and there, of directing and planning, of struggling in the face of every discouragement.

Eight years passed, and then peace came, for independence had been won, and this our country was made forever free.

On the 2d of November, 1783, Washington bade farewell to his army. On the 23d of December he resigned his commission as commander-in-chief.

There were some who suggested that Washington should make himself king of this country; and indeed this he might have done, so great was the people's love and gratitude.

But the great man spurned such suggestions. He said, "If you have any regard for your country or respect for me, banish those thoughts and never again speak of them."

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XIV.—THE FIRST PRESIDENT

Washington was now fifty-two years old.

The country was still in an unsettled condition. True, it was free from English control. But there was no strong government to hold the states together.

Each state was a little country of itself, making its own laws, and having its own selfish aims without much regard for its sister states. People did not think of the United States as one great undivided nation.

And so matters were in bad enough shape, and they grew worse and worse as the months went by.

Wise men saw that unless something should be done to bring about a closer union of the states, they would soon be in no better condition than when ruled by the English king.

And so a great convention was held in Philadelphia to determine what could be done to save the country from ruin. George Washington was chosen to preside over this convention; and no man's words had greater weight than his.

He said, "Let us raise a standard to which the wise and honest can repair. The event is in the hand of God."

That convention did a great and wonderful work; for it framed the Constitution by which our country has ever since been governed.

And soon afterwards, in accordance with that Constitution, the people of the country were called upon to elect a President. Who should it be?

Who could it be but Washington?

When the electoral votes were counted, every vote was for George Washington of Virginia.

And so, on the 16th of April, 1789, the great man again bade adieu to Mount Vernon and to private life, and set out for New York. For the city of Washington had not yet been built, and New York was the first capital of our country.

There were no railroads at that time, and so the journey was made in a coach. All along the road the people gathered to see their hero-president and show him their love.

On the 30th of April he was inaugurated at the old Federal Hall in New York.

"Long live George Washington, President of the United States!" shouted the people. Then the cannon roared, the bells rang, and the new government of the United States—the government which we have to-day—began its existence.

Washington was fifty-seven years old at the time of his inauguration.

Perhaps no man was ever called to the doing of more difficult things. The entire government must be built up from the beginning, and all its machinery put into order.

But so well did he meet the expectations of the people, that when his first term was near its close he was again elected President, receiving every electoral vote.

In your histories you will learn of the many difficult tasks which he performed during those years of the nation's infancy. There were new troubles with England, troubles with the Indians, jealousies and disagreements among the lawmakers of the country. But amidst all these trials Washington stood steadfast, wise, cool—conscious that he was right, and strong enough to prevail.

Before the end of his second term, people began to talk about electing him for the third time. They could not think of any other man holding the highest office in the country. They feared that no other man could be safely entrusted with the great responsibilities which he had borne so nobly.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.