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Imagining George Washington: A Historiography of George Washington in Historical Memory

Amanda Knox

George Washington. This single name elicits memories of who the man behind it is. The first president of the United States. The important Revolutionary War general. The farmer. The slave owner. Whatever memory is triggered by these four syllables is likely dependent upon the person and their connection to the man. However, it is interesting to consider how George Washington has been manipulated through historical writing to invoke such responses. For example, of the two biographies examined in this essay both attempt to make Washington more human and less of a godly legend. The first does this by focusing on his private life while the second does so while highlighting his military career. Furthermore, there has been research conducted into the ways that Washington's image has been used in popular culture and sociologists have weighed in on the conversation with considerations on why these memories are created in the first place. Most recently, emerging scholarship has been centering on the ways that national memory is being developed through places of

commemoration, such as Washington's birthplace. By tying together these seemingly unrelated works of scholarship on the topic, this essay seeks to answer the question of how the memory of George Washington has been used and discussed by academics who have written about him in diverse ways over a period of approximately one hundred years.

A few highlights of George Washington's public life may serve well for maintaining a temporal setting and general context of the figure. First, he was born in February 1732 in Virginia. At the age of twenty one, Washington joined the military, and began participating in the French and Indian War in various ways. He was given command of the Virginia militia which he relinquished in 1758 when the war concluded.⁷⁴ He served as General of the Continental Army from 1775 to 1783 and later as President of the United States from 1789 to 1797.⁷⁵ Washington passed away in 1799 at Mount Vernon, Virginia, at the age of sixty seven.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ "Biography," Mount Vernon, accessed November 11, 2015, <http://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/biography/>.

⁷⁵ "Key Facts about George Washington," Mount Vernon, accessed November 11, 2015, <http://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/key-facts/>.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

Equally valuable to this examination is the knowledge of how historical writing has developed over time. John Arnold, professor of medieval history, best details this transformation in his 2000 book *History: A Very Short Introduction*. In short, historical writing initiated with a political or religious focus in order for one population to prove supremacy over another and this type of writing continued through the 1800s.⁷⁷ By the twentieth century, he argues, historians began to focus more on social history, or the story of the common person in their socioeconomic setting.⁷⁸ Recently historians have been producing cultural history, analyses of how “things” make history. This progression of history writing is especially clear with a topic such as George Washington.

The first piece of scholarship considered in this examination of Washington’s historical memory is the earliest accessible work and it appeared out of the 1890s, a time when financial panic in the United States was coupled with the beginning of an industrial boom and a World’s Fair. Historian Paul Leicester Ford authored the biography *The True George Washington* in 1896 almost one hundred years after

⁷⁷ John A. Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 82.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 84

the death of George Washington. Ford, the great-grandson of the famous lexicographer Noah Webster, printed his first book in 1876 when he was fourteen years old and continued to write and edit works on such men as Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, and George Washington.⁷⁹ In *The True George Washington*, Ford eloquently explains that “by a slow evolution we have well-nigh discarded from the lives of our greatest men of the past all human faults and feelings; have enclosed their greatness in glass of the clearest crystal, and hung up a sign, ‘Do not touch.’”⁸⁰ Never more has this been the case than with Washington. Ford seeks to overturn this interpretation of Washington and to “humanize” him.⁸¹ Because of this, Ford spends little time dissecting Washington’s political career and works to reveal his private life with the primary use of Washington’s own writings. Ford unveils such topics as Washington’s family relations, physique, education, “relations with the fair sex,” farming and slaveholding duties, social life, friends, and enemies.⁸² The biography closes with two chapters devoted to Washington the soldier and Washington the

⁷⁹ “Paul Leicester Ford Papers,” New York Public Library, accessed November 13, 2015, <http://archives.nypl.org/mss/1043>.

⁸⁰ Paul Leicester Ford, *The True George Washington* (Philadelphia: J.B Lippincott Company, 1896), 5.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*, 9.

citizen and office holder. This would indicate that despite the cornerstone of Ford's work being Washington's private life, he believed the culminating points of Washington's life to be those involving his military and political careers.

One of the leading themes throughout these topics is Washington's honesty. In terms of his agricultural career Ford says that "it is to be questioned if a fortune was ever more honestly acquired or more thoroughly deserved."⁸³ He also concludes his work with a quote from Tench Tilghman who claimed that Washington was "the honestest man that I believe ever adorned human nature."⁸⁴ Each chapter is completed by a quote, either from Washington or one of his contemporaries, which denotes his enviable character. The most striking of these finishes a segment explaining Washington's lack of biological children and reads: "God left him childless that he might be the father of his country."⁸⁵

In this biography, Washington is remembered as a man with desirable moral qualities and as the father of his country. That it is "his" country is likely not a mistake. Once the United States of

⁸³ Ibid., 137.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 310.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 37.

America becomes Washington's there is a more compelling reason for the common person to uphold the foundations which the country is presumed to be founded upon. Interestingly, the publisher of *The True George Washington*, J. B. Lippincott, began as a publisher of bibles and trade books which would indicate that the published works were intended for the general public.⁸⁶ This being the case, it is perhaps more clear that Ford was writing with the popular intent of his time described by Arnold, the intent to create nationalism among his readers, particularly when this work is placed within the context of the events of the 1890s, a time when the common man was becoming more powerful in society.

Almost one hundred years later in 1984, John Alden, Professor Emeritus of history at Duke University, produced *George Washington: A Biography* which is fascinatingly not wholly unlike the one written by Ford. This biography is a quasi-social history in that Alden also seeks to remove the "gilding upon a wooden hero" and "contribute a lucid and balanced account of Washington as military commander and to assess correctly his role as defender of the American nation during

⁸⁶ The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, "J.B Lippincott Company Records," accessed November 13, 2015, http://hsp.org/sites/default/files/legacy_files/migrated/3104lippincottinventory.pdf.

his presidency.”⁸⁷ Alden uses sources that aim to illuminate Washington’s “personality, problems, and decisions,” which work to emphasize the human qualities Washington possessed while achieving almost superhuman feats.⁸⁸ The author thoroughly examines Washington’s life from his early boyhood years and private life, to his role in the French and Indian War, and through Washington as a Revolutionary War general to his funeral. The memory this work creates is nothing short of a heroic one. Beginning with his early military career Alden claims “the extraordinary young Colonel Washington continued to be extraordinary.”⁸⁹ Alden says that later, in 1775, despite the “ample supply of political and philosophical talent and genius” in the First Continental Congress the intellectually modest Washington who disliked oratory still “came to the fore.”⁹⁰ While Alden still attempts to say that Washington “was quite human” because “he had a sense of humor. He enjoyed a racy anecdote, and he perceived the ironies of men and things,” his previous statements of Washington’s military and political career, as only a couple examples

⁸⁷ John R Alden, *George Washington: A Biography* (Baton Rouge and Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), xi.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 307.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 103.

of the many, clearly still put forth the image of Washington not as a common man but as a man who made many sacrifices for the sake of his freedom and his country.

This work was published by the Louisiana State University Press and is clearly intended for a scholarly audience. This is particularly intriguing when the work is examined in light of the culture of the United States in the 1980s. Just as Ford's work constructs Washington to fit his times, so too does Alden's. By the 1980s, the United States is facing the Cold War, the threat of communism, and political ideological shifts towards conservatism. Ignoring Alden's dogmas, it would be unwise for a university to propagate any type of liberal stance during this time particularly when it comes to a Founding Father so it makes sense that Washington's astounding military and political careers are the highlights of this biography.

Conversely, Karal Ann Marling, professor of art history and American studies at the University of Minnesota, uses completely different sources and methods to ask a question that many previous scholars had not queried about Washington. Instead of studying Washington's life she directly considers how the memory that has

already been created of Washington is promulgated in everyday life.

The result is her 1988 book *George Washington Slept Here: Colonial Revivals and American Culture, 1876-1986*, a comprehensive cultural history of Washington. The context of this work arguably has less to do with the cultural climate of the United States and more relevance within the context of historical writing. Again, as Arnold outlined, the late twentieth century for history writers saw a shift towards cultural questions. This book is a perfect example of this shift because it examines “Washington imagery in the popular culture” from 1876 to the 1980s in order to better understand his significance within the culture.⁹¹ She examines all ranges of objects from paintings to stamps, and dinner plates to party invitations. One of the most interesting examples in this study is Marling’s survey of the ways that the prayer at Valley Forge was used in popular culture.

The prayer at Valley Forge was a depiction of Washington alone with his horse in dark snowy woods in his General’s uniform with bowed head and on one knee praying for protection over the Continental Army. This scenario is a work of fiction but that has meant little to anyone. Marling explains that this image was painted in

⁹¹ Karal Ann Marling, *George Washington Slept Here: Colonial Revivals and American Culture, 1876-1986* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), vii.

1854 by Lambert Sachs and again by John McRae in 1866.⁹² In 1928 the United States Postal Service chose to use this image as the commemorative Valley Forge sesquicentennial stamp and again in 1977 as the Christmas stamp.⁹³ The Saturday Evening Post also used this image on the cover of the 1935 issue published on Washington's birthday.⁹⁴ Marling elaborates that before the Civil War this image was viewed as parable, however as the country moved towards civil war it was increasingly used as a symbol of unity and propaganda "arguing first for the preservation and then for the restoration of the United States of America that George Washington and God had called into being in the cold, white-clad woods of Valley Forge."⁹⁵ It could have been this image that Ford had in mind when he described Washington as an untouchable hero. This example, and more broadly Marling's book, epitomizes the fact that public memory is largely influenced by the story that is emphasized in popular culture whether it is verity or not.

Barry Schwartz, professor of sociology, researched that last notion more thoroughly in his 1991 article "Social Change and

⁹² Ibid., 3-4.

⁹³ Ibid., 2-3.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 4-5.

Collective Memory: The Democratization of George Washington.”

While it may seem out of place to include a sociologist in this examination it actually lends itself well as an amalgamation of social and cultural histories pertinent to the topic. Instead of historically examining the life of George Washington or the use of his likeness, as previous sources have done, Schwartz considers the social reasons why these memories of Washington are developed. Schwartz claims that collective memory is the result of seeing “the past as a social construction shaped by the concerns and needs of the present.”⁹⁶ This point has been made clear as it relates to previously mentioned sources. He explains, “Between 1800 and 1865, Americans remembered George Washington as a man of remoteness, gentility, and flawless virtue; after 1865 they began to remember him as an ordinary, imperfect man with whom common people could identify.”⁹⁷ Not surprisingly, between 1865 and 1920, an era of reform and a time when the United States became a world superpower, Washington became the common man and during the 1920s, a height of prosperity in many ways for the United States, Washington became a

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Barry Schwartz, “Social Change and Collective Memory: The Democratization of George Washington,” *American Sociological Review* 56 (1991): 221.

“businessman and captain of industry” and so the evolution continues.⁹⁸ More specifically, Schwartz considers the number and types of biographies written about Washington before and after the Civil War.

Before the Civil War an average of sixty three biographies were written or reprinted on Washington and as the threat of civil war drew nearer the number of biographies rose to approximately eighty six.⁹⁹ Many of these biographies, like Ford’s, discussed Washington’s success in his private life and set him above the rest when it came to his public dealings.¹⁰⁰ They valued his character, revered his social status, and lauded him for being the father of our country, or his as the case may be. Before war was imminent it was not necessary to incite deep patriotism or military interest among citizens. Morality would be one of the primary concerns. Once Civil War took over the nation, Washington was being bandied between the North and South, each using him to validate their positions by claiming his support.¹⁰¹ If anyone could garner support they likely believed it would be Washington. By the 1860s, however, only forty seven biographies

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 223.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 224.

were published and the number declined to thirty four in the 1870s and 1880s.¹⁰² It must be understood that prior to the Civil War, the Revolutionary War was the only conflict of any kind in United States memory. The Civil War saw an unprecedented amount of death and political and civil strife which met a climax with the assassination of Abraham Lincoln who eventually became the new hero. Schwartz puts into words what Marling depicted with images and that is the fact that the memory of a past event is essentially constructed out of necessity in the present.

Finally, Seth Bruggeman, professor of history and American studies at Temple University, grapples with these similar issues concerning George Washington and memory in his 2008 book *Here George Washington Was Born: Memory, Material Culture, and the Public History of a National Monument*. Bruggeman incorporates social and cultural history writing into what began as an agency history for the National Park Service. His analysis of “how and what we choose to remember and why those choices change over time,” is

¹⁰² Ibid.

specifically applied to Washington's birthplace.¹⁰³ In short, Washington's birthplace was not significant to him. It was Washington's grandson who placed a marker at the site in 1815 that eventually awarded it national attention.¹⁰⁴ In 1923 a wealthy Virginian woman commissioned a replica of Washington's birthplace to be made on the site of its exact location. The director of the National Park Service loved the idea so much a deal was made to hand over the building to the Park Service once it was built.¹⁰⁵ The house was completed in 1930 and became known as Memorial House. Unfortunately, it was built in the wrong location and looked nothing like Washington's actual birthplace.¹⁰⁶ It eventually came out that no evidence of what the house looked like or what was contained within it existed.¹⁰⁷ What followed was much contest over how to interpret this place and its meaning. Women wanted to have their stories told, there was a call to have racial injustices depicted, the need to fight communism, and other similar instances throughout the development of this place that effected the changes made to it. Today there is still

¹⁰³ Seth C. Bruggeman, *Here George Washington Was Born: Memory, Material Culture, and the Public History of a National Monument* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 2008), 9.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 92.

no answer to how to properly interpret George Washington in this place, a place historians have no photographic evidence of. Recently, Bruggeman says, it has been suggested that the Park Service use Memorial House to depict the history of the Park Service or to depict the history of commemoration in the United States instead of used as a place to memorialize George Washington.¹⁰⁸ No decision has been made concerning those proposals but what this situation exemplifies is how difficult it is to find the truth behind a man stifled by assumptions, myth, and the story of what people need him to be.

As aforementioned, these sources may superficially seem quite disparate but when they are all considered in the larger scope of how historical writings developed from strictly seeking political gain, to social histories of the everyday person, and to cultural considerations of things, it can be seen how these writings change the memory of George Washington and so fit nicely together. This essay could have examined only biographies, only material culture, only public spaces, but the value of exploring these different groups together is that it becomes clearer how history writing on the topic changed over time and that all of these genres contribute to the image of Washington. The

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 203.

two biographies used here by Ford and Alden propagate the idealized heroic George Washington, as much as they also want to emphasize him as a common man. Ford's work is a great example of a social history of Washington because it examines his daily life and his life outside of politics. Alden's book is more of a quasi-social history because its focus is in telling Washington's life in the military. Both of these biographies, though, are products of their historical context and are similar to how other historians of the time were writing. The same goes for Marling's cultural history. The 1980s saw a cultural turn in the ways history was written and considered and Marling produced a work that did exactly that. The imagery of the prayer at Valley Forge specifically demonstrates how culture connected with a mythical interpretation of Washington and chose to remember him in that way. Schwartz contributed to social and cultural history as well. His sociological consideration displayed how the idea of Washington was manipulated within contemporary culture. Finally, Bruggeman also encompassed both the social and cultural history of Washington by navigating and making available the history of Washington's reconstructed and reinterpreted birthplace. An amalgamation of all of these sources may reveal who the "real" George Washington is or

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perhaps they could just be manipulated into what we need George

Washington to be in this moment.