

Martha Washington: The First, First Lady

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Abstract

Martha Washington is best known for her marriage to George Washington and subsequently becoming the first, First Lady of the United States. Most discussion and research only mentions Martha in passing and focuses instead on her husband. Martha's precedent-setting role as First Lady is both valid and important. However, Martha's influence on history is not limited to that role. This work highlights and examines the often-overlooked aspects of Martha Washington's life through an examination of both primary source writing and biographies. Her experience as a landowner and business woman, her dedication to her husband and the Revolution, and the standards she set for all following First Ladies left a remarkable legacy.

Martha Washington: The First, First Lady

Mount Vernon, the Washington estate, remains a shining example for both restorative and public historians, as well as a tourist attraction. Visitors of the estate may opt to view an introductory film before leaving the welcome center and touring the grounds. This film, as well as all of the restorative efforts, was commissioned and approved by the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association. Yet, this film focused almost entirely on George Washington and the Continental Army's crossing of the Delaware River. In fact, Martha Washington is mentioned only briefly: a single, off-handed narrative sentence which claims that Martha enjoyed spending George's money on fancy hats.¹

Not surprisingly, Martha has been overshadowed by the almost mythical figure of her husband. George Washington's importance and legacy are integral to both American history and an American identity. However, Martha Washington was his closest friend and confidante through all of these major events that shaped history. Helen Bryan, author of the foremost biography on Martha Washington, explains her inspiration to research and write the book in her preface: "Like every American child I learned about George Washington at school, but knew nothing about his wife except that her name was Martha."² George used Martha as a sounding board for ideas and problems. Martha

¹ Mount Vernon Ladies' Association. *George Washington's Mount Vernon: Official Guidebook* (Mount Vernon, VA, 2018).

² Helen Bryan. *Martha Washington: First Lady of Liberty* (Nashville, TN: Turner Publishing Company, 2002), ix.

traveled and stayed with the army for roughly half of the war.³ More importantly, by marrying the wealthy widow, Martha Dandridge Custis, George Washington greatly enhanced his social status, in a time where that factor meant everything. Martha Washington's influence over George Washington cannot be ignored. Volumes have been devoted to George Washington's life and achievements while, in contrast, Martha's life is examined only as an aside to her more famous husband.

Throughout her life, Martha Washington made many decisions and displayed many skills that were atypical of women in colonial America. She exercised her influence and set many precedents for the role of the First Lady through what would have been seen as "women's work." It would be ahistorical, however, to argue that Martha Washington was a feminist in the modern sense of the word. Martha enjoyed her role as a mother and homemaker. She viewed these not just as tasks or requirements of her gender, but as her passion as well.⁴ However, Martha did not allow society to limit her abilities. While she never consciously sought to defy gender norms or reject her role as a woman within her society, she did make decisions for her family that may not have been typical of a woman at the time and left a significant impact on society afterwards.

George Washington's presidency was important for several reasons. First, he was the first president of the United States, and all of his decisions about the structure of government were precedent-setting. Much in the same way, Martha Washington's decisions set precedents for the role of the First Lady in future presidencies. As Jeanne

³ Mary V. Thompson, *A Short Biography of Martha Washington* (Carlise, MA: Benna Books, 2017), 16.

⁴ Carol Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the Struggle for America's Independence* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 69.

Abrams argues, “Martha Washington pioneered the role of presidential wife...”⁵ While the term “First Lady” was not coined until later and is still technically not acknowledged as an official role, many of the choices Martha Washington made set responsibilities for the women who took up the role after her.⁶

While she may not have been the president, Martha Washington was the president’s wife and therefore commands respect and acknowledgement in her own right. The role that she played not only in George’s life, but also her roles as mother, housekeeper, friend, and First Lady, made a difference and set precedents. Judging precisely how much of an influence she played in George’s decisions is difficult because Martha chose to destroy their personal correspondence upon his death.⁷ However, the fact that Martha was almost never away from George for extended periods of time, alongside other surviving correspondence and notes, it is obvious that George viewed Martha as an important asset in his life. Martha Washington demonstrated extraordinary political understanding and influence at a time when women were not thought to be intelligent or strong enough to participate in conversations about politics. Martha’s demonstration of intelligence, business acumen, and her competent, precedent-setting role as the first, First Lady, mark her as a significant historical figure in her own right.

⁵ Jeanne E. Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 11.

⁶ “The First First Lady,” George Washington’s Mount Vernon, accessed March 13, 2019, <https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/martha-washington/the-first-first-lady/>.

⁷ “A Love Letter from General Washington,” George Washington’s Mount Vernon, accessed March 13, 2019, <https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/facts/washington-stories/a-love-letter-from-general-washington/>.

In order to truly understand Martha's actions and contributions, one must provide historical context to the time in which Martha lived. As Helen Bryan explained, "She cannot be viewed in isolation from the early colonial environment in which she lived, nor from the wider political developments of the eighteenth century that had a direct impact on her later life."⁸ Colonial Virginia was a status-based society. Strict societal codes and norms were to be followed. Advancing in the social hierarchy required additional money, property, or marrying into a family which had both.⁹ Status was incredibly important. The role of women in colonial Virginia was typical of other regions during the time. Women were seen as homemakers and child-rearers. They were taught to sew, cook, and clean as training for their future duties and to make them more attractive to suitors.

The role of women in colonial America began to change during and after the Revolutionary War, as the idea of "republican motherhood" became mainstream. The ideology behind republican motherhood considered that, "if mothers were to be responsible for rearing patriotic sons and daughters, then society must arm them with the knowledge necessary to the task...it was to have practical value and social significance: republican mothers would nurture republican children."¹⁰ Abrams elaborates on how this change affected woman's place in society, "the American Revolution brought a "divided

⁸ Bryan, *Martha Washington*, 4.

⁹ Fischer, David Hackett. *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 382-389.

¹⁰ Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers*, 154-155.

legacy to women,” as they were increasingly relegated to the domestic sphere at the same time that their political, economic, and intellectual expectations were raised.”¹¹

Martha Washington was born Martha “Patsy” Custis on June 2, 1731 as the oldest of eight children to a wealthy family which owned and operated a plantation.¹² Due to familial wealth and status, Martha was taught how to read and write, alongside the more typical womanly duties of the time.¹³ As she grew older, many suitors became interested in courting Martha. She was not only attractive and skilled at household work, but also had a lovely personality. This would later be an important part of her political influence. Daniel Parke was one such suitor. Parke was a member of an extremely wealthy family and twenty years older than Martha.¹⁴ Daniel’s father, John, initially objected to the marriage, even threatening to take away Daniel’s inheritance should he marry her against his wishes. Martha went by herself to meet with him. After his conversation with Martha, and a visit to meet Martha’s father, John approved of the marriage.¹⁵ Even then Martha was unapologetic and bold. She was unafraid of appearing to be bossy or unfeminine, especially when she thought what she was doing was right.

Martha Custis married Daniel Parke on May 15, 1750 when she was eighteen years old.¹⁶ Martha moved into his home named “White House” and began the work of

¹¹ Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic*, 26.

¹² Thompson, *A Short Biography*, 1.

¹³ Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers*, 6.

¹⁴ Patricia Brady, *Martha Washington: An American Life* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 28.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 30-31.

¹⁶ “First Marriage and Children,” George Washington’s Mount Vernon, accessed March 13, 2019, <https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/martha-washington/marthas-first-marriage-children/>.

turning his bachelor estate into a home for a family. Martha gave birth to her first child, Daniel, in 1751. Martha and Parke had three more children together, Frances in 1753, John, nicknamed Jacky, in 1754, and Martha` in 1756.¹⁷ Children were cherished in this society, not just because they were children, but because many died at young ages due to illness, congenital problems, or lack of medicine. Daniel passed away when he was only three years old and Frances at age four. Out of the four children that Martha had with Daniel Parke, only two outlived their father. Over the course of her lifetime, Martha would outlive all of her children and both of her husbands.

Martha as a Landowner and Businesswoman

For seven years, life at White House was comfortable for both Martha and Daniel despite the loss of their two oldest children. Suddenly, in the summer of 1757, Daniel became sick and passed away. Daniel had not written a will for his estate, placing Martha in charge of all of it until the portions for their two surviving children could be claimed as inheritance. Furthermore, Daniel did not have any surviving or nearby family. While still mourning the loss of her husband, Martha took over the responsibility of the plantation. Typically, at the time of a death such as this, the man's brothers would travel to the family estate and take over. In this case, Martha was alone. A brief two weeks after his death, Martha had ordered mourning clothes for her and her children, and a gravestone for her husband from suppliers in England. Martha did not stop there. Using her abilities to read and write, and showcasing her business acumen, Martha took over managing the estate. She paid the staff on several Custis plantations, as well as any outstanding bills.

¹⁷ Thompson, *A Short Biography*, 4.

Martha also signed over power of attorney in order to allow the courts in England to appoint an agent to collect outstanding debts to Daniel in the country. She lent money to family members, contacted a lawyer to allow her to access the accounts she inherited, and paid taxes.¹⁸ She personally wrote to two companies which dealt with Custis tobacco.

The letter she wrote to John Hanbury and Company appears as written by Martha:

Gent.

Virginia 20th August 1757

I take this Opportunity to inform you of the great misfortune I have met with in the loss of my late Husband Mr. Custis, your Corresponent

As I now have the Administration of his Estate & management of his Affairs of all sorts, I shall be glad to continue the Correspondence which Mr. Custis carried on with you.

Yours of the 16th of March Mr Custis rec'd before his Death with his Account Current inclosed wch I believe is right; and he had put on board the Insurance for it, I now inclose the bill of Lading for the Tobacco which I hope will get safe to your hands, and as have reason to believe it is extremely good. I hope you will sell it at a good Price, Mr Custis's Estate will be kept together for some time and I think it will be proper to continue his Account in the same manner as if he was living. Please to send an Account Current when the Tobacco is sold I am gentlemen Your very hbl Servt

Martha Custis
To Mr John Hanbury & CO
Merchts in London¹⁹

Additional correspondence between Martha and the plantation's supplier in London have survived. In one letter, Martha complained about the poor quality of the previous order's fulfillment and demanded better from the company. Bryan summarizes Martha's actions, saying, "she showed herself to be shrewd, capable, and efficient.

¹⁸ Bryan, *Martha Washington*, 75-76.

¹⁹ Martha Washington to John Hanbury and Co., August 20, 1757, in Joseph E. Fields, ed., *Worthy Partner: The Papers of Martha Washington* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1994), 6.

Clearly Martha did not simply sigh helplessly and fall into the arms of the next available men willing to deal with it all on her behalf.”²⁰

For roughly two years Martha took care of her family and her late husband’s estate until she remarried. Widows of wealthy men during this time in American history exercised a significant amount of power in comparison to other women. A widow was “free to make her own decisions about her property. Wealthy widows were the most economically and personally independent of all American women.”²¹ A widow inherited and employed control of her late husband’s wealth and land as a *feme sole* in English common law. Once remarried, however, new husband took over control of assets, because a woman reverted to *feme covert* status under common law.²² As Patricia Brady explains, “Patsy [Martha] Custis was rich and independent, free to make any decision she pleased about her own future...Patsy controlled an immense property...and Patsy had no trustees to interfere with her decisions...[she] acted as her own steward.”²³

George Washington returned to the area in 1758. He had greatly increased his social status by serving in the French and Indian War and being promoted to the rank of colonel. George and Martha had most likely met before, or at the very least, attended the same gatherings, as they moved in the same social circles. Romantic interest between George and Martha supposedly sparked at a dinner party hosted by their neighbors, the Chamberlaynes. The generally accepted version of their meeting relates that George and

²⁰ Bryan, *Martha Washington*, 77.

²¹ Brady, *Martha Washington*, 54.

²² Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers*, 5.

²³ Brady, *Martha Washington*, 52.

Martha spent the entirety of the evening together and that it was obvious to everyone that George was interested in courting the “widow Custis”.²⁴ Soon George, and other single men, were officially vying for Martha. It cannot be ignored that marrying the widow Custis would have improved any male suitor’s social status through the inheritance of her late husband’s land and money. Some historians interpret George’s interest in Martha as purely an opportunity for social advancement. If this was true at the outset of their relationship, it later developed into a marriage of mutual respect and affection.

By the spring of 1758, Martha had agreed to marry George Washington.²⁵ They were wed on January 6, 1759 and moved to Mount Vernon, the plantation that had been in his family since 1674.²⁶ Records from this time provide an extremely detailed record of what exactly Martha brought with her from the Parke estate. She competently requested items to be packed and ready to bring to her new home. Other surviving spending records show that Martha was again in charge of filling and decorating her new home. Records indicate that the estate was almost entirely empty and unfurnished as they show her ordering sets of chairs, desks, and other pieces of furniture. Brady includes this packing list, “she took a mahogany desk, a table and cabinet, two chests, three looking glasses, and six beds with ...twenty-four pairs of sheets, fifty-four tablecloths, ninety-nine napkins and towels, twenty-five pillowcases...two cases of knives and forks, a tea chest, at least sixty glasses...”²⁷

²⁴ Thompson, *A Short Biography*, 9.

²⁵ Bryan, *Martha Washington*, 82.

²⁶ Thompson, *A Short Biography*, 10.

²⁷ Brady, *Martha Washington*, 66.

At Mount Vernon, Martha was not only in charge of furnishing the house and purchasing all of the tools needed for the estate, but she also oversaw all of the domestic staff of hired servants and slaves. She was in charge of “17,500 acres of land and almost three hundred slaves.”²⁸ Along with running the estate, Martha looked after and taught her children. Martha looked forward to spending a peaceful life at Mount Vernon with her husband. After several years of peace, however, tragedy struck again for Martha and her family. In 1773, after suffering from seizures that began at the age of twelve, Martha’s daughter, “Patsy,” passed away moments after an epileptic episode.²⁹ Eight months later, Martha’s only surviving child, Jacky, was married. Martha was still so grief-stricken with the loss of her daughter that she was unable to attend her son’s wedding.³⁰

Around this time society and the political climate started to change. Anti-monarchical and anti-English sentiment began to grow within the colonies. Unrest in areas such as Boston soon bubbled into violence. England continued to violate what the colonists considered to be their rights as English citizens through legislation such as the Intolerable Acts. It became clear that these problems and disagreements would lead to further conflict. In the fall of 1774, George was asked to be a part of the First Continental Congress. These meetings led to the Second Continental Congress, the Declaration of Independence, a demand for change and, eventually, revolution.

²⁸ Thompson, *A Short Biography*, 4.

²⁹ “Martha Parke Custis,” George Washington’s Mount Vernon, accessed March 15, 2019, <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/martha-parke-custis/>.

³⁰ Jeanne E. Abrams, *George and Martha Washington: Health, Illness, and the First Family* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 47.

Martha as a Revolutionary

The outbreak of the Revolutionary War and George's appointment as commanding general of the Continental Army was upsetting for Martha. One of the conditions for marrying George had been that he would leave the service so that she would not need to worry about losing a second husband.³¹ Even George looked forward to retiring to Mount Vernon.³² She supported both her husband and the rebel cause, but had looked forward to a normal life alongside her husband at their home. When the role that George would play in the war became clear Virginia politician Edmund Pendleton wrote about Martha saying that, "I was much pleased with Mrs. Washington and her spirit. She seemed ready to make any sacrifice and was cheerful though I knew she felt anxious. She talked like a Spartan mother to her son on going to battle. 'I hope you will stand firm – I know George will,' she said."³³

One way in which Martha Washington truly set a precedent and demonstrated her true strength of character, was the campaign that she began at the beginning of the war. Martha ran events and fundraisers for fellow elites where she would express the importance of freedom and liberty, attempting to turn public opinion in favor of the rebellion and her husband.³⁴ The influence that Martha and other women like her had at this time should not be overlooked. Influential women were married to influential men.

³¹ Thompson, *A Short Biography*, 9-10.

³² Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 209.

³³ Thompson, *A Short Biography*, 14.

³⁴ Emily J. Arendt, "'Ladies Going about for Money': Female Voluntary Associations and Civic Consciousness in the American Revolution," *Journal of the Early Republic* 34, no. 2 (2014): 175.

Influential men voted, created laws, and served on decision-making committees in the state. Martha's strategy to find support among other women, and by extension their husbands, was not only successful, but also integral to the outset of the war. Without public support from influential men, the revolution may have died before it truly began.

The way in which Martha conducted herself during this time describes a woman who was intelligent, competent, and politically-minded. She ran what was essentially a campaign to garner public support and funding. All donation funds were eventually forwarded to Martha. She acted not only as a figurehead representing the fundraising effort, but also the individual who handled all of the money until she could deliver it to her husband.³⁵ These actions also predicated her future role as First Lady within her husband's presidency. As Abrams summarizes, "her experience as the wife of the leader of the Revolutionary Army served as a training ground in influencing public opinion that would serve her well in her later role as First Lady."³⁶

Despite the fact that the personal correspondence between Martha and George was destroyed, evidence that they had a close relationship included Martha's dedication to visit George during the war. This dedication was clearly demonstrated later on in the war, when George would not allow Martha to travel with the army if she was not inoculated for smallpox. Smallpox had become an enormous problem for the Continental Army because of its deadly and devastating effect and its contagious nature. Martha was terrified of the idea of inoculation, as she was afraid that she would not survive the process. After initially refusing to be inoculated, she eventually agreed, because she

³⁵ Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers*, 45.

³⁶ Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic*, 35.

desperately wanted to spend time with her husband.³⁷ She was inoculated in 1776 while in Philadelphia.³⁸ George Washington mentions her inoculation in a letter to his brother saying, “Mrs. Washington is now under inoculation in this City; and will, I expect, have the Small pox favourably, this is the 13th day; and she has very few Pustules; she would have wrote to my Sister but thought it prudent not to do so, notwithstanding there could be but little danger in conveying the Infection in this manner.”³⁹

On average, Martha spent about six months per year traveling with the army. This was typically when the army set up its winter encampment and remained in place for a longer amount of time. While visiting her husband Martha continued to influence and participate in politics, in addition to running fundraisers back home in order to raise money for supplies for the soldiers. She worked with other women to make and buy clothes and other items to be delivered to the soldiers. As Abrams explains, “during the war, Martha’s active public service on behalf of and concern for the common soldiers earned her their sincere appreciation and respect, as well as having a political impact by raising George’s popularity among his men.”⁴⁰ While at the camps, soldiers saw Martha as an encouraging, motherly figure. Martha not only delivered items purchased through her fundraising efforts, but she also delivered hand-sewn and knitted clothing items,

³⁷ Joseph J. Ellis, *His Excellency: George Washington* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 93.

³⁸ Abrams, *George and Martha Washington: Health, Illness, and the First Family*, 55.

³⁹ George Washington to John Augustine Washington, May 31, 1776, in Saxe Commins, ed., *Basic Writings of George Washington* (New York: Random House, 1948), 231.

⁴⁰ Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic*, 35.

nursed soldiers back to health, and provided comfort and moral support.⁴¹ An aide to Baron von Steuben compared Martha to “the Roman matrons of whom I have read so much...I thought that she well deserved to be the companion and friend of the greatest man of the age.”⁴²

The Revolutionary War was an intensely political phenomenon. To call Martha’s organizing, fundraising, and influence anything less than political participation is a disservice to the historical record. While Martha did not fight in the war or work on committees to draft legislation, she did everything she could within approved societal gender roles. Abrams explains, “...ladies were at times able to use those contemporary social and cultural ideals to their advantage...For many middle-class and elite American women, republican motherhood justified their interest and involvement in contemporary political and social issues.”⁴³ Being knowledgeable of politics was necessary for mothers because they were charged with raising their sons. By moving within the gender roles and societal norms of the time, Martha was able to make a political impact in an almost covert way.

Following the success of the Revolutionary War, George returned home to Martha and Mount Vernon. Both George and Martha were looking forward to spending time at home together in the newly independent nation. Martha’s grandchildren came to live at Mount Vernon and she enjoyed caring for them. Roughly four years went by before it became obvious that the new nation was struggling and the Articles of Confederation

⁴¹ Fields, ed., *Worthy Partner*, xxii.

⁴² Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers*, 71.

⁴³ Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic*, 15.

were failing. Martha would often look back on those years with George as the best time of her life. George was soon contacted, however, to leave and become a delegate representing Virginia in regards to legislative proceedings to replace the Articles of Confederation. With the drafting of the governmental system of the new republic, the three branches of government became defined, and an executive branch needed to be selected. George Washington was asked to become the first president of the United States, meaning that he would be unable to spend the quiet life with Martha at Mount Vernon that they had both envisioned.⁴⁴

Martha as the First, First Lady

Following the official ratification of the Constitution, committee members selected a location for the president to live. The house and headquarters of the presidency was located in the capital of the nation at the time: New York City. George Washington's inauguration took place on April 30, 1789 in New York.⁴⁵ Martha once again began to plan and organize for her move. Records remain of what she selected to be packed for travel and what she ordered to be packed for safekeeping on the estate. Despite her usual efficiency in planning and executing her plans, Martha spent at least three extra months at Mount Vernon before making the journey to New York City, even missing the presidential parade. This hesitation has caused a fair amount of controversy of historical interpretation. Without a record of Martha's exact thoughts, this wait could be interpreted as her reluctance and dissatisfaction to leave her home. However, it is obvious that Martha would have wanted to be with her husband, and even if she was not excited to

⁴⁴ Ellis, *His Excellency*, 185.

⁴⁵ Brady, *Martha Washington*, 160.; Thompson, *A Short Biography*, 21.

move to New York, there could have been several other reasons for her lengthy stay at Mount Vernon. Unforeseen situations regarding logistics at Mount Vernon, or even weather could have stalled her departure. At the stops along the journey to New York, Martha and her grandchildren were greeted by cheering American citizens. Martha quickly realized that her new life would be placed on display for the general public. Abrams explains, “The new First Lady became a national public figure from almost the moment she left Mount Vernon, and like her successors, she soon realized she would be subject to constant scrutiny under the public eye.”⁴⁶

The next chapter of Martha Washington’s life began her most influential legacy. Upon arrival in New York, Martha once again found herself creating a home for herself. She spent some time unpacking her belongings that she had brought with her, decorating, and purchasing additional items for the home. It may seem as though Martha devoted most of her time to spending her husband’s money, but that is not the case. Martha was extremely deliberate with the items that she purchased. Before the Revolutionary War began, Martha organized and participated in boycotts of English goods, purchasing American-made items instead. Martha carefully and methodically chose items to decorate her and George’s home to reflect what would be seen as reflective of America.⁴⁷ It is also important to note that Martha herself had her own significant family inheritance as well as the remains of Daniel Custis’s estate, which would have transferred over to George, excluding inheritance set aside for the children. The financial decisions that Martha made were by no means frivolous. She chose to dress in a relatively plain fashion and

⁴⁶ Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic*, 64.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 69, 77.

specifically cultivated an atmosphere of both relatability and the American spirit. Abigail Adams described Martha as “plain in her dress, but that plainness is the best of every article...Her Hair is white, her Teeth beautiful...Her manners are modest and unassuming, dignified and feminine, not the Tincture of ha’ ture about her.”⁴⁸

In addition to homemaking responsibilities such as managing servants and workers, purchasing food, clothes, and decorations, Martha began to participate politically within the new nation and truly define the role of First Lady. She used her station to create events and fundraisers with other women of her social status. Martha specifically focused on veterans’ aid and compensation. Abrams says, “...Martha’s appreciation for the sacrifices that the American soldiers made propelled her to make one of her few overt political gestures when she later asked Congress to provide benefits for veterans after the war.”⁴⁹

Martha’s station as George’s wife and the influence of her fundraising campaigns brought her into contact with other influential women. Abigail Adams became one of Martha’s closest, life-long friends. As the wives of the president and the vice president, Martha and Abigail spent a great deal of time together. The two women wrote letters to one another until Martha’s death in 1802 and even traveled across the country to visit one another. Abigail greatly appreciated Martha, her leadership, and her role as the First Lady. She later described her close friend saying, “Mrs. Washington is one of those

⁴⁸ Abigail Adams, Stewart Mitchell, ed., *New Letters of Abigail Adams: 1788-1801*. (CA.: Creative Media Partners, LLC, 2018), 8.

⁴⁹ Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic*, 58.

unassuming characters which create Love and Esteem.”⁵⁰ Abigail then took up the mantle of First Lady when her husband John became the second president of the United States. The network of influential women that Martha wove together not only strengthened her political goals to support her husband and the rebel cause, but also provided different contacts for her future endeavors as the First Lady. Martha Washington’s friendship with Abigail Adams is integral to the examination of Martha’s influence. Both women would hold the unrecognized title of First Lady. As the first, First Lady, Martha developed the political and social role that the position would eventually encompass officially. As both her contemporary and close friend, Abigail Adams had a close vantage point from which to observe to the development of the role of First Lady. Adams honored the precedents set by Martha, and later built on the foundation that she had provided.

In modern times, the unofficial position of First Lady is an honored and respected role within the government. The First Lady is not merely a figurehead reflecting her husband’s platform and policies, but somewhat of a policy maker herself. Today, the First Lady chooses specific causes or issues to focus on, much like Martha did with the cause of veterans. While Martha Washington may not have had the power to enact such programs, as the first, First Lady, she set a precedent which later allowed for the definition of the role to expand in this way.

In addition to the ability to discuss specific issues, create platforms, and propose legislation, the First Lady of today has the responsibility of being a hostess. This is another precedent set by Martha Washington. During her first week in New York, Martha hosted a dinner gathering on Friday evening for the governmental elite and their wives.

⁵⁰ Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers*, 70.

These dinners became a weekly tradition reminiscent of the European salon. Abrams explains that, “And it is Martha Washington who is credited with introducing the country’s first ‘political salon’...American salons were much more intentionally political in nature.”⁵¹ She directed the setting, the menu, and the invitations. Not only did Martha host these weekly gatherings, but she and the other women would routinely participate in conversations regarding politics. There were times when the men would go to another study to have conversations separate from the women, but many times political conversations took place in a mixed-gender setting.⁵²

In these conversations Martha reveals another aspect of her relationship with George. Remaining records from guests such as John and Abigail Adams, detail the types of events and conversations that took place at these Friday evening dinners. Abigail Adams provides detailed descriptions of Martha’s “Friday 8 o clock” drawing room receptions, including “homely...Ice Creams and Lemonade” in letters to ⁵³ Martha was extremely knowledgeable of the current political issues, as well as George’s own opinions on these subjects. It was obvious to their guests that George shared his thoughts with Martha, and that he valued her input.

Living in New York City was difficult for Martha. She felt lonely and far away from her close friends and her home in Virginia. She described her life in New York in a letter to her niece saying, “I live a very dull life hear and know nothing that passes in the

⁵¹ Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic*, 34.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 79.

⁵³ Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, July 12, 1789, in Stewart Mitchell, ed., *New Letters of Abigail Adams*, 19.

town – I never goe to the publick place – indeed I think I am more like a state prisoner than anything else, there is certain bounds set for me which I must not depart from – and as I can not doe as I like I am obstinate and stay at home a great deal.”⁵⁴ When the capital, moved to Philadelphia, Martha felt much more comfortable. Their home in Philadelphia was closer to other influential women for Martha to meet with and fundraise. In Philadelphia, Martha took a similar approach to her political participation. However, she did dedicate more time to socializing and fundraising with the other influential women living nearby.

When George Washington announced after his second term as president that he would not be running for a third term, he and Martha began preparations to travel back to Mount Vernon. Martha was once again excited by the prospect of spending retirement at home with her husband peacefully. In reality, she and her husband had become national celebrities. Visitors came to Mount Vernon as soon as they returned home. Martha once again took on the job of hostess, and provided a warm and welcoming environment, despite the fact that she would have much rather her family be left alone.

Once again, Martha’s dream of rest at home with George failed to become reality. After less than two years at home at Mount Vernon, George became ill after spending several hours in the cold the day before. On December 14, 1799 George passed away.⁵⁵ Martha had now cared for her first husband, four children, and second husband on their deathbeds and was responsible for taking care of the logistics following her loss. This

⁵⁴ “Letter, Martha Washington to Fanny Bassett Washington, October 23, 1789,” Mount Vernon, accessed March 20, 2019, <https://www.mountvernon.org/education/primary-sources-2/article/letter-martha-washington-to-fanny-bassett-washington-october-23-1789/>.

⁵⁵ MVLA, *Mount Vernon*, 178.

time, Martha had a host of advisors and friends who were willing to help her, but she still reserved many of the responsibilities for herself.⁵⁶ It was at this time that Martha chose to burn all of the letters that she and George had written each other over their many years of courtship and marriage.⁵⁷ The loss of this primary source evidence is mourned by modern historians. As Bryan explains, “This may have been prompted by a wish to keep the details of their private relationship from prying eyes, but it has led to speculation the letters contained information Martha – and possibly Washington himself – did not wish to be generally known.”⁵⁸ One suggestion for information that Martha would have liked to keep secret would be her husband’s potential correspondence with Sally Fairfax, the wife of his close friend. Two surviving letters written by George Washington to Sally Fairfax provide evidence which Joseph Ellis describes as “scanty, but convincing beyond any reasonable doubt, that Washington had fallen in love with his best friend’s wife several years earlier.”⁵⁹

No matter what her motivation, Martha truly did prevent others from discovering what was said within her correspondence with George. Despite the fact that Martha destroyed almost the entirety of their writing, a few letters did survive.

Several of Martha’s surviving letters were drafted by George’s secretaries, predominantly Tobias Lear. The letters drafted by George’s secretaries feature phrases and words that Martha herself would not have written. These phrases include sentiments

⁵⁶ Bryan, *Martha Washington*, 378.

⁵⁷ “A Love Letter from General Washington.”

⁵⁸ Bryan, *Martha Washington*, 379.

⁵⁹ Ellis, *His Excellency*, 36.

such as, “I only care for what comes from the heart,” and “I have also learnt from experience that the greater part of our happiness or misery [sic] depends upon our dispositions and not upon our circumstances...”⁶⁰ The letters containing these phrases would have been written “in Martha’s quasi-official capacity as wife of the president to a female friend and acquaintance with important political connections.”⁶¹ The dates that these letters were composed coincide with Martha’s time in New York. While her professional correspondence, drafted by George’s secretaries was exceedingly positive, Martha’s private correspondence with her niece reveal her true feelings and disappointment with her life at the time. These sentiments would have been potentially damaging to George’s political career. Allowing George’s secretaries to draft her professional correspondence helped to prevent potential political scandal.

Martha spent the last two years of her life living at Mount Vernon with a few remaining servants and slaves. Following George’s death, Martha emancipated his slaves. George had detailed in his will that his slaves were to be freed following Martha’s death. Key advisors to Martha warned her that the slaves would try to bring about her death in order to free themselves, so she decided to preemptively free them herself.⁶² While it is certainly possible that the slaves at Mount Vernon would have considered this possibility in order to gain freedom, the fear of rebellion was traditionally unfounded and meant to stir racial animosity among white elites. There is no existing evidence that these slaves would have conspired to murder Martha Washington, and it is unlikely that they would

⁶⁰ Bryan, *Martha Washington*, 3.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² MVLA, *Mount Vernon*, 188.

have known anything about this clause in George's will, but because of the lack of evidence, the possibility cannot be ruled out either. In any case, Martha feared for her life according to Abigail Adams who wrote, "in the state in which they were left by the General, to be free at her death, she did not feel as tho her Life was safe in their Hands, many of whom would be told that it was [in] there interest to get rid of her."⁶³

Martha fell ill in early May of 1802. During her final days, Martha prepared for death by saying goodbye to her friends and remaining family, and taking communion. Finally, on May 22, 1802 Martha Washington passed away. Her coffin was placed next to George's in the Washington family tomb on May 25, 1802.⁶⁴

The legacy that Martha left behind is truly remarkable. Her accomplishments deserve to be examined through a lens of appreciation rather than general dismissal. Martha's actions define her as a significant historical figure in her own right, within, as well as outside, of her marriage to George Washington. Overshadowed by the larger-than-life figure of her husband, Martha's role within Washington's presidency has traditionally been ignored. The societal gender roles of the time in which she lived overlooked the importance of women such as Martha Washington and Abigail Adams. Revisiting colonial times and searching for the voices of disenfranchised groups works to create a more accurate historical record and improve current historical methodology.

Martha Washington truly demonstrates that, despite the limitations and stereotypes placed on women at the time, women were perfectly capable of making business and financial decisions. At the same time that Martha defied her station, she

⁶³ Abigail Adams to Mary Adams, Dec. 21, 1800, in Fritz Hirschfeld, *George Washington and Slavery: A Documentary Portrayal* (Columbia, Mo., 1997), 214.

⁶⁴ Brady, *Martha Washington*, 229.

never shirked what would have been seen as her womanly duties. In fact, she cherished her role as homemaker and mother. Martha not only raised her own children, but also raised and educated her grandchildren. Her decisions on what items and products were purchased for her home reflected not only a grasp on financial competence, but also an understanding of the political ramifications of her decisions on her husband's reputation. Her experience running fundraisers, as well as handling the money earned during these projects, further reveals her financial competence and general trustworthiness. The way in which she conducted herself while staying with the Continental Army ingratiated both herself and her husband to the soldiers. This influence would be increasingly important in George's presidency. Her experience at the army camps also provided Martha with inspiration for a cause to take up while First Lady. Martha Washington truly defined the role of First Lady in the United States. She worked to create an "all-American" image for herself and her husband. She developed the first political gathering with her Friday evening dinners. Many of the traditions of hosting other influential and political families that are still held today, began with Martha Washington. Martha's business acumen and efficiency, her political fundraising, and the precedents she set as the first, First Lady, mark her as an important historical figure. Examining the role that Martha Washington played in politics during her time reveals the way in which Martha influenced politics into the modern day. The responsibilities and role of the First Lady remains Martha Washington's long-lasting contribution to modern politics. However, her work as a fundraiser, business owner, mother, and hostess all contributed to the complex and worthy legacy she left behind.

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