

Mount Vernon and the Dilemma of a Revolutionary Slave Holder

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Most of George Washington's wealth came from the work of slaves. When his father died in 1743, 11-year-old George inherited 10 slaves. He gained another 18 slaves and the large plantation of Mount Vernon in Virginia when his half-brother died in 1754.

Washington was a successful plantation master, and by 1786, he tripled the size of Mount Vernon and owned 216 slaves.

Washington's wealth came from forcing other humans to work. They were his property, and he did not doubt slavery was wrong. The American Revolution changed his ideas about slavery. In 1775, Washington arrived in Massachusetts to command the Continental Army. He was surprised to discover that the Northerners allowed free African-Americans to be soldiers.

British tried to lure away slaves

After meeting with his officers, Washington changed this policy and tried to make an all-white army. The following month, the British army made a new rule. It would free any slave of a patriot who ran away and fought for the British.

Washington immediately understood the crisis created by this British promise of freedom. At the time, one out of every five people in the American colonies was black. The colonists might lose many slaves, and the British could gain many new soldiers. In fact, 17 slaves from Mount Vernon fled to fight for the British during the war. This quickly led Washington to change his mind. By December 1775, the Continental Army, in the North at least, included black soldiers.

Washington's revolutionary ideals also helped change his attitude toward slavery.

Like many other patriots, Washington said the British treated white Americans like slaves. This was just a comparison. White Americans were free men and women and not treated as badly as slaves. But Washington began to think of slavery differently. Washington went a major step beyond most slave masters. He tried to treat slaves better, and eventually, he even freed them.

Washington stands alone among Virginians

Washington's emancipation of his slaves was an unusual decision for a person of his time. He was the only Virginia Founding Father who freed his slaves. By the early 1770s, Washington clearly tried to improve life for the slaves on his plantation. From this point, he rarely bought a slave, and he tried to not sell his slaves away from Mount Vernon without their permission. Washington hoped to act as a humane master and at first kept slave families together.

But Washington found out that he could not make as much money when slaves were treated well. He ended up treating them cruelly and made them work very hard in order for his plantation to make a profit. He sometimes sold slaves to other countries, separating them from their families forever. Washington also ordered some slaves to be whipped or beaten.

Five months before his death, Washington wrote a will describing how his slaves were to be freed. He said child slaves should be trained in a job and learn to read and write. Elderly slaves should be taken care of. Washington knew that some of his heirs would be upset, because slaves were very valuable. He insisted they must free his slaves immediately after he died.

Some wanted stronger anti-slavery stand

Despite these actions, some say Washington did not go far enough. At his death in 1799, Mount Vernon included 317 slaves, but only 124 of them belonged to Washington and only these would be freed. The rest were owned by his wife. More importantly, Washington never said in public that slavery should end.

In a letter in 1786, he said that he wished lawmakers would slowly end slavery. Still, he never said that in public. In the end, Washington had a stronger commitment to the country than freeing slaves. He feared freeing the slaves would divide the new nation and cause a war.

It is clear that Washington struggled with this most important question.

Quiz

- 1 Based on the article, which of the following is TRUE?
- (A) Washington's perspective on slavery changed many times over the course of his life.
 - (B) Washington felt so strongly about freeing slaves that he was willing to risk going to war.
 - (C) Freeing his slaves caused Washington's plantation, Mount Vernon, to no longer be successful.
 - (D) After the British army's promise to free slaves who fought for the British, Washington decided to free his slaves.
- 2 Which sentence from the article BEST supports the idea that Washington wanted slavery to end in America?
- (A) The American Revolution changed his ideas about slavery.
 - (B) By December 1775, the Continental Army, in the North at least, included black soldiers.
 - (C) He tried to treat slaves better, and eventually, he even freed them.
 - (D) In a letter in 1786, he said that he wished lawmakers would slowly end slavery.
- 3 According to the article, which of the following accurately explains the relationship between the British and slavery in America?
- (A) They began treating free Americans like slaves.
 - (B) They announced that Americans were wrong to support slavery.
 - (C) They began freeing slaves who fought for them instead of for America.
 - (D) They announced that they would end slavery in America if they won the war.
- 4 Which section of the article explains HOW Washington might have influenced whether the nation went to war over slavery?
- (A) Introduction [paragraphs 1-3]
 - (B) "British tried to lure away slaves"
 - (C) "Washington stands alone among Virginians"
 - (D) "Some wanted stronger anti-slavery stand"