

George Washington's Boyhood Book: Lost, Found, and Lost Again

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While at the Washington Papers I became interested in the young George and convinced that more could be known about his early life—up to the time, at age 20, when he accepted a commission as an adjutant in the Virginia forces. After that his life becomes increasingly documented. He had begun to preserve his papers—“which may be interesting,” he wrote in 1797.¹ His biographers have done little, often nothing, to penetrate his early years. John Marshall, in 1806, in his *The Life of George Washington*, dealt with George's early years in just five sentences on the first page of the second volume.² In 1837, Jared Sparks devoted eleven pages to the subject.³ Two decades later Washington Irving devoted nineteen pages to Washington's youth.⁴ Paul Leicester Ford, in 1900, devoted just nine pages to his early years in a topically organized biography.⁵ In the early 1930s, John C. Fitzpatrick addressed George's early years in just thirty pages.⁶ Douglas Southall Freeman, in his seven-volume work (published in 1948–57), first mentions George on page 47 of volume 1 and brings him to age twenty on about page 269. In those 222 pages, however, Freeman spends little more than fifty of them directly dealing with the young George, and little of that sheds any light on George before he was age ten.⁷ James Thomas Flexner, in his four-volume biography (published in the mid- to late 1960s), spent forty-one pages on our young George—and again, little of it before he is ten.⁸ Harrison Clark, in his two-volume biography, *All Cloudless*

Glory (published in 1995–96), spends but twenty-eight pages on George before placing him in the military service of Virginia, and sixty pages covering his next three years.⁹ Most recently Ron Chernow employed just seventeen pages to deal with George's first twenty years, which by comparison is fulsome since his was a one-volume work.¹⁰

I have omitted one author—parson Mason Weems—one of only two men who knew Washington personally and completed full-length biographies of him. John Marshall was the other. Weems's first effort, in 1800, spent just six sentences dealing with his first twenty years—only one more than Marshall.¹¹ But Weems was not finished. He lived in Dumfries, Virginia, just under twenty miles from Mount Vernon, and had known Washington—casually at least. He had visited with him at Mount Vernon, had stayed overnight, and had corresponded with him. His wife was a distant cousin of George's, and through her he was related to Washington's physician and long-time friend, James Craik. Apparently urged on by those around him, Weems expanded his coverage of George's early years. In 1806 ten of the volume's eighty-four pages included stories he elicited from George's childhood friends and relatives. (Unfortunately, the moral garb in which he clothed these stories caused late-nineteenth-century historians to reject them entirely.¹²) In 1808 he further expanded the number of pages devoted to Washington's youth to twenty¹³ and in 1809 to thirty-five, although by that time the volume had reached 288 pages.¹⁴

My point is to show by admittedly crude comparison how little Washington's biographers bothered to say about his youth—and to make the point that only Weems made any effort to search out further details. We can only wonder at how much more he might have said if he had had access to the school papers, the rules of civility, and the (admittedly few) youthful letters and poems that later historians had at hand.¹⁵

It is just this lack of attention to or interest in his youthful years that makes me want to investigate the subject in more depth. There is, I am certain, much more that can be known from the world of information that is now available to us. For example, I now know the ship, captain, and circumstances that prompted George's older brother Lawrence (and Lawrence's father-in-law, William Fairfax) to arrange for a berth on a ship that could ultimately have led Washington to a

commission in the British navy—but that is a story for another time. Many more details of his life are out there just waiting to be dug up and dusted off.

My interest in the young George caused me, several years ago, to enlist the aid of Fredrick W. Rickey, a math historian I had met while a visiting professor in the history department at West Point. I wanted to know more about George's mathematics education—something in which his school papers show he seemed to have made significant progress. It was Rickey who called my attention to a little text that I want to talk about tonight—a small book that appears to have the youthful signature of Washington on its title page along with the date 1742.¹⁶

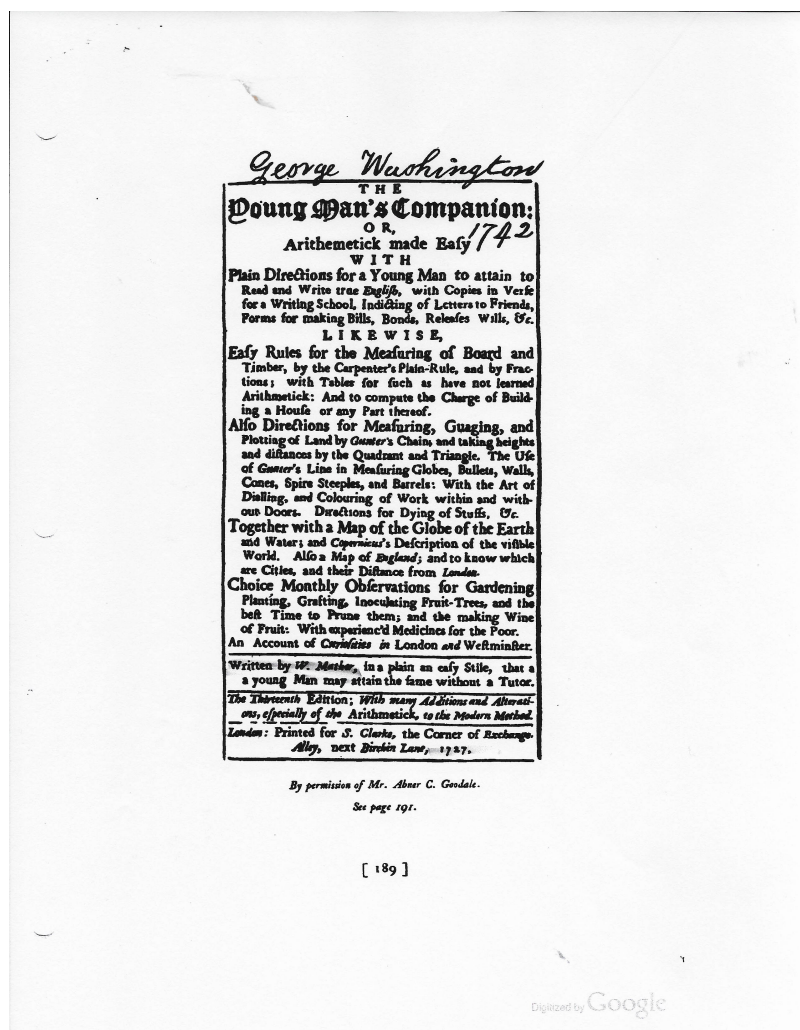


Figure 1. Title page as reproduced in George Emery Littlefield, *Early Schools and School-Books of New England* (Boston: Club of Odd Volumes, 1904), 189.

The timing suggests that it was a gift from an older half-brother, Austin, whom George met for the first time in 1742 when he returned home from Appleby School in the north of England. Since 1729 Austin had been at Appleby

School, where their father had studied as a lad from age six to nine.¹⁷ Austin had finished his education there in 1739 and had then spent three years as an usher, or assistant teacher. The book he brought home for George was William Mather's *The Young Man's Companion*, not widely known in the Colonies but quite popular in England. The small book was first and foremost an arithmetic tutorial, but it also included instructions in reading and writing English. On a more practical side, it provided sample letters and legal documents, and instructions on gardening and on the making of wines, medicines, and ink.

My research has convinced me that George kept the book all his life and appears to have shared it with his stepchildren and grandchildren. This is probably why this volume does not appear in any of the several lists of the books in his library. It would have been more likely found with the children's books and not with his own. After the General's death, the volume remained at Mount Vernon and was passed down with the house. In the late 1840s, while gathering materials for his biography of George Washington, Washington Irving made several visits to Mount Vernon. On one of these he examined the Mather text and other books and papers. Jean Washington, daughter of John Augustine Washington—the last of the family to reside at Mount Vernon—recalled later that “when reading Irving's *Life of Washington* the book was shown me as being the one referred to by him.”¹⁸ Of it, Irving had written, “a ciphering book preserved in the library at Mount Vernon, has some schoolboy attempts at calligraphy; nondescript birds, executed with a flourish of the pen, or profiles of faces, probably intended for those of his schoolmates.”¹⁹ She recalled “Mr. Irving's examining it on a visit he made to Mount Vernon for the purpose of collecting materials for his work.”²⁰ The book remained with the Washington family when they left Mount Vernon, having sold the property in 1859 to the Ladies Association and moved to Waveland, their new home in Fauquier County, Virginia.

In the early days of the Civil War, John Augustine, a volunteer aide to General Lee, was killed by Union pickets while scouting a northern position. His wife, Eleanor, had died a year earlier, and the now orphaned children left Waveland in the hands of a caretaker and moved in with an uncle, John Washington, and his family at their Blakely plantation some twenty miles to the north in Jefferson County, now West Virginia. In 1864, when a fire destroyed the manor house at Blakely, both families moved to Waveland. In 1865 Northern troops visited

Waveland and, in addition to burning all of the outbuildings, took a number of books including the Mather text. For the first time the provenance of Washington's boyhood book was lost.

The mystery of its location was short-lived, however. "There is in this city one of the interesting books in the world," reported the *New-York Daily Tribune* in January 1866. The story was widely reprinted in other papers all over the country. "A Valuable Relic" and "Washington's Text Book," read the headlines.

This book was found in Virginia during its occupation by our troops. . . . It is in the possession of a gentleman of this city. In a recent visit to New York [General Grant] examined it with profound reverence, and expressed his belief that its silent, eloquent, and instructive pages were the architect of the practical, symmetrical, and finished character of the great Washington. The book was presented to Gen. Grant. But with the delicacy which distinguished all that he does, he refused to receive it as a gift, but was willing to take it in trust to hold it till the owner should appear. Should none apply for it, it will be placed among the archives of the nation—a precious legacy.²¹

When Jean Washington, John Augustine Washington's second daughter, learned of Grant's intention, she wrote him asking that the book be returned to the family. The first response, from an aide, denied the request until ownership was established.²² Although no further correspondence has been found regarding her claim, the volume was soon returned to the Washingtons at Waveland, where it remained for another decade.

In 1876, Lawrence Washington, John Augustine's eldest son, allowed the surviving books of George Washington's library—some 250 volumes—to be displayed at the Philadelphia Exposition. Afterward the bulk of the collection was sold in two lots. After the sale, several "imperfect books including some school books with Washington's scribbling in them as a school boy [were sold to] a Mr. Chambers, who later sold them to Sabin."²³ Precisely what happened to the small volume over the next two decades remains something of a mystery, but by the end of the century the little book had come into the hands of Albert Cheney Goodell Jr. of Salem, Massachusetts. Since Washington's Mather text does not appear in any of the catalogs of subsequent sales in the early 1890s, it is quite possible that

Goodell purchased it from either Chambers or Sabin before the sales took place in the early 1890s.

In the first years of the twentieth century, Goodell shared the Mather text with George Emery Littlefield, a Boston rare book dealer, who discussed it in his *Early Schools and School-Books of New England* and included a facsimile of the title page with Washington's boyish signature and the date 1742. After Goodell's death, his library was sold in Boston by C. F. Libbie and Company on March 12, 1918. The Mather volume, now in a Moroccan case but lacking one map, sold for \$52.50. No record of the buyer has been found and the little volume disappeared once again.

Then, in 1967, after spending nearly half a century "underground," the volume suddenly appeared again. Its owner—presumably not the person who had purchased it in 1918—placed it on temporary deposit at the Library of Congress, apparently hoping to establish its authenticity as a Washington book. The Library of Congress immediately reached out to Mount Vernon, and Charles Wall, then resident director of Mount Vernon, examined the book and arranged to have it brought to Mount Vernon for further study. The Mount Vernon staff examined the book but concluded that its authenticity was uncertain because it was not listed in any of the several inventories made of George Washington's library.

The volume was returned to the Library of Congress and then to its owner and went underground once again. In the nearly fifty years since the book was examined at Mount Vernon, there have been no further "sightings" of the Mather text that is almost certainly the same volume that Washington received in 1742. There is no record of a sale at auction of the book since 1918. Complicating the search, the gentleman who brought the volume to Washington in 1967 has since died, as have all his children. A few grandchildren and great-grandchildren appear to have survived, but despite my efforts to date, I have been unable to reach any of them.

I'm not giving up, however. Recently the editors of a newspaper in the small South Carolina city where the last owner resided have expressed interest in the story, and I am working with them to determine how best they can aid the search.

Washington's little book deserves every effort we can make to bring it back to light and return it to Mount Vernon. It contains Washington's earliest known signature and is certainly the first book we have known him to own.

George's copy of Mather's *Young Man's Companion* has repeatedly been something of a bibliographic "cold case," and yet clues have repeatedly emerged that revived the investigation. I believe that we may still recover the book that Ulysses S. Grant so admired and return it to Mount Vernon where it had once resided for more than a century.

Notes

1. George Washington to James McHenry, April 3, 1797, <https://founders.archives.gov>.
2. John Marshall, *The Life of George Washington*, 5 vols. (London: Printed for Richard Phillips, 1804–07), 2:1.
3. Jared Sparks, *The Writings of George Washington . . . with A Life of the Author* (Boston: American Stationers, 1837), 5–16.
4. Washington Irving, *Life of George Washington* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1857), 45–64.
5. Paul Leicester Ford, *The True George Washington* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1900), 61–63, 85–88, 186, 209.
6. John C. Fitzpatrick, *George Washington Himself* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1933), 19–48.
7. Douglas Southall Freeman, *George Washington, A Biography*, 7 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), 1:47–269.
8. James Thomas Flexner, *George Washington*, 4 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1965), 1:12–52.
9. Harrison Clark, *All Cloudless Glory: The Life of George Washington*, 2 vols. (Washington: Regnery Publishing, 1995), 1:4–32.
10. Ron Chernow, *Washington: A Life* (New York: Penguin, 2010), 6–22.
11. Mason L. Weems, *A History of the Life and Death, Virtues and Exploits, of General George Washington faithfully taken from Authentic Documents*, 3rd ed. [printing] (Philadelphia: John Bioren, 1800), 3.
12. Mason L. Weems, *The Life of Washington the Great, Enriched with a Number of Very Curious Anecdotes*, 5th ed. (Augusta: Geo. P. Randolph, 1806), 6–15.

13. Mason L. Weems, *The Life of Washington*, 6th ed. (Philadelphia: R. Cochran, 1808), 9–28.
14. Mason L. Weems, *The Life of Washington*, 9th ed. (Philadelphia: Mathew Carey, 1809), 3–29.
15. John Marshall did have access to most of Washington's papers but for some reason was given few, if any, of his youthful papers. When Jared Sparks in his 1837 biography mentioned Washington's rules of civility, Marshall marveled: "I have read no part of these volumes with so much pleasure as the series of maxims under the head of 'Rules of civility and decent behavior in company and conversation.' These rules, of which I have never before heard, furnish a key with which to open the original character of this truly great man." Herbert B. Adams, *The Life and Writings of Jared Sparks*, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1893), 2:285.
16. George Emery Littlefield, *Early Schools and School-Books of New England* (Boston: Club of Odd Volumes, 1904), 189.
17. Lawrence Washington had died in 1698, when George's father was only four years old. His mother, Mildred Warner Washington, remarried in 1800, to George Gale, a tobacco merchant from Whitehaven, England. That same year she and her three children, John, 9, Augustine "Gus," 6, and Mildred, 3, sailed to Whitehaven with Gale. The mother died shortly after arriving in England, leaving Gale to care for the three stepchildren. Gale enrolled the boys in Appleby School, a half day's ride from Whitehaven. In the meantime, John Washington, in Virginia, who was executor of Lawrence's will, began suing to gain the return of the children (and the balance of their father's estate) to Virginia. In 1704 his suit was successful, and the children returned to Virginia and were raised by family in Chotank, Virginia.
18. Jean [Jane] Washington to Ulysses S. Grant, January 17, 1866, in John Y. Simon, ed., *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*, 32 vols. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 16:442–43.
19. Washington Irving, *Life of George Washington*, 5 vols. (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1857), 1:23.
20. Jean [Jane] Washington to Ulysses S. Grant, January 17, 1866.
21. *New-York Daily Tribune*, January 19, 1866, p. 8. The Grant visit to New York recalled here was October 17–20, 1865.
22. On January 29, 1866, Bvt. Col. Adam Badeau noted on the docket: "answered declining until ownership is established." Simon, *Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*, 16:443.
23. Appleton P. C. Griffin, *A Catalogue of the Washington Collection in the Boston Athenaeum* (Boston: Boston Athenaeum, 1897), 539. There is no record of its sale in

American Book Prices Current during this period. It is likely that Chambers acquired the book in a private sale.