

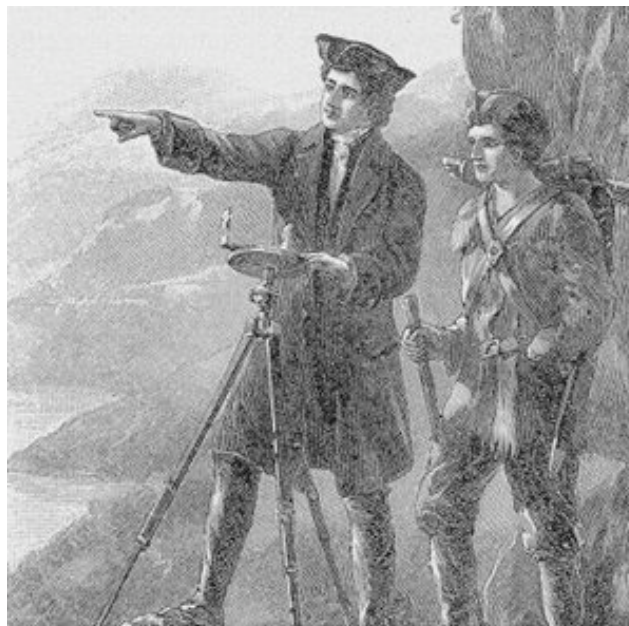
# USA's First President – Surveyor George Washington

Donald BUHLER

**Key words:** History, Surveyor, Washington, Public Land Survey System

## SUMMARY

From a historical standpoint, George Washington is the most famous and celebrated individual in the United States. The books and writings on Washington are vast and thorough; however, few people realize his first occupation was as a surveyor. This early livelihood was extremely important and pivotal to the success of Washington life. By surveying the raw and unsettled lands of the New World many windows of opportunity were open for Washington. Throughout history land has always equated to power and wealth and this was amplified in the New World. Land ownership was the gauge of a person's status, power and wealth in the eighteenth century of America. Only land owners were allowed to vote and the size of land ownership was definitely the mark of status. Washington realized that to measure or survey the land would afford him a great advantage in the "currency" of the new world. His experience in surveying and mapping the lands also provided him with the invaluable skills and knowledge during the revolutionary war with England.



Young Washington-- The Surveyor

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## EARLY YEARS

George Washington was born February 22, 1732, to Augustine and Mary Ball Washington at Popes Creek in Westmorland County, Virginia. His father died when George was eleven and he inherited the family farm on the Rappahannock River where he was living with his mother and other siblings. His older half brother, Lawrence Washington, inherited lands along the Potomac River, to be known as Mount Vernon (ten miles south of Washington, DC). George's education was through self study or what we would call today as home schooling and some formal schooling that was arranged by his father. This education included writing, ciphering, mathematics, and geometry which he excelled in. Washington immediately began to apply this knowledge by using a surveyor's chain and compass, inherited from his father, to survey and map his land for gardening at the early age of fifteen. His Turnip Field Survey dated February 27, 1749 is part of the map collection in the Library of Congress. He also began to survey his brother's land along the Potomac River.

The Potomac River was also the residence of Thomas Lord Fairfax. The Fairfax home was the center of politics and influence for Virginia. Thomas Lord Fairfax had a royal grant for all of the land between the Potomac and Rappahannock rivers, approximately five million acres. Lawrence and George Washington both socialize with the Fairfax family because of the location of Lawrence's land on the Potomac River. Lawrence married a Fairfax and the bond between the families became stronger. Lord Fairfax was aware of Washington's reputation as a gentleman, an expert horseman and a self-taught man, who was familiar with surveying.

The Fairfax land grant west of Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains was in dispute but was resolved by a decree and granted to Fairfax. In 1748 Fairfax commissioned George Washington, George William Fairfax and James Glen, Surveyor of Prince William County to survey his holdings west of the Blue Ridge because this land was wilderness, unknown and uncharted. Also, Fairfax was concerned of other claims to the land from Spain and France. George at the age of sixteen began to hone his survey skills on this month long excursion into the unknown lands of the western Virginia. These skills would benefit his career in many ways.

In July of 1749 the seventeen year old Washington was officially appointed the county surveyor of Culpepper County. His social contacts and demonstrated knowledge had benefitted him immensely. This appointment enabled Washington to prosper by providing surveys for over 200 tracks of lands between 1749 and 1752 in Culpepper and Frederick counties. Washington knew that control over land was the basis for power and wealth of the Virginia elite and he wanted to be a part of the privileged class. His skill in organizing

surveys, executing the field work, dealing with land owners, and platting the land parcels helped him later in his life as a soldier, politician and citizen.

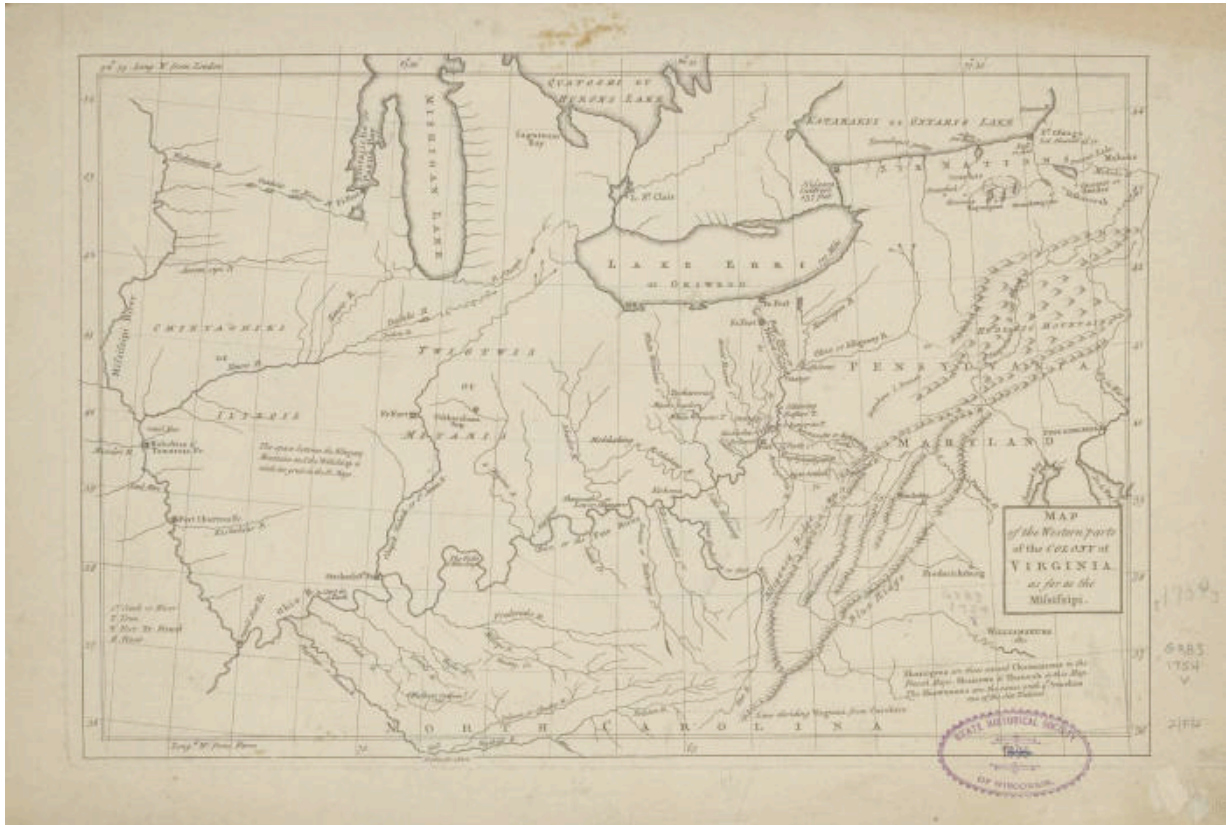
The appointment of a seventeen year old man to county surveyor was unusual and did cause some consternation with others. Washington did not follow the normal process of testing for a Crown Surveyorship and there was some concern. He did subscribe to the Surveyor's Oath "...doe swear by the great name of ye living God that you shall faithfully attend to and discharge your office of Surveyor unto which you are appointed without favour or respect to persons." Thomas Lord Fairfax was Washington's sponsor and quelled any controversy. Washington's work as a county surveyor allowed him to associate with the elite land owners and land companies. These new relationships would help Washington throughout his career. (*USS George Washington (CVN-73) History Vignettes*)

Prospective settlers in Virginia were required to obtain a survey warrant for a set amount of acreage in a specific location. The survey warrant, issued directly to the county surveyor, instructed the surveyor to make a "just and true" survey of the land, thereby officially determining and limiting its boundaries. County surveyors were responsible for laying out the land claims, surveyors had a unique role in Virginia society. "Their appointments guaranteed a certain social prominence, since nearly all parties interested in gaining title to an area of land were required to deal with the surveyor. Surveyors were also among the best-educated Virginians and were often in the best position to purchase land for themselves. It was not unusual for surveyors to acquire large estates from the many opportunities they had to patent land in their own names. Additionally, their intimate knowledge of the land and official capacity as representatives of large land holders such as the Fairfaxes made their participation politically and practically essential to large land companies such as the Loyal Land Company of Virginia, the Ohio Company, and the Mississippi Land Company" (Redmond)

## **SURVEYING AND THE MILITARY**

Washington was commissioned as a lieutenant colonel in the Virginia Regiment to address the French and Indian War that was beginning to stir up in the backcountry of Virginia where Washington had firsthand knowledge from his surveying experience. Washington task was to deliver an ultimatum to the French to withdraw from the Ohio River Valley frontier. His report of these activities, *The Journal of Major George Washington*, was sent to London, where it captured the imagination of the world and put Washington in the forefront of world politics. An engraved map (see figure below) which was based upon Washington's sketch map of his journey into the back country of Virginia was issued in the London version of the journal. Washington's journal documented his troops delivery of the ultimatum and also the ambush of a French detachment in the war's first skirmish. Washington was a man to be reckoned with in the opinion of London political leaders. Washington's words, his cartography and his actions sent a strong message to England of Washington's capacity and competence. In addition, Washington journal provided England with the knowledge of the military strength of the French and the Indians, as well as a map of the unknown lands of

America. Washington was now a well known persona with a reputation as a savvy military leader.



”This map accompanied The Journal of Major George Washington... with a new map of the country as far as the Mississippi. (London, 1754). It shows the interior of the continent, from western Virginia and upstate New York to modern Minnesota and Missouri, including French and British forts in the Ohio Valley and the approximate locations of Indian nations.” (Wisconsin Historic Society)

Washington continued to use his surveying and mapping expertise during the Revolutionary War. As the commander-in-chief of the Continental Army he insisted that a geographer be a part of his immediate staff. He had seen the value of communication with spatial information/maps and how that impacted decision makers. Gathering intelligence through the survey of terrain, rivers, roads and towns was a definite advantage for the Continental Army. Washington enlisted the services of other surveyors from all parts of Colonial America to provide knowledge for the war effort.

## THE LATER YEARS

After the Revolutionary War Washington returned to the Mount Vernon estate, the land obtained from his brother Lawrence's widow. Mount Vernon was the center of Washington's farming, political and commercial endeavors. As a member of the Virginia Militia, he was granted a claim to land for his service during the French and Indian War. Washington had land patents of about 14,000 acres in the Ohio Valley before the Revolutionary War through the "Surveyor of the Soldiers Land" and now wanted to develop this land for commerce. He began to work with land companies and this occupied him after two terms as President of the United States of America.

Controversy on how the lands were selected and the validity of surveys had long laid the seeds for a survey reform in America. The change came in the form of a new design for a rectangular survey system or public land survey system. The Continental Congress with Washington's input would debate and finalize this system in 1785. This system would be used for the disposal and sales of the non original thirteen colony lands or the Western Reserve Public Domain lands of the newly formed United States.

George Washington died on December 14, 1799 and had executed a survey on his Mount Vernon estate just months before his death. Learning the surveyor's craft was as central to Washington's early development as riding a horse or understanding how to manage a farm. He had mastered the social skill with regard to manner, speech, and general conduct; he understood and applied another set of rules, surveying, that determined property and wealth and even involved an oath to God. George Washington is universally admired for his conduct in all things. (*USS George Washington (CVN-73) History Vignettes*)

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## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Donald A. Buhler is the Chief Cadastral Surveyor of Bureau of Land Management of the Department of Interior. The Cadastral Survey Program oversees the maintenance and propagation of the Public Land Survey System (PLSS), including all Federal interest lands and Native American lands. The rectangular grid system of the PLSS is used as a basis for legal and land descriptions for most of the United States and becomes part of the permanent land records of the United States. In addition, the Cadastral Survey Program is the main architect and builder of the geographic coordinate data base, a foundational data layer of geographic information systems in both the public and private sector. He is a Fellow of the American Congress of Surveying and Mapping, a member of the National Society of Professional Surveyors and a delegate for the United States delegation of the Fédération Internationale des Géomètres. He is Co-Chair of the Cadastral Subcommittee and a member of the Coordination Committee of the Federal Geographic Data Committee.

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