

George Washington: General, President and Farmer

When the name "George Washington" is mentioned, many people think of him as the person that chopped down a cherry tree and could not lie about doing that. Others remember him as an outstanding General during the French and Indian War and the American Revolution. Some will connect him with being the first President of the United States. It is interesting to look at some of the lesser known things that George Washington did during his life.



George Washington was born in Virginia on February 22, 1732. Unfortunately, Washington's father died when George was 11 years old. George had very little formal schooling, but taught himself to be an expert woodsman, surveyor, and mapmaker. The notebooks, diaries, drawings, and letters from Washington allow us to know a great deal about him even though he lived over 200 years ago.



Washington very much loved his home at Mt. Vernon. There he enjoyed farming the land and caring for his livestock. Obviously, being in war and serving as President kept him away from Mt. Vernon. Even though he was away frequently, he kept in close touch with those at Mt. Vernon about what was happening on the farm.

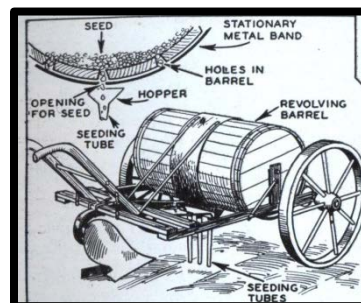
In Colonial times, many American farmers planted tobacco as a cash crop and then were able to sell it to England and purchase items that were not available in America. Washington discovered that growing tobacco year after year, took the nutrients out of the soil. So many nutrients were removed by tobacco that the land would have to be left unplanted for 20 years in order to replenish itself. That is a very long time to leave land unproductive.



Washington wanted America to be able to "feed" herself and he knew growing tobacco was not the best crop to grow. Over the years, Washington tried a

variety of fertilizers - manure (from cows, pigs, sheep, horses), green manure, creek mud, and fish heads to see which ones made the soil most productive. His diaries show how he kept exact details on what he did and how the soil responded. By rotating the crops and applying manure, Washington was able to keep his soil productive.

Washington was always looking for better ways to complete the tasks on the farm. Planting a field with seed by hand and then covering the seed using a hoe was very time consuming. Washington created a barrel plow which was a wooden barrel with holes drilled into it to release the seeds as the barrel turned behind the plow.



One of the most remarkable buildings at Mt. Vernon is Washington's 16-sided barn. When wheat was harvested in colonial times, workers beat the wheat stems with a flail to separate the wheat seeds from the straw stems. In Washington's barn, horses trampled the wheat stalks on the upper level and the grain fell onto the lower level through spaces in the floor. This method required much less labor than doing it by hand. Completing this process inside the barn protected the wheat kernels from dirt, wind, and rain.

Two hundred years ago, Washington and his friends kept records about their farms in diaries and shared information through letters. Washington was only too happy to share both his successes and failures at Mt. Vernon with other farmers. Washington was a great General and President and he was also a remarkable **farmer**. His love of the land at Mt. Vernon and his understanding of soil productivity, crop rotation, and creative technology helped in making agriculture an important part of America in its earliest years.



After serving as President for two terms, Washington finally retired to Mt. Vernon in 1797 where he cared for his livestock, managed his crops, and wrote in his diary. He died December 14, 1799 just two days after he had ridden out to inspect his fields in the cold and snow.



Name: _____

Date: _____

George Washington: General, President, and Farmer - Reading Passage

Directions: Read each question and fill in the best answer.

1. The author wrote this article about *George Washington* to tell people that he

- A. had little education.
- B. was a general in war.
- C. was a farmer.
- D. was president.

2. The best way to discover accurate information about *George Washington* and *Mt. Vernon* is

- A. through newspaper articles.
- B. by watching television shows.
- C. by reading his diaries and letters.
- D. by reading his emails.

3. Growing tobacco year after year was not a good idea

- A. because it was a cash crop.
- B. worms ate the plants.
- C. England wanted to buy it.
- D. it took too many nutrients from the soil.

4. According to the article, *Washington* thought

- A. children should get an education.
- B. children should not lie when they do something wrong.
- C. America should be able to feed itself.
- D. everyone should keep a diary and write letters.

5. Which of the following did Washington use as fertilizer?

- A. wheat and tobacco
- B. corn and tobacco
- C. creek mud and fish heads
- D. cows and horses

6. Washington's barn was remarkable because

- A. it was at Mt. Vernon.
- B. it made work easier.
- C. it had 16 sides.
- D. it had a barrel plow.

Extended Response: Choose two questions to answer.

1. Washington knew many farmers grew tobacco as a cash crop to make money. Why did he say he wanted America to be able to "feed" itself?
2. What did you learn about Washington from reading this article that you did not know before?
3. Which of George Washington's roles (as General, President, or Farmer) do you think was most important? Explain your answer.

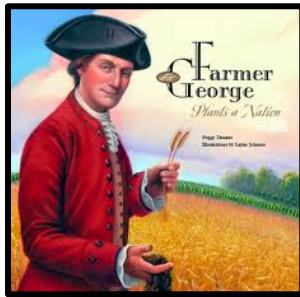
George Washington Trivia

- George Washington started school when he was six years old. He left school at 15 to become a surveyor because his mother couldn't afford to send him to college.
- At 26, he married Martha Dandridge Custis, a widow who already had two children, Jackie and Patsy. Washington never had any children of his own.
- At six feet, two inches tall, and 200 pounds, he was one of our biggest presidents.
- Some of his favorite dishes were cream of peanut soup, mashed sweet potatoes with coconut, and string beans with mushrooms.
- As a farmer, he is credited with introducing the mule to America.
- Toothaches bothered him for years. When he was 57, he had all his teeth pulled. From then on, he wore ivory false teeth set in a silver plate.
- Washington was the only President to be elected unanimously.
- Washington did his own bookkeeping and recorded every penny of expense or profit. His ledgers still exist today.

An Activity for You to TRY...

Keeping Your Own Diary

One of the ways we learned so much about George Washington was by reading his diaries and letters. For one week, keep a diary of what happens to you. You can include what you eat, where you go, what you wear, and what you do. Next, use your diary to write a letter to a friend about the past week. Exchange diaries and letters with your classmates. Make a list of what you learned about your classmate from reading the diary and letter. Perhaps, you will better understand how much we can learn about a person who lived many years ago by reading what they wrote.



Check Out This Book



Farmer George Plants a Nation by Peggy Thomas

Peggy Thomas depicts George Washington as a forward-thinking farmer dedicated to making Mount Vernon a self-sufficient, profitable plantation. Emphasizing Washington's innovative thinking and experimentation, the narrative explains how he invented a plow to streamline the planting of crops, rotated his crops and tested different fertilizers, bred donkeys and horses to create strong mules, and designed a treading barn with 16 sides. Quotes from Washington's diaries and letters, presented in script outside the main text, demonstrate his devotion to improving his farm and lend credence to the author's assertion that 'George's thoughts were never far from home,' even during the Revolution and his presidency. Thomas's history is extremely detailed, full of facts that bring the 18th-century farm to life.