Hamilton and his wordy peers. A proud, ambitious, and thin-skinned man, Washington also must have sensed their occasional condescensions. To be fair, these voluble civilians appear quite respectful in their treatment of Washington when compared to some of the generals around him during the war, such as Thomas Conway, Charles Lee, and Horatio Gates, who schemed to replace him as senior commander, and Benedict Arnold, who proved a traitor to Washington and to the American cause.

The Real George Washington

ALMOST EVERY BIOGRAPHER OF WASHINGTON SETS OUT DETERMINED to show us the real man, to bring that stiff image to life. In the nineteenth century, Paul Leicester Ford wrote at the outset of *The True George Washington* that "if the present work succeeds in humanizing Washington, and making him a man rather than a historical figure, its purpose will have been fulfilled." In the twentieth, another biographer subtitled his work "George Washington as a Human Being," which begs the question of what sort of creature other authors had studied. James Thomas Flexner, returning from a four-volume expedition into Washington's life, reported that he discovered "a fallible human being made of flesh and blood and spirit—not a statue of marble and wood." In our own century, Ron Chernow, in a fine study of Washington, states that "the goal of the present biography is to create a fresh portrait of Washington that will make him real, credible, and charismatic in the same way that he was perceived by his contemporaries."

But his chroniclers, in pursuing this humanizing mission, in fact seek to undo Washington's work of a lifetime, which was to discipline his turbulent emotions, build an image of lofty distance, and most of all, establish a reputation for valiant leadership, unselfish virtue, and unyielding honor—that is, someone with the makings of a great man. Washington would spend decades in erecting and polishing that statue of himself. Nathaniel Hawthorne was not just being humorous when he mused that Washington was "born with his clothes on, and his hair powdered, and made a stately bow on his first appearance in the world." Rather, the novelist was putting his finger on the essence of the man.

One anecdote from the Constitutional Convention gives a sense of the effort Washington put into developing and preserving this potent public persona. Alexander Hamilton remarked to Gouverneur Morris (Columbia, 1768) on the general's social reserve, noting that even with close friends, he "allowed no one to be familiar with him." Morris disputed that. Hamilton challenged Morris, the next time he saw Washington, to slap him on the back in hearty greeting. Try that, Hamilton said, and I will reward you with a good, wine-filled dinner for a dozen friends. So it was that Morris, the next time he encountered Washington, shook the man's hand while grasping his shoulder. According to an account attributed to Hamilton, Washington "withdrew his hand, stepped suddenly back, fixed his eye on Morris for several minutes with an angry frown, until the latter retreated abashed, and sought refuge in the crowd. The company looked on in silence." Morris stated ruefully at the subsequent meal paid for by Hamilton that "nothing could induce me to repeat it."

Washington's Pursuit of Virtue

WASHINGTON DID NOT RECEIVE A FORMAL EDUCATION BECAUSE HIS FAther died when he was just eleven years old and then, when he was twenty, he lost his surrogate father, his older half brother Lawrence. In his lack of schooling, he grew up like most Americans of his time. In the America of 1775, there were only nine colleges, and out of a population of 2.5 million, there were just three thousand college graduates.

In colonial America, the typical young white boy got at best a year or two of schooling from four to six hours a day, which was enough to learn to read a bit and to add and subtract. After

that brush with learning he was set to farming with his family or to an apprenticeship. Most instruction consisted of oral repetition, mainly because paper was expensive. Girls, blacks, and First Peoples* generally received even less education. There was a major regional difference here. In New England, the Puritans were trying to make a new society, their "city upon a hill," and so established publicly supported "town schools," in part to enable people to read the Bible. But Virginians, and to a lesser extent other Southerners, were trying as much as possible to replicate existing English society, and so were less interested in educating the vast majority of children.

Washington never attended college, nor did he pick up Latin or French on his own, as the autodidact Benjamin Franklin did. As a youth, Washington read Caesar's *Commentaries* in translation, which indicates some curiosity about military affairs, but there is no record that he followed up on this by reading other Roman histories. This interest in Caesar was a bit unusual, because in the republican atmosphere of the eighteenth century, the Roman dictator was "conspicuous by his absence from most secondary curricula." Yet Washington remained an admirer. When he was sprucing up his house after marrying Martha Custis, among the decorations he ordered from London was a small bust of Caesar. However, his English buying agent was unable to find a Caesar of the size he wanted, and offered instead a list of the busts readily available: "Homer, Virgil, Horace, Cicero, Plato, Aristotle, Seneca, Galens, Vestall Virgin Faustina Chaucer, Spencer, Johnson, Shakespear, Beaumont Fletcher, Milton, Prior, Pope, Congreve, Swift, Addison, Dryden, Locke, Newton." Washington apparently let the idea drop.

It is no surprise that *Cato* was his favorite play. The drama is as stiff as Washington strove to be, almost unreadable to us today. But, writes one specialist in the history of American theater, eighteenth-century audiences expected lengthy declamations and

---

* Please see this book's introductory note on this usage.

were not put off by predictable plots. They came primed to enjoy the play's "crisp and quotable epigrams and the beautiful expression of worthy sentiments." We do not know how old Washington was when he first saw the play, which was performed in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1735; a year later at the College of William & Mary; and in 1749 in Philadelphia.

During the eighteenth century, Cato was the very embodiment of virtue. "Think Cato sees thee," was one of Franklin's sayings in his "almanacks." It was natural that the Roman would become Washington's ideal. He would know about the orator from the play, and also perhaps from listening to conversations about the portrayal of the man in *Plutarch's Lives*, which was enormously popular with eighteenth-century American elites. This is how Plutarch describes Cato:

> *It is said of Cato that even from his infancy, in his speech, his countenance, and all his childish pastimes, he discovered an inflexible temper, unmoved by any passion, and firm in everything. He was resolute in his purposes, much beyond the strength of his age, to go through with whatever he undertook. . . . It was difficult to excite him to laughter,—his countenance seldom relaxed even into a smile.*

Born to an aristocratic Roman family in 95 BC, Cato was considered remarkable even in his youth for his strict rejection of corruption and luxury. He possessed wealth, yet lived and dressed simply. Aside from that, he had a typical life for a successful Roman notable, first achieving military recognition by commanding a legion in Macedon, where he lived as his soldiers did, eschewing special food and lodging. He then began climbing the rungs of the Republican government. Plutarch states that "he undertook the service of the state as the proper business of an honest man." But in politics as in war, he stood out for his self-denying, hardworking approach. By learning accounting and studying the records of the treasury, he was able to detect and stop kickbacks, embezzlement, and a variety of other shady financial dealings by the office's senior functionaries.

Cato's first great political confrontation came in 63 BC, when Cicero, who had been elected consul the previous year, exposed the conspiracy of Catiline, a populist patrician who had stood for consul three times, only to be rejected each time. After the third such rebuff, Catiline and his followers apparently planned a violent takeover of the city. Cicero responded by calling for their execution. He was opposed in this by Julius Caesar, who was just beginning his own rise to political prominence. "Caesar at this time had not done much in the Roman world except fall greatly into debt," Anthony Trollope, a historian as well as a novelist, notes tartly. Caesar argued that the conspirators instead should simply be exiled. Cato denounced Caesar as pleading for false mercy that endangered the state. For the next two decades, the men would be relentless enemies as Cato struggled to preserve the Republic against Caesar's dictatorial ambitions. A few years later, Caesar proposed a law that would reward his veterans with government-owned land but in doing so would diminish the state's tax base. Cato spoke vigorously against this, provoking Caesar to have him dragged away. Cato continued to speak the entire time.

In January of 49 BC, Caesar led his troops into Italy, effectively declaring war on the Senate and provoking a civil war. Cato fled across the Adriatic to join Pompey, Caesar's former ally but now his enemy. When Caesar defeated Pompey, Cato led a remnant force across the Mediterranean to Africa. In April of 46 BC, facing capture, Cato committed suicide in Utica, a Roman town in what is now Tunisia, preferring death to submitting to Caesar. Julius Caesar himself was of course assassinated just two years later.

To become an American Cato, Washington would need to become a man of recognized great virtue. Despite his lack of education, he understood that for someone of his time and place, attainment of public virtue was the highest goal one could have in life. He also may have sensed that eighteenth-century "virtue" was essentially male—the root of the word is *vir*, the Latin word for man. To be virtuous was to be a public man with a reputation for selflessness. Washington likely never read the definition by Montesquieu, the eighteenth-century French political philosopher, of

"virtue" as "the love of the laws and of our country," but many of his peers did.

Young George Washington wove together these cultural strands when he wrote a letter in 1756, at the age of twenty-four, stating that in his life he would pursue "Honor and Reputation." In other words, he would judge his own actions by how they might affect those two things, and he would measure his peers the same way. Eventually he would come to personify them for his fellow Americans.

Today, that approach to life may seem profoundly conservative. But in the eighteenth century, it carried a whiff of egalitarianism. Aristocrats had little need to show public virtue—they held power and position by birth, and their rank would be unaffected by public esteem. Washington, the fatherless adolescent and third son for the purposes of inheritance, enjoyed no such advantage. "Justifying by virtue is a way of escaping hereditary control," observes Gordon Wood. Young George Washington had something to prove, and he saw how to do it.

Washington's American Education

JOHN ADAMS HAD IT RIGHT. WASHINGTON WAS NOT A PHILOSOPHER, BUT he was a sturdy practical thinker. By that, Adams seems to have meant that Washington was capable of observing and learning. He read all his life, but mainly about surveying and agriculture. His library consisted of books on those subjects, plus some history, law, and religion. There was little philosophy, and even less fiction or poetry.

So how did Washington acquire the ability to think critically, as he would do during the American Revolution?

Any answer is necessarily speculative. It appears that his consciousness of the gaps in his education made him a studious observer. On top of that, his early military defeats provided compelling incentives to make him want to learn from his experiences. More