

Name _____ Date _____

George Washington & Public Service

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. George Washington had many traits that made him an effective leader: humility, a sense of duty, adaptability and a willingness to work hard. Perhaps the trait he is best known for is his honesty. According to a popular story, 6-year-old George received a hatchet, a small ax, as a gift. While using the hatchet, he damaged his father’s cherry tree. When his father saw the damaged tree, he became angry and confronted George. Instead of fibbing or making up excuses, George said, “I cannot tell a lie...I did cut it with my hatchet.” Washington’s father happily announced that his son’s honesty was worth more than a thousand trees.

Notes

The cherry tree story is actually not true. It was made up by one of Washington’s first biographers, Mason Locke Weems. Weems wanted to focus on Washington’s virtues and present him as a good role model. Even though the story is a myth, it has been retold over and over.

2. Washington became well-known in the military and in politics. Despite this, he still thought of himself first as a farmer. He had grown up on a plantation and learned about the value of land in his first job as a surveyor. Washington was a “gentleman farmer.” That meant he farmed for pleasure, not because he needed the money or the food that he grew. Washington married Martha Dandridge Custis in 1759. After that, he lived and worked at Mount Vernon, his family’s estate. He was a curious and creative farmer. He read all the latest research about agriculture and experimented with different crops and farming methods. By the end of his life, he had expanded Mount Vernon from 2,000 acres to an 8,000-acre property with five farms. Washington wrote down many of his observations about agriculture. He hoped this would help American farmers in the future.

Notes

3. Washington was a Founding Father and the nation's first president. However, he never lived in the White House. In fact, Washington, DC was not even the capital of the United States when Washington was sworn in as president in 1790. He was inaugurated in New York City. During his first term, he selected Washington, DC as the future capital of the United States. The district was then called the Territory of Columbia. He chose it as a compromise between the northern and southern states. By the time his second term began, the capital had been moved to Philadelphia. It remained there for 10 years. Thomas Jefferson, our third president, was the first president to be inaugurated in the nation's permanent capital of Washington, DC.

Notes

4. As president, Washington created a cabinet, or group of advisors. They helped him run different areas of government. He had four cabinet members: Thomas Jefferson as Secretary of State, Alexander Hamilton as Secretary of the Treasury, Henry Knox as Secretary of War and Edmund Randolph as Attorney General. Having a cabinet is not required by law, but every president since Washington has also created one. In 2017, President Donald Trump had 24 cabinet members. Some of Trump's cabinet members included Rex Tillerson as Secretary of State, Betsy DeVos as Secretary of Education and Kirstjen Nielsen as Secretary of Homeland Security.

Notes

5. Washington struggled with his position on slavery over his life. He first became a slave owner at the age of 11, when his father died and left him 10 slaves in his will. As a young adult, he purchased at least eight more slaves. During the Revolutionary War, he became more and more conflicted about slavery. Even though he was uncomfortable with it, his wealth and prominent social standing depended on his plantation, and his plantation depended on slave labor.

Notes

By the time Washington died, there were 317 enslaved people living at Mount Vernon. Not all of them were owned by him. Many belonged to the estate of Martha Washington's deceased first husband. In his will, Washington stated that the slaves he owned would be freed upon Martha's death. Martha ended up freeing those slaves before she died.

6. Washington decided to step down from public service after two terms as president. He set a precedent that every future president except one has followed. To explain his decision and share his advice for the future, he wrote a Farewell Address. It was printed in Philadelphia's American Daily Advertiser on September 19, 1796.

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