

Mary Ball Washington, Mother of George Washington
1706-1789

"A Very Good Boy"

"I am not surprised at what George has done for he was always a very good boy."

These were the simple comments Mary Ball Washington made to La Fayette. He had come to see the matron of his friend and hero before his return to Europe at the end of the American Revolution. "So simple in her true greatness of soul, was this remarkable woman."

As we consider the matron behind the Father of America, what qualities did she possess that helped him to become a 'very good boy' and helped to shape the one who shaped America?

Industry and Self-reliance

Mary Ball was orphaned at age 12. At that time George Eskridge, a lawyer, became her guardian. After her marriage to Augustine Washington as his second wife she had five children, George being the oldest. He was named after her guardian. Augustine had two older sons from his first wife. After Augustine's death when George was eleven, Mary found a heavy load to bear. Here is a picture of colonial life. "It is difficult today, to appreciate the heavy load that Mrs. Washington tried to carry. Imagine, if we can, a household which included five children, the oldest one eleven, in a house which had no bathroom, no toilet, no running water, no electricity, no refrigeration, no kitchen range, no clock." "In the old days of Virginia women were taught habits of industry and self-reliance and in these Mrs. Washington was nurtured."

Principled

She applied herself and was "remarkable for vigor of intellect, strength of resolution, and inflexible firmness wherever principle was concerned." A childhood visitor to their home once stated, "...Of the mother I was ten times more afraid than I ever was of my

own parents; she awed me in the midst of her kindness, for she was indeed truly kind...Whoever has seen that awe inspiring air and manner, so characteristic of the Father of his country, will remember the matron as she appeared the presiding genius of her well-ordered household, commanding and being obeyed." Mary Washington taught her children obedience. She viewed this as of great importance. "An accepted tradition tells us that she was asked, somewhat later in life, to name the lesson which she had tried the hardest to teach George in his earliest years. She replied, laconically, 'The lesson-to obey.' "

Piety and Prayer

"As Mrs. Washington was connected with the church there [in Fredericksburg] her son no doubt shared, under her own eye, the benefits of divine worship, and such religious instruction as mothers in that day were eminently accustomed to give their children." "Tradition gives an interesting picture of the widow, with her little flock gathered around her, as was her daily wont, reading to them lessons of religion and morality out of some standard work. Her favorite volume was Sir Matthew Hale's Contemplations, moral and divine. The admirable maxims therein contained, for outward action as well as self-government, sank deep into the mind of George and doubtless had a great influence in forming his character...This mother's manual, bearing his mother's name, Mary Washington, written in her own hand, was ever preserved by him with filial care, and may be seen in the archives of Mount Vernon." "She was in the habit of repairing every day for prayer to a secluded spot, formed by rocks and trees, near her dwelling."

Plain But Dignified, without Promoting Pride

In her style and manner of dress Mary Washington was plain but dignified. She did not revel in the pomp and ceremony that would have been typically expected of European families of renown. She didn't revel in pride of her son's accomplishments although she acknowledged that he had a great destiny to fulfill. There is an account of her meeting with George Washington. "After an absence of nearly seven years...no pageantry of war proclaiming his coming, no trumpets sounded...Alone and on foot...the deliverer of

his country, the hero of the age repaired to pay his humble duty to her whom he venerated as the author of his being, the founder of his fortune and his fame. For full well he knew that the matron was made of sterner stuff than to be moved by all the pride that glory ever gave...She welcomed him with a warm embrace...She remarked of the lines which mighty cares and many trials, had made on his manly countenance-spoke much of old times, and old friends; but of his glory, not one word!"

There was an incident that took place in which Mary Washington's mother-instincts were used to change the course of her son's life and possibly the course of America. When George was a youth of fourteen years, his step-brother, Lawrence, worked to influence him to join the navy, for Lawrence had a love and experience on the sea. He had even named his farm Mount Vernon after Admiral Vernon for whom he had sailed. George had obtained a midshipman's warrant and his luggage was already on board of a man-of-war, "anchored in the river just below Mount Vernon. At the eleventh hour the mother's heart faltered. This was her eldest born." She needed him to work on the farm and prepare to be a farmer. Life at sea was very dangerous. She put her foot down and refused to let him go. By doing so, the commander-in-chief of the future American Army was preserved to fulfill his role on land and to preserve our liberties.

Mary Ball Washington died in 1789 of cancer at the age of eighty-four. She was buried near what is now known as Meditation Rock, the pile of rocks where she had spent time each day in prayer. (If you go to Fredericksburg, Virginia today you will see this inscription on the rock: Mary Ball Washington prayed for the safety of her son and country during the dark days of the Revolution. This tablet was presented by the National Mary Washington Memorial Association...)



Mary Ball Washington's faith was part of the heritage she left to her son, who also sought God. Here is one of many paintings depicting the eye-witnessed event of Washington kneeling in prayer during the dark days at Valley Forge during the American Revolution.

What had helped to make George Washington good from his mother was the combination of all these qualities working together to temper and forge the character of the greatest leader we have ever known. While we owe so much to George Washington who deserves our attention today, there is also a place of gratitude for this intrepid, tenacious mother who recognized her responsibility to train up a boy and who found him to 'be very good'.

Sincerely,

Peggy White (editorial staff)

Parts with quotes were taken from the following resources:

- The Women of the American Revolution by Elizabeth Ellet
- The Life of George Washington vol. 1, 4 by Washington Irving
- The Making of George Washington by William H. Wilbur

Pictures for this article were taken from: www.donandleslie.blogspot.com and <http://wikimapia.org>