

## **Teacher Background on George Washington:**

Washington had two traits that must be examined to understand his humanity. He was profoundly ambitious with an eagerness for fame, and he was a man of intense passions. Mistakes made during his youth, largely in part to these traits, were the catalyst for the gradual cultivation of the dignity and self-control seen in the older mature leader that emerges at the Revolutionary War. Washington was born into an upper but not top-level Virginia family who had half brothers who were educated in England. This would surely have been the path for George if not for the untimely death of his father at age eleven. This event sharply changed the direction his life would take. He received little formal education after this time and would always be somewhat insecure because of this lack. There is evidence that he had a strained relationship with his mother. He therefore relied on other family members, namely half brother Lawrence who became a substitute father, and the powerful Fairfax family for his social upbringing. Although often ill at ease socially his circumstances seem to have sharpened his ambitions. Through connections with the Fairfax family he launched his first career as a surveyor. In this position his energy and reliability afforded him the opportunity to obtain land claims in the Shenandoah Valley. With Lawrence's death there opened a militia adjutancy, George applied and received it. He also was to inherit the Mount Vernon property upon the death of Lawrence's sole heir. At this point Washington embarked on military life and the wilderness battles of the French and Indian war became his training grounds. Eager to prove himself he made many mistakes and at times showed poor judgment, he argued with superiors, and threatened to quit. In this period of his life he aggressively pursued promotion and his faults were very evident. His patience was honed during the trials of this period.

After the French and Indian war he married the wealthiest widow in Virginia and secured his financial status. He became active in civic life, managed Mount Vernon and the Custis properties, cared for family and friends financially, and matured with his responsibilities. Washington's greatness lies in his growth as a man. He gained self-control over his strong passions and he strived to be the classical man of honor. He most certainly understood the reaction his dignified and honorable actions would evoke. A slaveholder all his life he struggled with the dichotomy of holding slaves in a republic founded on equality for all. In his will he not only made provisions to free his slaves on his death but provisions for their education also. He also made the necessary arrangements for the freeing of Martha's slaves at her death.

Representative Henry Lee addressing Congress after Washington's death stated that George Washington was, "First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen." Washington has earned the title, "Father of Our Country". From the hero status he earned as Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army to the presidency Washington epitomized the classical leader. He selflessly led the patriots to victory over the British earning America her freedom. He was the trusted man to preside over the Constitutional Convention and when it came time to choose a president there was only one man who could be seriously considered. He became the model for all future presidents and stepped down from a third term so as not to abuse his powers. In his farewell address he urged the people to support the new government. Washington's greatness lay in his character and his self-discipline to be a man of honor.