

# IN PURSUIT



LESSON #2 • FROM MARTHA WASHINGTON

## BEFORE WOMEN COULD HOLD OFFICE, SHE CREATED ONE



*by Karin Wulf*

**M**artha Washington had not intended to be the first of anything, but rather to follow in the pattern of the women she knew as wives, mothers, and Virginia plantation mistresses. Instead, she was the first of a long line of women who never sought the role that she inaugurated. While the term “First Lady” was not regularly used for a century after her service, she felt the weight of its responsibility and the eyes of the new nation upon her.

Historians despair of Martha’s decision to burn her correspondence with her famous husband just before she died, yet this First Lady is not unknowable. Like her husband, she has become somewhat calcified in American memory, but the historical record, including her correspondence with friends, family, and associates from her life in Virginia and then as First Lady and her later years, reveals a firm, lively person. She could be direct, astute about politics, and attuned to fashionable clothes and household furnishing – sometimes all in one letter. Portraits made during her life capture only a glimpse of the latter. She ordered sparkling purple silk, silver embroidered and sequined high heeled shoes for her wedding, and she never stopped being fond of shoes. As First Lady she dressed somewhat more plainly but her clothing was always of the finest quality.

Martha Dandridge Custis and George Washington were born less than a year apart, in 1731 and 1732; theirs would be her second marriage, his first. It was, by the accounts of those who knew them best, a loving partnership. In a few surviving letters, George refers to her as his “dear Patcy,” and they addressed each other as “My Dearest.” George signed one urgent letter in the summer of 1775 as “Your entire.” They were happiest together at Mount Vernon, ever mindful of what was happening back at home during the long years of the war and the presidency – and of being apart. Devoted to her husband, Martha spent every winter of the war with him wherever he had made camp for the season, including at Valley Forge.

George and Martha Washington were elite, wealthy Virginians through and through. From her first marriage to the much older Daniel Parke Custis, Martha carried into her union with George two children and an extensive estate that included more than eighty enslaved people. They would not have children together, but they would raise hers. At Mount Vernon they oversaw a plantation complex worked by hundreds of enslaved people. Through a combination of inheritance and acquisition, by the time of George’s death his real estate stretched across tens of thousands of acres and included some small industrial concerns. But, of course, their lives would not be confined to Virginia.



The Marriage of Washington to Martha Custis / Junius Brutus Stear

When she married him, Martha would have known that George was set up for public life, which in colonial Virginia was both an opportunity and a responsibility for elites. The first hint of that came before they married, when he served as an officer in the Virginia militia during the Seven Years War. Then shortly after they married George was elected to Virginia’s colonial assembly, the House of Burgesses, where he would serve until the eve of the American Revolution including working closely with the royal governor, Lord Dunmore. Up to that point, Martha’s life as his wife would have seemed a familiar echo of the women among her

family and friends. But when her husband’s military leadership of the revolutionary war and then political leadership of the new United States was required, Martha’s life changed along with those of everyone around her. In the transition from colonies to nation, their friend, the historian and writer Mercy Oris Warren said, “events have outrun [our] imagination.”

The Washingtons lived in three different “presidential mansions” as the capitol city moved, the first two in New York and then the third in Philadelphia through the end of the president’s second term in early 1797. These pre-Washington DC and pre-White House residences have all since been demolished. Glimpses of the Washingtons’ efforts to create a new standard for a presidential life and for the First Lady’s role come through. George Washington held a regular formal reception on Tuesday afternoons for men, and Martha held a less formal one, ostensibly for ladies but in fact men and women both attended, on Friday evenings. They called these gatherings “levees,” the name for formal public access to the French monarch; features of the Washingtons’ levees included Martha greeting people from a raised dais (to be fair, she was petite at only 5 feet tall), raised eyebrows and some critical commentary. How was this democratic?

For that matter, how was one to be a First Lady – or a president – when there had never been such a thing? Borrowing some ceremonial features from the system they knew best, tempered by the sentiments of the revolution, seemed sensible. Martha would hold “the first rank in the United States,” and what she did or said, where she went and what she wore all made for political fodder. The Washingtons would step carefully

but decisively, together, into this phase of their “public life.” It was not without cost. Using the same metaphor that her husband often invoked, Martha wrote of longing to be in “the shades of mount Vernon, under our own vines and fig tree.” And “yet I cannot blame him,” she wrote, “for having acted according to his ideas of duty in obeying the voice of his country.”

For Martha, having been raised to hostess duties, managing the accoutrements of hospitality for diplomats, politicians, office seekers and the general curious public was second nature. She stocked the official residences with such supplies as china decorated with all of the states around

the rim of the plates and her own initials in the middle, cutlery, wine, and more prosaic items like “mops and Clamps for scouring brushes.” They acquired printed invitations to dine (“The President of the United States and Mrs. Washington, request the Pleasure...”) which could be filled in with the names of the lucky invitees. Martha described both formal and less formal visits: “the practice with me has been always to receive the first visits, and then to return them”; these included “the ladies of the diplomatic corps...introduced in their first visits by the Secretary of State.” In this innovation borrowing from traditions, Martha Washington did something no American woman had ever done: she occupied an entirely new national role, and she taught the country how to see a woman in it.

Did she encourage her husband’s better angels? In one respect we know she emphatically did not. She was casually cruel about slavery and her expectations of enslaved people. Confounded when seventeen fled with the British, who were promising freedom during the revolution, she was infuriated when one of her maids fled from Philadelphia decades later and wanted her tracked down and then brought back (she never was). But did he encourage hers? Perhaps. When he died George Washington provided that at Martha’s death the enslaved people he owned would be emancipated, but for whatever reasons, possibly out of fear, she acted on that provision just a year after he died and a year before she followed him to the grave.

Martha Washington would prove a hard act to follow. Before women could hold office, she had to create one—by stepping onto the center stage of American public life without a script and making her role real through practice. At the end of Washington’s presidential administration, Abigail Adams wrote to the only woman to serve in the position she was about to hold that she would “endeavor to follow your steps and by that means hope I Shall not essentially fall Short.”



Miniature painting of Martha Washington Seven Years Before becoming First Lady / James Peale