

# PATERNITY, U.S.A.

by

FREDERICK D. MALKINSON



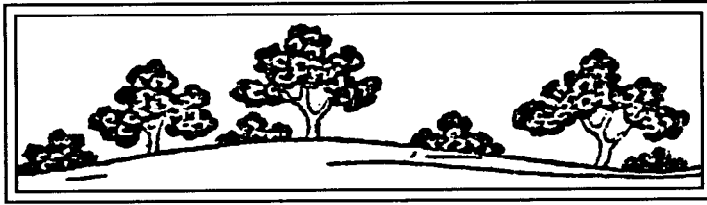
THE CHICAGO LITERARY CLUB

5 April 1999

COPYRIGHT © 1999 BY FREDERICK D. MALKINSON  
(All rights reserved)

## PREFACE

This paper reviews many both little-known and well-recognized controversial aspects of George Washington's career, and the manner in which Mason Locke Weems' *The Life of Washington*, the first biography of our first president, then played an essential role in establishing Washington's everlasting fame.



## Paternity, U.S.A.

George Washington was not an uncontroversial figure when he died. Especially during his high-profile presidential years, his judgment and integrity were widely assailed, and he was repeatedly criticized for the employment of doubtful constitutional means to evade or silence his enemies. The extremes in which Washington was held during the course of his public career are well exemplified by just two of an incredible number of press reports. On June 20, 1791, the *Connecticut Courant* stated: "Many a private man might make a great President; but will there ever be a President who will make so great a man as WASHINGTON?" The following appeared on December 23, 1796, in the Philadelphia *Aurora*: "If ever a nation was debauched by a man, the American nation has been debauched by WASHINGTON. If ever a nation was deceived by a man, the American nation has been deceived by WASHINGTON. Let his conduct . . . serve to be a warning that no man may be an idol. . . . let the history of the Federal government instruct mankind, that the masque of patriotism may be worn to conceal the foulest designs against the liberties of the people."

### *Paternity, U.S.A.*

On the one hand, Washington's supporters, a majority of the population, could readily enumerate his many virtues and the sources of their admiration. Physically, Washington was a handsome and commanding figure, standing well over six-feet tall in an age when he towered over most of his contemporaries. Even in London it was said that "Not a King in Europe but would look like a valet de chambre by his side." He was intelligent, judicious, dignified and "had a quality of assured competence that made men ready to follow him." During the French and Indian and the Revolutionary Wars, he took the most extreme, even reckless risks, but bullets that tore his clothing and killed his horses always left him unscathed. One of the officers in his frontier corps wrote of the twenty-six-year-old Washington: "In our earliest infancy you took us under your tuition, trained us in the practice of that discipline which alone can constitute good troops. . . . Your steady adherence to impartial justice, your quick discernment and invariable regard to merit . . . first heightened our natural emulation, and our desire to excel." Washington was a born leader, but variously described as modest, courteous and eminently thoughtful. He blended amiability and reserve and was considered by most to be a charming and gregarious host and conversationalist.

Washington's main accomplishments during the Revolutionary War were to keep the Continental army intact and a constant threat to, or thorn in the side of, the British troops. He was also forced to make decisions with much wider implications than the purely military ones. Since the Continental Congress officially gave him powers to determine certain

### *Paternity, U.S.A.*

civilian concerns, Washington became, while commander in chief, as much of a chief executive as the colonies then had. These responsibilities, and his many years in public view, made Washington a most likely candidate to lead a post-war government. At the end of the war, his spontaneous resignation as commander in chief, Cincinnatus-style, was a momentous and magnanimous step that almost none of history's earlier statesmen-warriors had taken.

Following Washington's unanimous election by the electors, he essentially had to invent the presidency as he pursued his years in office, establishing numerous precedents that continue to the present day. Despite growing factionalism and increasing political attacks, Washington was overwhelmingly re-elected for a second term. Throughout, Washington provided the leadership and sense of purpose and coherence needed for the United States' newly synthesized form of democratic government. As Gary Wills has stated: "Washington has embodied during his lifetime, the American character. . . . he demonstrated the possibility of and the relationship between public and private virtues in America." As for Washington's willingness to relinquish the power of the presidency after his second term, his erstwhile enemy, George III, said that his retirement from the presidency, coupled with his resignation as commander in chief fourteen years earlier, "placed him in a light the most distinguished of any man living," and that he was "the greatest character of the age."

Needless to say, Washington's detractors—and there were large numbers, both here and abroad—had very different assessments of the man and his accomplishments. Wash-

### *Paternity, U.S.A.*

ington was depicted as an individual who often lacked control of his emotions and was noted for his volcanic temper, a man educated only through the equivalent of the primary grade level who showed little evidence of intellectual growth thereafter. He was seen as overly ambitious, yearning for glory, and, especially in his land dealings, strongly motivated by acquisitive tendencies. He was portrayed as indifferent to religion, excessively cruel in his campaigns against the Indians, and "a man who should be remembered as a slave holder and . . . whose career owed much simply to good luck" as Wesley Frank Craven has written.

Again, on a personal level, Washington was observed to be an overly proud man, somewhat vain, painfully sensitive to criticism and quick to blame his shortcomings as a military leader on his superiors or his subordinates. He often appeared austere, almost glacial, was neither fluent nor eloquent and was not warm in his affections. Edward Thornton, the post-war secretary to the British ambassador, described Washington as follows: "Of his private character I can say but little positive. I have never heard of any truly noble, generous, or disinterested action of his; he has very few who are on terms of intimate and unreserved friendship. . . ."

There were many critics not only of Washington's personal characteristics but of numerous actions he took during his almost three decades of public life. Early in his military career on the western frontier in the 1750's, Washington, overlooking the fact that England and France were not at war, led an attack on a small party of Frenchmen, killing ten and taking the rest prisoner, only to find that he had set upon a peaceful

*Paternity, U.S.A.*

diplomatic mission and had killed its leader. The French, infuriated, responded by launching a massive attack on Fort Necessity, which Washington had incredibly constructed in a valley overshadowed by forests and hills from which the French and their Indian allies poured down a withering and decisive fire. In the rain the fort's roof leaked, ruining the gunpowder. Washington surrendered after a third of his force of several hundred men lay dead or wounded. The defeat won the French many new Indian allies, and an English pamphleteer wrote that Washington's surrender was "the most infamous a British subject ever put his hand to." In 1756, Washington commanded one thousand men in Virginia to battle increasing Indian raids and massacres on the frontier. Imposing strict discipline, he ordered brutal floggings of his men for looting, swearing, gambling and other similar offenses. His recruiting practices and his cashiering of men at pleasure, even for cheating at cards, came under sharp criticism by the Virginia House of Burgesses. The *Virginia Gazette* attacked him for abusing his men, while others accused him of long absences from the front while settlers were killed and their houses burned. At the conclusion of over five years of frontier military service, Washington never won more than a skirmish, lost a fort, surrendered a regiment and utterly failed in his quest to protect Virginia's frontier families against Indian attacks. In 1758, he resigned his commission.

Washington's later leadership of the Continental army was marked by recurrent criticism from his soldiers, his officers and members of the Continental Congress. In the first four



### *Paternity, U.S.A.*

years of the war he lost every major engagement. His men were forced to retreat so often that Washington came to be called "the master of the retrograde maneuver." The final defeat of the British was largely the result of their inept leadership (they utilized four commanders in chief in eight years), incredibly long supply lines across the Atlantic Ocean, the gigantic size of the American battlefield, and Washington's critical assistance from the French army and fleet at Yorktown. For a final sardonic evaluation of Washington's role in the Revolution, John Adams wrote: "The history of our Revolution will be one continued lie from one end to the other. The essence of the whole will be that Dr. Franklin's electric rod smote the earth and outsprung General Washington. That Franklin electrised him with his rod, and thenceforth these two conducted all the policy negotiations, legislatures, and war."

Washington's acts and decisions as our first president cannot be summarized here. But it was during these years (1789-97) that criticism of Washington, with opposition to many of his policies, reached a crescendo. Chief among many of these were the rise of political factionalism and Washington's leaning toward Federalism versus the Republicans, his disgraceful sacking of Edmond Randolph, secretary of state, his excise taxes on alcoholic beverages which resulted in the Whiskey Rebellion, and, particularly, his support of the Jay Treaty with England, which infuriated the Republicans and many in the general population with their strong bias toward France as America's old ally. Repeated unlawful advances by the U.S. Treasury of "expense" monies to

### *Paternity, U.S.A.*

Washington, far exceeding his presidential salary, further tarnished his luster in the eyes of many. His seeming monarchical behavior occasioned the *National Gazette* to write of him: "He holds levees like a King, makes treaties like a King, answers petitions like a King . . . and swallows adulation like a King. . . ." When Washington left the president's office in 1797, Benjamin Bache wrote in the *Aurora*: "If ever there was a period for rejoicing, it is this moment."

Washington's retirement to Mount Vernon from the presidency was short-lived. He died on December 14, 1799, after a brief bout of quinsy, an acute infection of the throat with severe progressive swelling which ultimately cut off his airway. After his death controversial assessments of Washington's life and career continued, ranging from Henry Lee's famous and fulsome phrase: "First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen" to Thomas Paine's vitriolic quatrain. Imprisoned during the French Revolution, Paine bore continued anger toward Washington who, on the one hand, had had his officers read sections of Paine's fiercely uplifting pamphlet, *The American Crisis*, to his troops during the Revolutionary War, but, on the other hand, had refused to intercede on the imprisoned Paine's behalf despite the fact that Paine held American citizenship. Paine wrote:

Take from the mine the coldest hardest stone,  
It needs no fashion, it is Washington;  
But if you chisel, let your strokes be rude,  
And on his breast engrave *Ingratitude!*

### *Paternity, U.S.A.*

Suddenly, in January 1800, just one month after Washington's demise, to paraphrase the title of a famous Ivan Albright painting, there suddenly came into the literary world a soul called Mason Locke Weems. Although he wrote largely in the genre of what we call today historical fiction, Weems nonetheless was destined to write the most widely read, longest printed, and arguably the most influential biography ever published in the United States. The first biography ever to be devoted to Washington, it still remains today in new volumes on bookstore shelves two hundred years after Washington's death.

Mason Locke Weems was born on October 1, 1759, in Herring Creek near Annapolis, Maryland. He attended Kent County School in Chestertown, near Baltimore, and at the age of fourteen was sent to Great Britain to study medicine, although there is no clear evidence that he ever received a medical degree. He returned to the colonies in 1776, but there is no record of how he spent the Revolutionary War years. During that time, however, he came under the influence of Dr. William Smith, who had become rector at Chestertown in 1779 as well as head of the Kent County School. It appears that Weems' early talents for speech-making, his unbridled imagination, and his talents for anecdotes decided him to consider an alternate career to medicine. Through Smith's influence he was promised a church, and in 1782 he returned to London to study for the clergy. In 1784, having been ordained in the Anglican Church and admitted to the priesthood by the Archbishop of Canterbury, he returned to Maryland and his parish. By this time, however, post-war

### *Paternity, U.S.A.*

disaffection with the Anglican Church had decimated clerical prerogatives, and the church's poll tax had been abolished. Although Weems kept his parish for several years, he was forced to establish a girls' school to support himself. But both his liberal views (he had freed slaves left to him at his father's death, for example) and his newly undertaken crusading zeal, especially for temperance, began to offend many of his parishioners. Finally, in 1792, he abruptly left his pulpit and embarked on more than a thirty-year career as an author, traveling book seller, and "purveyor of morality." He became an itinerant foot peddler, pack on back, still dressed in clerical garb and charming his way to innumerable meals and offers of overnight stays during his travels. On occasion he was not loathe to take up the duties of the cloth again when requested to do so in locales bereft of church and clergy. Passage on foot was difficult with the prevalent obstacles of bad weather, poor roads, and swamps and rivers to ford, but Weems was an intrepid traveler.

In 1793 he established an association—to last a lifetime—with Mathew Carey, a famed printer, publisher and author in Philadelphia, receiving from Carey a generous and varied stock of books to be sold. His sales travels now took him incessantly back and forth from New York City to as far south as Virginia.

In 1795 Weems married Fanny Ewall, daughter of an affluent tobacco merchant whom Weems had met on his travels to Virginia. By that time he had earned enough money to purchase a home in Dumfries, Virginia, a town only eighteen miles from Mount Vernon. The Ewall's home,

### *Paternity, U.S.A.*

Bel Air, was nearby and the Ewalls were related to Washington's mother's family. Since Washington was an occasional visitor to Bel Air, Weems achieved a certain, at least second-hand contact with and knowledge of Washington, although whether the two were actually acquainted is uncertain. However, in 1796 Weems organized a symposium, chaired by Benjamin Franklin, entitled "The Immortal Mentor, or Man's Unerring Guide to a Healthy, Wealthy, and Happy Life." The resulting tract was devoted "to the home virtues and the simple life," and Washington was persuaded to contribute to the title page, which he did as follows: "I have perused it with singular satisfaction and hesitate not to say that it is, in my opinion at least, an invaluable compilation. I cannot but hope that a book whose contents do so much credit to its title will meet a very generous patronage."

At about this time Weems finally gave up his pedestrian ways and invested in a covered "Jersey Waggon," in which he carried a bookcase and a violin and which enabled him to extend his business trips as far south as Savannah, Georgia. Undaunted by "roads horrid and suns torrid" and depending upon the occasion, he was always ready to deliver a political oration, a sermon or a solo fiddle concert. With the crowd he had attracted he would then sell his books from the wagon.

Weems now began writing his next manuscript in what was to be a series of pamphlets. Entitled *The Philanthropist: or a Good Twenty-five Cents Worth of Political Love Powder for Honest Adamsites and Jeffersonites*, it was a protest against factionalism, which had already arisen between Federalists and Republicans, especially during Washington's second term.

### *Paternity, U.S.A.*

He added a jingoistic paean of praise to the military, and detailed the first of what would be many elaborate and fanciful tales in his later writings. Washington, well-known for his abhorrence of factionalism and the beginning rise of political parties, wrote Weems as follows in August 1799: "Much indeed is it to be wished that the Sentiments contained in your pamphlet, and the doctrine it endeavors to inculcate, were more prevalent. Happy would it be for this Country at least, if they were so."

As early as 1797 Weems had become interested in books about Revolutionary War heroes, having found on his travels that the public was repeatedly asking for them. Since no other author was attempting to meet this demand, Weems began to write about Washington and informed Carey that cheap books on Revolutionary War heroes would sell well: "People here think nothing of giving . . . (their quarter of a dollar) for anything that pleases their fancy. Let us give them something worth their money." On June 24, 1799, he wrote Carey again: "I have nearly ready for the press a piece christen<sup>d</sup> . . . *The Beauties of Washington*. 'Tis artfully drawn up, enliven<sup>d</sup> with anecdotes, and in my humble opinion, marvelously fitted (to American tastes). What say you to printing it for me and ordering a copper plate Frontispiece of that Heroe, something in this way. George Washington Esq. The Guardian Angel of his Country. 'Go thy way old George. Die when thou wilt we shall never look upon thy like again.'

"N.B. The whole will make but four sheets and will sell like flaxseed at a quarter of a dollar. I could make you a world of pence and popularity by it."

### *Paternity, U.S.A.*

One month after Washington's death, Weems wrote Carey again: "I've something to whisper in your lug. Washington, you know is gone! Millions are gaping to read something about him. I am very nearly prim<sup>d</sup> and cock<sup>d</sup> for 'em. 6 months ago I set myself to collect anecdotes of him. My plan! I give his history, sufficiently minute—I accompany him from his start, thro the French and Indian and British or Revolutionary wars, to the President's chair, to the throne in the hearts of 5,000,000 People. I then go to show that his unparalleled rise and elevation were owing to Great Virtues. 1 His Veneration for the Deity, or Religious Principles. 2 His Patriotism. 3rd His Magninmity. 4 His Industry. 5 His Temperance and Sobriety. 6 His Justice (etc., etc.). Thus I hold up his great Virtues . . . to the imitation of Our Youth. All this I have lin<sup>d</sup> and enliven<sup>d</sup> with *Anecdotes apropos interesting* and *Entertaining*. I have read it to several Gentlemen whom I thought judges, such as Presbyterian Clergymen, Classical Scholars (etc., etc.) and they all commend it much. . . . We may sell it with great rapidity for 25 or 37 Cents and it wd not cost 10. . . . I am thinking you could vend it admirably: as it would be the first. I can send it on, half of it, *Immediately*."

Carey, however, expressed much less interest in the manuscript than Weems. At this point Weems made his own arrangement for publication in February 1800. The first printing was from Baltimore, the second from Georgetown, and the third and fourth, finally arranged by a repentant Carey, from Philadelphia. Weems centered the book principally on Washington's early years and stated in his preface that he was writing primarily for both children and adults.

### *Paternity, U.S.A.*

He then stated his theory of biography: "True he has been seen in *greatness*: but it is only the greatness of public character, which is no evidence of *true greatness*; for a public character is often an artificial one. . . . It is not, then in the glare of *public*, but in the shade of *private life* that we are to look for the man. . . ."

The eighty-page pamphlet was entitled *A History of the Life and Death, Virtues and Exploits of General George Washington; dedicated to Mrs. Washington, by the Rev. M.L. Weems of Dumfries*. For the first six years the text was not substantially changed. By 1808, however, with the publication of the sixth edition, the text now numbered about 250 pages and was close to its final form. The new title was *The Life of George Washington, With Curious Anecdotes Equally Honorable to Himself and Exemplary to His Young Countrymen*. Weems was self-described on the title page as "the Former Rector of Mt. Vernon Parish," a patently non-existent parish. Of this expanded edition, one recent Weems biographer wrote that "it bubbled with intimate anecdotes of Washington's boyhood, the authenticity of which is as doubtful as Weems' assumed rectorship." By 1810 this book was a runaway best seller, having sold over fifty thousand copies in a largely illiterate population. By 1825 the Washington biography had reached its twenty-ninth printing and, to this date, has gone through more than eighty.

Although Weems had made at least a small fortune on his Washington biography, he continued his itinerant ways, preaching, playing his fiddle, and selling books—his own and those of many other authors, especially novels, political and religious tracts and volumes of poetry. Many more pub-



### *Paternity, U.S.A.*

lications—twenty-six in all—were to come from Weems' own pen as well. His biography of Francis Marion, the *Swamp Fox*, published in 1810 was his second most popular book, remaining widely sold and repeatedly printed into the 1890's. He published additional biographies of Benjamin Franklin in 1815 and William Penn in 1822, as well as many pamphlets condemning sundry vices, such as *God's Revenge Against Murder* (1807), *The Drunkard's Looking Glass* (1812), *God's Revenge Against Adultery* (1815), *God's Revenge Against Dueling* (1820), and the *Bad Wife's Looking Glass* (1823). As usual these tracts were laced with many lively, incredibly embellished anecdotes, or stories that were totally fabricated.

By now Weems had memorized major portions of the Bible, the Hymnal and the Book of Prayer so that he could conduct impromptu services without a book. This he often did on village squares or the porch of a store or wherever he could attract a crowd of people. As he traveled the same routes repeatedly he gradually became well known for his anecdotes, his sense of humor and his pious views. Harold Kellock writes: "In all his travels he never failed to make chance events serve the purpose of pushing his wares before the public. If he was ready for a fair or a church service, he was equally ready to make a drunkard on the street or a broken gamester the theme of a homily that would lead to the sale of his ever-ready pamphlets." Sometimes Weems even assumed an actor's role to advance sales. He might enter a tavern, for example, play the role of a tippler going through successive stages of drunkenness, and end up selling numerous copies of his tract on alcoholism to his delighted audience.

### *Paternity, U.S.A.*

The fame of Weems' biography of Washington garnered him a number of invitations to address various state legislatures, since much of the book also contained a true and detailed history of Washington's public career. He delivered a practiced and highly popular oration evoking the virtues of Washington's life and deeds, including a paean of praise for the republican form of government and a thunderous critique of the tyranny and dangers of monarchy. He was invited later on to give this same address to the House of Representatives in Washington, D.C.

In most of his last fifteen years Weems continued to travel, to hone his own unparalleled salesmanship, to preach whenever the opportunity arose, and to write. By this time he was well known throughout all of his travel routes up and down the East Coast and, as Kellock states: "Many lively tales and legends were woven about him who had been himself the originator of so much American folklore." Weems became inactive in the last few years of his life, though by that time he had accumulated some wealth and wide fame as a biographer and pamphleteer. In 1825 he died at the age of sixty-six in Beaufort, South Carolina, and was buried at Bel Air, the family home in Virginia.

With the publication of Weems' *Washington*, the first of its subject, Weems created a national symbol and a model hero as an emblem for a brand new form of government, an unproven experiment in broad-based democracy. At that time this country had no national literature, no national written history, and no common heritage after renouncing that shared with England. The individual states still pitted

*Paternity, U.S.A.*

themselves occasionally against the sovereignty of the federal government and at times even threatened secession. Weems' immensely popular book was, in a sense, a pro-Federalist tract since it established Washington as "an American first, a Virginian second." Further, the importance of Weems' *Washington* is best understood in the context of its times. Current belief in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was that persons and personalities were the sole agents of historical change and development. Emerson wrote in 1841: "There is properly no History, only Biography." Thomas Carlyle stated that: "The history of the world is but the biography of great men." In this country specially ordained roles had been ascribed to certain early settlers, such as John Winthrop and William Bradford. Later the nation's founders were similarly enshrined. But, marking the origin of the Republic, Washington was widely seen as the hero who had directly led the states to that national union through his successive roles as commander in chief of the Continental army, presiding officer of the Constitutional Congress and first elected president.

In the literature of Weems' times, patriotic fervor and ideology, along with outright myth making, often supplanted or embellished simple facts. As Peter Conn has stated, "... biographies of American heroes were often mere exercises in secular piety and hero worship." Anticipating Emerson's later statement, Weems believed that for the well-known subjects of his biographies, the meaning of the past could best be uncovered through narratives of their lives, deeds, statements and writings. In Washington's case he also wanted to emphasize

### *Paternity, U.S.A.*

his virtues in private life as a model for all Americans, especially young Americans, though little was known about Washington's youth or private life at that time. Weems wrote: "Of those private deeds of Washington very little has been said. In most of the elegant orations pronounced to his praise, you see nothing of Washington the *dutiful son*—the affectionate brother—the cheerful schoolboy—the diligent surveyor—the neat draftsman—the laborious farmer—the widow's husband—the orphan's father—the poor man's friend. No! This is not the Washington you see; tis only Washington the HERO, and the Demigod. . . ." Weems focused on Washington's private virtues, "for in these every youth is interested, because in these every youth may become a Washington," sentiments that well displayed Weems' sensitivity to his prospective audience.

In his biography Weems did his best to fill in these various blanks, interviewing many friends, acquaintances and relatives of Washington who had known him from early childhood. He was also in contact with Bushrod Washington, George Washington's literary executor. Weems wrote his biography with verve, humor and occasionally Homeric prose, interlarded with colloquial dialogue. The book was vastly embellished with fanciful events and freshly conceived myths destined to take on extraordinary lives of their own. Illustrative of myth and characteristic of Weems' prose, there is no more famous American legend than his fabricated story of George Washington and the cherry tree, which first appeared in the 1808 sixth edition of the biography, and was allegedly told to Weems by a distant relative of Washington's. Six-year old George, armed with a new hatchet "unluckily

*Paternity, U.S.A.*

tried the edge . . . on the body of a beautiful young English cherry-tree which he barked terribly. . . ." The next morning his father discovered the tragedy and nobody could tell him anything about it. When George and his hatchet appeared, his father asked him if he knew who had killed his cherry tree. "This was a *tough question* . . . but . . . looking at his father, with the sweet face of youth brightened with the inexpressible charm of all-conquering youth, he bravely cried out, 'I can't tell a lie, Pa; you know I can't tell a lie. I did cut it with my hatchet'—'Run to my arms, you dearest boy,' cried his father in transports, 'run to my arms; glad am I, George, that you killed my tree; for you have paid me for it a thousandfold. Such an act of heroism in my son, is more worth than a thousand trees, though blossomed with silver, and their fruits of purest gold.'"

Although this and other Weems myths were later included in the widely read schoolbook, McGuffey's reader, one might still ask why the cherry-tree story, for one, survives. Weems probably meant only to illustrate the virtue of Washington's strict honesty by this tale, but much has been written in general about mythology in terms of heroes, history, national origins and religious beliefs. Myths are reminiscent of dreams, employ fantasy, produce their own kind of logic and distort normal relationships to say nothing, frequently, of truth. Of national myths James Robertson has written: "All societies depend for their continuity, for their very existence, on common assumptions, common forms of communications, common . . . thoughts and ideas, common patterns of behavior and ritual, and a common inheritance."

### *Paternity, U.S.A.*

The myth analysts have had a field day with their various interpretations of the cherry-tree legend. For just one example, Robertson writes: "The story implies the challenge and thrill of a child disobeying the injunction or (threatening) something the parent treasures. . . . The act was symbolic—the cherry tree was an English tree. The father, alias George III, is depicted as displaying older, autocratic ways. Washington will defy these old ways and the authorities. . . . The immigrant to America had to defy the family and the familiar, destroy the treasured possession of the family tree and community in order to leave them and venture into the New World. . . . The [cherry-tree] story fulfills the wish of every rebellious child that rebellion and independence will be met with approval and will result in being once again enfolded in the arms of the father." Lastly Robertson pointed out that the act of cutting a tree was also the very act Americans know as that of "civilizing and settling virgin land—necessary to build a log cabin, supply fuel for warmth and cooking, build stockades and split rails for fences."

Several other fanciful stories about Washington, the boy and the man, appeared in the Weems biography. These included the cabbage-seed story—seeds when planted later sprouted into the words "George Washington" leaving young George with "the good spirit of God ingrafted on his heart." This story was plagiarized from James Beattie's commemoration of his dead son published in Scotland in 1799. Other fables included Washington's mother's dream of her house afire, bravely extinguished by five-year old George; the account of the admirable young athlete, George, who

*Paternity, U.S.A.*

was often seen to throw a stone across the Rappahannock; the story of the "famous Indian warrior" who fired seventeen times at Washington, but was mysteriously unable to hit him; Washington's wildly overblown death scene, obviously meant to imply a second resurrection with a detailed description of his ascent to heaven where Benjamin Franklin and other great patriots "embrace him in transports of tenderness unutterable"; the Valley Forge prayer story, and several others.

The Valley Forge anecdote is especially interesting as an impressive and classic example of how a totally mythical event can be transformed into actual historical reality. Weems wrote: "... one [of the Valley Forge inhabitants] ... was passing thoughtfully the edge of a wood near the [army] camp, heard low sounds ... paused to listen and ... saw Washington engaged in prayer. ... on returning home [he] told his family he knew the Americans would succeed, for their leader did not trust in his own strength, but sought aid from the Hearer of [his] prayer." In actuality Washington attended church infrequently, was never seen to kneel in prayer, may well have been a deist, and in his writings frequently invoked Providence, but not God. The passerby, a Quaker, was later claimed by others to be Isaac Potts, who came into possession of a house in Valley Forge at the end of the Revolutionary War, but was nowhere near this area in the winter of 1777. Nonetheless the power and allure of this mythic event first led to a related bronze inscription placed on the Subtreasury building in New York City, followed by the later conversion of the Potts home into a shrine and the subsequent laying of the cornerstone of the Washington Memorial Chapel in Valley

### *Paternity, U.S.A.*

Forge in 1903. Then in 1928 the government issued a red two-cent stamp showing Washington praying at Valley Forge, a stamp that adorned the regular mails for many years until the first-class postage rate was increased to three cents. Finally, in Washington, D.C., in 1955, a private chapel for members of Congress was opened which contained, as its principal artistic feature, a stained glass window depicting the kneeling figure of Washington in prayer at Valley Forge.

For almost the entire nineteenth century a large number of Washington's biographers continued to reproduce Weems' legendary materials in their own writings. One of them, who had read Weems' *Washington* at age ten, said of the book: "It was true to its great office . . . and that was, to make the American youth feel and believe that Washington was the greatest man that ever lived . . . and that the country he delivered was the greatest country on the globe." Interestingly, president-elect Abraham Lincoln addressed the New Jersey Senate on February 21, 1861, as follows: "May I be pardoned if, upon this occasion, I mention that away back in my childhood . . . I got hold of a small book, . . . Weems' *Life of Washington*. I remember all the accounts there . . . of the . . . struggles for the liberties of the country." Contemporary sources state that Weems' *Washington*, which Lincoln read repeatedly, may have been the only book he owned as a young man. It appears that the book provided Lincoln with a model of self-discipline and both characterological and intellectual influences as an upholder of virtue and constitutional order. Finally, although the validity of some of Weems' anecdotes was questioned even during his lifetime



### *Paternity, U.S.A.*

and, indeed, entirely discounted by some, a children's book printed as recently as 1954 stated: "Stories about George Washington as a boy have been retold so often through the years that even though we're not sure they really did happen, they have become a part of the story of America. And they do tell us something of the kind of boy he was."

In sum, Weems supplied distinct needs for the American imagination in the nineteenth century. His remarkable success reflects his exalted subject matter and the style of his writing. He succeeded much more than many who followed in putting a human face on his hero. As Marcus Cunliffe has written: "[Weems] should be seen in context, as a stage in the history of American nationalism; of popular and juvenile literature. . . . American nationalism was a self-conscious creation, and George Washington was its chief symbol." Weems had discovered in his many travels what Americans wanted to read and the Washington biography satisfied all of their desires: romanticism, patriotism, religion, epic narrative, and humor. He also was the first to tell American children about the hero's childhood, and for this his anecdotes were essential illustrations of Washington's traits and character in a young country still lacking a folklore of its own. The myths all expressed some generally perceived truth about their subject as well as practical lessons that his actions held for other Americans. Weems' *Washington* also made available some of Washington's most notable speeches and addresses at a time when these were not readily available in print, thereby memorializing brilliantly his Farewell Address and other great rhetorical moments that marked Washington's career.

### *Paternity, U.S.A.*

Briefly, what of Weems the man? He was self-assured, endearing, high-spirited, an inveterate wanderer—though apparently an affectionate husband and father—an extravagant writer, salesman par excellence, a flamboyant, inveterate preacher, and a bit of the confidence man. As Cunliffe says: "We warm to him, though, because he is buoyant, bizarre and—a little pathetic." Peter Onuf, in his current introduction to Weems' ninth edition of the Washington biography writes: "Weems' humble readers knew that, in the final accounting, they were the true custodians of Washington's character and reputation. Only by sustaining and strengthening the Union, by preserving and extending the stage on which the rising generation of young patriots would play their own roles, could Americans become the 'GREAT AND HAPPY NATION' that George Washington envisioned."

Finally, since the *Life of Washington* also included much inspired and inspiring rhetoric from selected passages of Washington's numerous addresses, "Weems' great achievement was to . . . fashion a . . . father figure whose 'voice' would resonate for succeeding generations. . . . Weems played an essential role in fabricating the image of Washington that has since dominated the American historical imagination." It was Weems who secured Washington's everlasting fame, and who thereby so successfully and securely established himself as the father of the father of his country.

### Select Bibliography

- Boorstin, Daniel J. *The Americans: The National Experience*. New York: Random House, 1965.
- Brookhiser, Richard. *Founding Father: Rediscovering George Washington*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996.
- Bryan, William Alfred. "The Genesis of Weems' 'Life of Washington.'" *Americana* 36 (April 1942): 147-65.
- . *George Washington in American Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1952.
- Cunliffe, Marcus, ed. *Mason L. Weems' "The Life of Washington."* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1962.
- Flexner, James Thomas. *Washington The Indispensable Man*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1974.
- Kellock, Harold. *Parson Weems of the Cherry-Tree*. New York: The Century Company, 1928.
- Randall, Willard Sterne. *George Washington: A Life*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1997.
- Smith, Richard Norton. *Patriarch: George Washington and the New American Nation*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993.
- Van Tassel, David D. "The Legend Maker." *American Heritage* (February 1962): 58-9, 89-94.
- Weems, Mason Locke. *The Life of Washington*. New edition with primary documents and an introduction by Peter S. Onuf. Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1996.

This paper was written for The Chicago  
Literary Club and read before the Club on Monday  
evening, the fifth of April, Nineteen Hundred and  
Ninety-Nine. This edition of three hundred copies  
was printed for the Club in the month of  
September, Two Thousand.

PRINTED  
IN THE U.S.A.