

## OVERTURNING the FIRST CONSTITUTION

Getting to Philadelphia...

### George Washington and the Western Country

From Chapter Five, The Whiskey Rebellion, by Thomas P. Slaughter

Washington's wilderness education began in 1748 when he was sixteen years old...To the young traveler...the frontier seemed a lice-ridden place of rotten, muddy roads; wild war-making and head-scalping Indians; abundant and tasty game, but inhabited by white settlers no more civilized than their aboriginal neighbors. Washington found himself unhappily "amongst a parcel of barbarians and an uncouth set of people." He described the living habits of the frontiersmen as comparable to those of "dogs or cats." The weather and insects forced him to abandon more civilized practices and sleep as the denizens, in his clothes "like a Negro." [p. 79]

Patriotism, military ardor, and his increasing financial stake in the international conflict for the western country brought Washington back for years of military service in the Great War of the Empire...It was patriotism, he wrote, that led him to lament the "lethargy we have fallen into," and attempt to arouse "the heroic spirit of every freeborn Englishman to attest the rights and privileges of our King (if we don't consult the benefit of ourselves) and rescue from the invasion of a usurping enemy our Majesty's property, his dignity and land."

This same passage from his letter to Governor Sharpe gives a clue to Washington's other ambitions. He was also inspired in the period before the Revolution by what he termed "the benefit of ourselves." "What inducements have men to explore uninhabited wilds," he reasoned, "but the prospect of getting good lands?" [p. 80]

During the 1760s and 1770s Washington mounted a campaign for land on the frontier more impressive than any he ever executed as a general – and more successful...Governor Dinwiddie had offered a 200,000 acre bounty to encourage enlistments for the war. After the fighting ended, it took some persuasion to convince the House of Burgesses to finance the governor's promise. By the time that the militia's leader – George Washington – got around to petitioning and persuading the new governor and House of Burgesses to deliver on the bounty, he had accumulated claims to more than 20,000 acres. Between the years 1754 and 1769 Washington purchased rights from soldiers too poor, too cynical or too naïve to bank on the word of the ex-governor. Some gladly surrendered their apparently ephemeral claims; others declined Washington's offers of £10 for each 2000 acres.

Once Washington succeeded, the grant materialized during the next session of the assembly. [p. 81]

Eventually, Washington would own over 63,000 acres of trans-Appalachia, becoming one of the largest absentee landlords the western country knew during his day. Settlers who based their counter-claims on deeds or on proto-Lockean arguments of superior right to ground they tilled, both fell before Washington's assaults. Indians, the laws of Pennsylvania, and edicts by the monarch of the British Empire proved mere annoyances crushed by the superior force of Washington's determination to own ever more land. [p. 82]

Back home in Virginia, Washington ruminated over the lack of industry among western Pennsylvanians. The richness of the soil and absence of markets for their products left them content to produce no more than they could consume. The solution was clearly to establish better routes of communication and trade with the West: "Extend the inland navigation as far as it can be done with convenience and show them by this means how easy it is to bring the produce of their lands to our markets, and see how astonishingly our exports will be increased and these states benefitted in a commercial point of view."

Initially, Washington's interest in developing water routes to the West had been almost entirely personal and profit-oriented. The canals themselves, through tolls, would produce income for investors. Commercial traffic would bring prosperity to Virginia entrepôts such as Alexandria and to new towns that would spring up along the trade route. And, far from least, when access to the western country became easier, the value of its land would increase substantially. As the claimant to tens of thousands of acres in the region, Washington kept this potentiality very much in mind.

The particular measure Washington sought during the 1780s was incorporation of the Potomac Company by the state of Virginia, which he secured on January 5, 1785. His success in this venture brought to a close ten years of efforts to procure the sufferance of Maryland and Virginia for his canal venture. The Annapolis Convention of 1786 was arranged in no small part through the labors of Washington and fellow investors. It met precisely to solve the kinds of problems confronting interstate commercial projects of this sort. [p. 86]

**Source:**

Thomas P. Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion: Frontier Epilogue to the American Revolution*, Chapter Five: "George Washington and the Western Country"

# **THE MOUNT VERNON CONFERENCE, THE ANNAPOLIS CONVENTION, and the END of the FIRST CONSTITUTION**

## Potomac Company

Washington asked the Virginia legislature to pass measures providing for a company managed jointly with Maryland to make the Potomac navigable. The legislature complied with Washington's request and appointed him as Virginia's representative in negotiations with Maryland. After conferences at Annapolis he had the satisfaction of seeing his proposal embodied in identical bills passed by the two state legislatures to create the Potomac Company, complete with an appropriation of money to get the plan under way.

The two-state agreement had been necessary because, under the Articles of Confederation by which the United States was then governed, Congress could do nothing of much importance without the consent of the states affected. Washington was deeply troubled about the national government's weakness and disunity. In 1785 he wrote: "The Confederation appears to me to be little more than a shadow without the substance."

- George Washington was first president of the Potomac Company, as well as an investor.
- Tobias Lear, Washington's personal secretary, was its chairman for a period.
- Other principals of the company included Thomas Johnson, eventual governor of Maryland

## Mount Vernon Conference

The Potomac Company laws were immediately followed by an agreement between Virginia and Maryland assuring freedom of navigation on the Potomac River and Chesapeake Bay on a basis of complete equality. The commissioners who met at Alexandria, Virginia, to draft the details of this pact were greeted by Washington and invited to adjourn to the quiet comfort of Mount Vernon. There, in March 1785, they signed the agreement. It included, apparently at Washington's suggestion, a provision for annual consultations between representatives of the two legislatures to deal with commercial questions.

This provision was the seed from which the Constitutional Convention grew. In the Maryland legislature, ratification of the Mount Vernon Conference agreements resulted in a suggestion that Pennsylvania and Delaware be invited to the next annual conference to widen the program of development. When this idea reached Richmond, Virginia, state legislator James Madison suggested a meeting of all the states. An invitation was accordingly sent by the Virginia legislature to all the other states suggesting an early meeting to consider the trade of the United States, and "how far a

uniform system in their commercial regulation may be necessary for their common interest and their permanent harmony; and to report to the several States such an act relative to this great object as ... will enable the United States in Congress effectually to provide for the same.”

The states represented, and their delegates were:

- Maryland: Samuel Chase, Daniel of St. Thomas Jenifer, and Thomas Stone
- Virginia: Alexander Henderson and George Mason; James Madison and Edmund Randolph were also appointed as Virginia delegates but were not informed by Virginia governor Patrick Henry and did not attend.

### Annapolis Convention

The meeting convened in Annapolis in September 1786. Although all the states had accepted the invitation, only five sent delegates. However, among the 12 delegates who came to Annapolis were 2 to whom Washington had fully opened his mind. These were Madison and Alexander Hamilton, Washington’s trusted wartime aide. The delegates at Annapolis sent out a summons for a convention to meet in Philadelphia in May 1787 to consider measures “to render the constitution of the federal government adequate to the exigencies of the Union.”

The states represented, and their delegates were:

- New York: Egbert Benson and Alexander Hamilton
- New Jersey: Abraham Clark, William Houston, and James Schureman
- Pennsylvania: Tench Coxe
- Delaware: George Read, John Dickinson, and Richard Bassett
- Virginia: Edmund Randolph, James Madison, Jr.

The convention met from September 11 to September 14, 1786. The commissioners felt that there were not enough states represented to make any substantive agreement. New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and North Carolina had appointed commissioners who failed to get to the meeting in time to attend it, while Connecticut, Maryland, South Carolina and Georgia had taken no action at all.

They produced a report which was sent to the Congress and to the states. The report asked support for a broader meeting to be held the next May in Philadelphia. It expressed the hope that more states would be represented and that their delegates or deputies would be authorized to examine areas broader than simply commercial trade.

The direct result of the report was the Philadelphia Convention of 1787.

### **Sources:**

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