Mount Vernon and the Dilemma of a Revolutionary Slave Holder

Like most powerful Virginians of the 18th century, most of George Washington's wealth and status came from the labor of African and African-American slaves. When his father died in 1743, 11-year-old George inherited 10 slaves. The death of his half-brother, Lawrence, in 1754 brought him the 2,600-acre plantation of Mount Vernon, along with another 18 slaves.

The wealth his wife, Martha Custis, brought to the marriage was even greater. While most of her slaves remained on other properties, she brought 12 personal slaves with her when she moved to Mount Vernon in 1759. Washington was energetic and purposeful in all aspects of life, including being a successful plantation master, and by 1786 his careful management had increased his property to 7,300 acres and 216 slaves.

Washington's wealth rested on the exploitation of humans as property. He expressed no qualms about benefiting from what we now see as a fundamentally horrific and immoral institution. The American Revolution challenged Washington's traditional acceptance of slavery on both practical and idealistic grounds. When Washington arrived in Massachusetts in 1775 to take command of the American forces, he was surprised to discover that New Englanders had begun to allow free African-Americans, as well as slaves, to join them as soldiers.
At first, he wanted an all-white army

After meeting with his officers, Washington changed this policy and tried to make an all-white Continental Army. The following month, the British Army in Virginia declared that any slave of a patriot master who fled to fight the patriots would gain his freedom.

Washington immediately grasped the strategic crisis posed by this British promise of freedom in a country where one in every five people was black. In fact, 17 Mount Vernon slaves fled to join the British during the war. This quickly led Washington to reverse his policy, and by December 1775 the Continental Army, in the North at least, included black soldiers.

Washington's Revolutionary ideals also helped transform his attitude toward slavery.

Like many other patriots of the period, Washington described British tyranny as threatening to enslave white Americans. Washington explained to his old friend George Fairfax that British "custom and use shall make us as tame and abject slaves as the blacks we rule over with such arbitrary sway."

Better treatment for slaves

Slavery was the most extreme example of human oppression. While many used the slavery metaphor, Washington went a major step further than most of his fellow slave masters. He decided to improve the conditions for slaves on his plantation, and eventually, he even freed his slaves.

Washington's emancipation of his slaves was an unusual and honorable decision for a man of his day. No other Virginia Founding Father matched his bold steps. By the early 1770s Washington clearly tried to lessen the evils of slavery on his plantation, and from this point on he rarely bought a slave and tried to never sell them away from Mount Vernon without their consent. Washington hoped to be a humane master by keeping slave families together.

However, Washington soon discovered that slavery was only profitable when slaves were treated brutally. He sometimes ordered that slaves be whipped or beaten. He also sold some disobedient slaves to islands like the West Indies, separating them from their families forever.

Five months before his death, Washington drew up a will that described how his slaves were to be freed. Child slaves were to receive job training and learn to read and write, and elderly slaves were to receive financial support. Knowing full well that some heirs would be upset, Washington insisted that "this clause respecting Slaves, and every part thereof be religiously fulfilled ... without evasion, neglect, or delay."
His anti-slavery ideas never went public

Despite these actions, some may still say Washington's attitude toward slavery did not go far enough. At his death in 1799, Mount Vernon included 317 slaves, but only 124 of them belonged to Washington, and only these would be freed. The rest were his wife's. More significantly, Washington never publicly explained his new belief that slavery should end.

In a private letter in 1786, he stated that he wished the legislature would slowly abolish slavery. Even his private commitment was to a cautious and gradual process, but he never allowed even this moderate anti-slavery position to be known publicly. In the end, Washington's commitment to national unity prevented him from throwing his enormous prestige behind the radical cause of emancipation, because he feared it would deeply divide the new nation.

Could Washington have put together an anti-slavery group that might have ended the slavery and avoided the Civil War? If he spoke out against slavery, could it have caused an earlier civil war that would have destroyed the country? We can never know the answers, but it is clear that in his own cautious way Washington struggled with the most profound question of the Revolutionary Era. He ultimately decided that his moral sense of what was right overcame his personal interest in perpetuating slavery.
Quiz

1. All four selections below help to make the claim that Washington’s economic status was dependent on his efficient use of slaves.

Which selection provides the STRONGEST evidence to support the claim?

(A) Like most powerful Virginians of the 18th century, most of George Washington’s wealth and status came from the labor of African and African-American slaves.

(B) When his father died in 1743, 11-year-old George inherited 10 slaves. The death of his half-brother, Lawrence, in 1754 brought him the 2,600-acre plantation of Mount Vernon, along with another 18 slaves.

(C) Washington was energetic and purposeful in all aspects of life, including being a successful plantation master, and by 1786 his careful management had increased his property to 7,300 acres and 216 slaves.

(D) He expressed no qualms about benefiting from what we now see as a fundamentally horrific and immoral institution.

2. Which section of the article BEST demonstrates Washington’s various perspectives on slavery?

(A) Introduction [paragraphs 1-3]

(B) “At first, he wanted an all-white army”

(C) “Better treatment for slaves”

(D) “His anti-slavery ideas never went public”

3. Which answer choice BEST reflects Washington’s reaction to the American Revolution?

(A) He began to understand that slavery was inherently immoral due to the actions of the British.

(B) He first changed his ideas about slavery for strategic purposes in hopes of defeating the British.

(C) He endorsed harsher treatment of slaves to improve the chances for victory against the British.

(D) He realized that slaves were suffering at the hands of slave owners because the British emphasized the issue.
How does the article develop the idea that, while privately committed to emancipation, some say Washington's stance could have been stronger?

(A) by contrasting his beliefs on slavery to those of most Americans
(B) by giving Americans' reactions to his belief that slavery should be abolished
(C) by describing how his moral ideals had the potential to influence the American people
(D) by explaining how he was more influenced by the future of America than his moral ideals