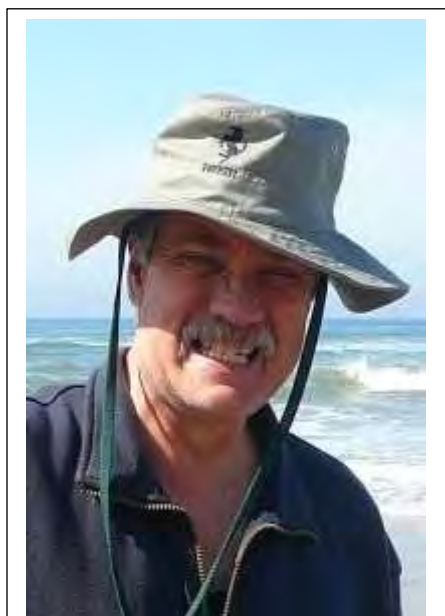


George Washington and the freedom of his slaves

Dennis Jamison
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Many Americans will remember George Washington's birthday today (February 22nd). Despite the confusion originating from the federal government's tampering with a perfectly good birthday celebration for George Washington by renaming it President's Day, on a superficial level, it might seem that the citizenry is in no danger of forgetting Washington any time soon. However, remembering George Washington's birthday twice in the month of February does not necessarily mean that the Father of the Country is respectfully being remembered.



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Although the memory of George Washington has been somewhat obscured, it is still important to remember the Father of the Country, not simply for being the nation's first president, nor more fundamentally, for the kind of man he was, but Americans need to remember George Washington for the ideals and values for which he fought, and those for which he worked as a key leader in the infancy of the United States of America. Yet, one of the most significant aspects of George Washington's incredible achievements occurred when the old farmer freed all of his slaves.

It is indeed ironic that Washington's birthday falls within the month that has been designated as Black History Month, yet few Americans are even aware that Washington took such bold action for his day. George Washington insured that his slaves would be set free as a provision of his will after he died. An even bigger irony is that it is probable that more Americans today are aware of the falsehood of the story of young George chopping down his father's cherry tree than the veracity of his efforts in freeing his slaves. Sadly, this exposes the convoluted state of the American education system, especially in the area of teaching the history of

the United States.

The fact that Washington's birthday falls within Black History Month, would seem to offer an obvious teaching opportunity to help young people learn that not all of the Founding Fathers were just a bunch of old white men who did not give a damn about freeing the slaves. This misconception that seems to be subtly promulgated today was one of the primary beliefs of the Southern Confederacy, and one belief that Abraham Lincoln dispelled in his debates with Senator Douglas. It is quite amazing that quite a number of history teachers and other educators today would not react to the lie that had been perpetrated by white Southern Democrats or Douglas, yet would question Lincoln.

Simply to raise this issue would stimulate the general argument from ardent revisionist historians that examines the Founding Fathers, and inclusively, Washington's 'hypocrisy' that the revolutionaries did not free their slaves immediately after the Revolution, that they did not honestly believe in genuine

freedom for all. This narrow and insidious view neglects the facts that the United States was created as a Democratic-Republic, and that there were essentially two factions of colonists that managed to create a land of the free. It neglects the fact that the northern Founders managed to outlaw slavery in the northern territories as part of the Northwest Ordinance,

Such subtly superficial treatment of the subject of slavery as being a fundamentally divisive issue from the time of the founding is deceptive. It neglects the fact that slavery at the time of the founding had existed in the world, throughout all parts of the world for thousands of years. It neglects the fact that by the time of the founding, the institution of slavery had existed in the colonies for around 170 years! It neglects the fact that slavery had been instituted by British law and entrenched into the culture of the colonies by that time. It does not touch the fact that Jefferson's original Declaration of Independence contained several components which condemned slavery.

To be sure, the fight against tyranny was the fight against slavery, but it was one thing fighting against the British Empire for freedom, and it was quite another to fight against countrymen and neighbors who lived on the same soil. To fight a revolution at the same time of fighting a civil war would not have allowed the establishment of the United States of America. The Founding Fathers who genuinely believed in freedom were able to accomplish what they could that was attainable within the political climate of their day. The fact that they created an independent nation was a miracle in and of itself. The fact that they were able to pass the Northwest Ordinance under the noses of the legislators from the South was amazing.

The fact that the former president of the United States, with his nearly impeccable reputation, was able to free his slaves demonstrates that he was a man ahead of his time. Even during the time of the Revolution, Washington allowed blacks to join the Continental Army although he did not actively recruit them. The general was able to get away with this, despite the fact that some of the representatives of southern states were totally opposed to allowing blacks in the Continental Army. Even near the end of the Revolution, at the time his troops were marching on Yorktown, reportedly a journal entry of a German officer, told that one in four of Washington's soldiers were blacks.

It is true that before the war, George Washington had been just another Virginia landowner who looked upon slavery as a normal part of life. But, there is also speculation suggesting Washington viewed slavery as a necessary evil in the way that other southern landowners were perceiving the institution at that time. Prevailing sentiment among many southern slave owners persisted that if given freedom, the slave would not understand the value of freedom, and if freed, it would ultimately lead to rule by mob since in some areas of the south, slaves actually outnumbered the whites. Some recognized that slavery was inhuman or immoral, but were not inclined to stand up on their own to force the issue even if they felt strongly about it.

It was the Founding Fathers who dared to stand up against the face of slavery as manifested under the monarchy of King George III. But, it was the very foundation of the new nation, "conceived in Liberty" as Lincoln noted, that flew in the face of slavery worldwide and throughout the course of human history. The Founding Fathers faced the most critical issue first – independence. The struggles that Washington and the other founders had to deal with were quite complex and complicated, but Washington may have been one who had experienced more deeply or broadly the complexities of slavery. It is ironic, that the leader of the revolution who had exposed himself to death so often during the war, performed one of the most strident acts of a leader after the old general died.

Washington had taken steps to change the laws of Virginia that would allow a slave owner to free his slaves as a provision of his last Will and testament. After the Revolution, he retreated to Mount Vernon and attempted to concentrate on his neglected farmlands. During this period in Virginia prior to 1782, state law restricted slave owners in their efforts to free their slaves. A slave owner was only allowed to set a slave free for "meritorious service" and only with the approval of the Governor and his council. This law was repealed in 1782 with a new law permitting the manumission of slaves through a deed or a will. Washington did not take immediate action on this law, but waited until a few months before he passed away to draw up his last Will and testament which stipulated the freeing of all of his slaves upon Martha's death.

Despite Washington's misgivings about slavery later in his life, his circumstances involved growing up in the South, inheriting slaves as a boy of only eleven when his father died, and marrying a wealthy widow who inherited many slaves due to her husband's death. He owned many slaves, bought and sold many slaves during his lifetime, but when it came close to the end of his lifetime, Washington's will detailed his wishes that he would be able to free all of the slaves at Mt. Vernon, but they did not all belong to him. Some belonged to Martha's heirs and they were not even hers to free under state law.

Over the years after their marriage, Washington's slaves had intermarried with Martha's slaves who would have to be returned or taken in by her first husband's heirs. If Washington freed his slaves without being able to free Martha's slaves, it would have divided the various families and that was something

Washington did not want to do. There is a perception among some historians that Washington attempted to persuade Martha to influence her heirs to free the Custis slaves, but there is no evidence that she tried to do so.

George Washington lamented that he wished he could free all the slaves at Mt. Vernon, but they did not all belong to him. Washington did free William (Billy) Lee, his personal valet, before Martha died; but the other slaves were to be emancipated upon Martha's death. Washington also stipulated in his will that the elderly ex-slaves would be provided for, specifically clothed and fed, by his direct heirs, and the freed children would be taught to read, to write, and some valuable trade in order to provide support for themselves. Martha Washington actually carried out her husband's wishes to free the slaves within twelve months of his death and ultimately allowed them to stay on at Mt. Vernon if they had family members there.

George Washington's actions were controversial in the time he made such a powerful effort which was a strong statement of his genuine convictions. Despite fierce opposition and severe resistance, he made it happen. It was a genuine legacy from a man who dared to risk his life for the genuine freedom of his people. Americans should not lose sight of this heritage.

Dennis Jamison graduated UTS in 1978. He reinvented his life after working for a multi-billion dollar division of Johnson & Johnson for several years. Now semi-retired, he is an adjunct faculty member at West Valley College in California. He currently writes a column on history and one on American freedom for the Communities Digital News.