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James Thomas Flexner thought that there would be little left to learn about George Washington after the publication of the fourth volume of his biography of the Great Man in 1972. “I was confident that almost all papers directly of importance to the study of Washington had already come, one way or another, into my ken,” Flexner wrote in his autobiography. “It would take a discovery of blockbuster impact – it was hard to conceive where it could come from – that would do more than change details in a study like mine already grounded on so various an accumulation of evidence” (Flexner (1996) 405). Curious historians might as well move along, Flexner declared like a policeman at the scene of a crime. The action had ended; there was nothing left to see.

Fortunately, few historians have taken Flexner at his word. Since the revival of interest in the Founding Fathers over the last quarter of the twentieth century – due in part to the popularity of Flexner’s biography – dozens of new books about Washington have appeared in print. Most recently, Ron Chernow’s magisterial Washington: A Life (2010), along with works by distinguished historians such as Joseph J. Ellis, John Ferling and others have given the lie to the idea that there is nothing new to learn about George Washington.

The relative value of the plethora of recent books about Washington greatly depends on the extent to which they make use of the modern edition of The Papers of George Washington. This massive editorial project at the University of Virginia, which Flexner likened to a “brontosaurus snuffling at my tail,” has spent almost fifty years identifying, transcribing, annotating, and publishing every known letter to and from Washington. To date, the editors of the Washington Papers have amassed copies of some 140,000 documents from repositories all over the world – and dozens of new documents are uncovered every year. Washington letters, sometimes of
great significance, do indeed still turn up in musty old scrapbooks and creaky attics.

Few of these letters, to be sure, have shattered our understanding of Washington’s personality or his deeds. More often, the most interesting discoveries incrementally adjust our perceptions. In 2001, for example, the editors of the Washington Papers discovered a previously unknown note from Martha to George Washington written on the day of the Battle of Brandywine, September 11, 1777. “My love,” Martha wrote, “the silver cup I mentioned to you in my letter by the last post – Wt 113 oz.” (PGW, Revolution, 11:203). Normally, such a minor piece of correspondence would raise few eyebrows; and the identity of the “silver cup” is unknown. However, Martha’s destruction of all but a few pieces of her correspondence with George shortly before her death in 1802 makes this item extremely rare – and the fact that she addressed her husband as “my love” in a casual note offers unique insight into the intimacy of their relationship.

One of the greatest obstacles to a keen understanding of any historical figure is the tendency to view him or her as frozen at a particular moment in time, or within a specific, narrow context. Thus, studies and biographies of Washington too often focus on him as young, middle-aged, or old; or as a soldier, farmer, or politician. In truth, of course, Washington’s life was a journey (if the somewhat trite phrase may be forgiven). Many qualities of his personality – most notably his temper and his ambition – changed profoundly over the course of his life; and Washington’s capacity for assessing himself dispassionately and learning from his mistakes eventually set him on the road to greatness.

Tracing the evolution of Washington’s personality is impossible without recourse to his papers, which he deemed “a species of Public property, sacred in my hands” (Lengel (2007) 253). Reading his correspondence from day to day, one gets a sense, for example, of his mind’s vast capacity for detail. Like Napoleon, Washington understood that military (and political) success depended to a great degree on attention given to matters that others might deem insignificant. A careful perusal of Washington’s letters might also help to temper recent assertions that he was ruthlessly ambitious, a cold-hearted realist, or suspicious of the will of the people in a democratic form of government (see Henriques (2006); Ferling (2009); Chernow (2010)). In fact, Washington’s sense of “ambition” evolved significantly between the beginning of the French and Indian War in 1754 and the onset of the Revolutionary War in 1775; his “realism” warred endlessly with his essentially idealistic character; and his view of the possibilities and pitfalls of democratic government changed dramatically between his presidential inauguration in 1789 and his retirement in 1797.

The essays in this volume assess Washington from almost every conceivable angle. They explore his family experiences; development of Mount Vernon; evolving concepts of slavery; early travails on the frontier; and growth as a
politician. They also trace his development as a military commander, from his involvement in key battles and understandings of strategy and tactics to his skills as an administrator, spymaster, and practitioner of irregular warfare. Washington’s involvement in the creation and establishment of the United States government inspire essays on his participation in the Constitutional Convention of 1787 and his conduct as President from 1789–1797. The concluding essays describe his intellectual development and religious beliefs, and reveal Washington’s ongoing symbolic importance to the United States in the centuries following his death.

A unifying element in these essays is their reliance on careful study of his papers and correspondence, including items as yet unpublished. In aggregate, they provide important new insights into Washington’s life and accomplishments, and his role in the creation of the United States. The authors of these essays do not, of course, agree in every particular; disagreement and debate is in the nature of historical inquiry. Even so, they point unerringly to one uncontrovertible fact: we still have much to learn about George Washington.
Chapter One

The Youth of George Washington

Jessica E. Brunelle

In 1841 the celebrated novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne wittily remarked that George Washington “was born with his clothes on and his hair powdered, and made a stately bow on his first appearance in the world” (Wills (1994) 194). For many Americans in the 19th and early 20th centuries it was difficult to imagine that the revered Father of our nation had ever been a child, romping around in the Rappahannock River, practicing his penmanship in copybooks, and wooing girls. The severe lack of legitimate documentation of his youth did not aid this understanding. Tremendous gaps in surviving records have allowed eager hagiographical mythmakers like Mason Weems to fill in Washington’s early life with didactic and entertaining stories that praise the great man he would become. Many of those stories – the most famous being young Washington chopping down the cherry tree – have permeated the American memory and become acknowledged as fact. This is all much to the chagrin of many 20th and 21st century Washington historians who have ignored Weems entirely and looked at a wide variety of sources and studies to cobble together a more complete and truthful picture of Washington’s youth. The resulting image is a young man with a voracious sense of ambition who yearned to be free of life at the family farm and rise above his middling status. Young George Washington desired greatness and exploited circumstances and connections to achieve it – though not even he could have dreamed the greatness he would attain.

If we do not know much about the young George Washington, we know even less about his parents. His father, Augustine Washington, was born in 1694 to Lawrence Washington and Mildred Warner. In 1715 or 1716 he
married Jane Butler, who died unexpectedly on November 24, 1729 after bearing him three children: Lawrence, Augustine, Jr (or "Austin," as he was known), and Jane. A year and a half later, in 1731, Augustine married Mary Ball, an orphan who brought middling property to the marriage. The value of Augustine’s land and investments put his growing family within the wealthiest 10% of Virginians, but they were in the second tier of the gentry, a level below the stately Lees, Byrds, and Fairfaxes. Augustine seems to have been an ambitious man, however, intent on moving up the socio-economic ladder. He served as a Justice of the Peace, sheriff, and church warden and sent Lawrence and Austin to the Appleby School in England to receive educations befitting gentlemen. He also acquired numerous properties throughout the region, including a plantation in Stafford County, 2,500 acres along the Potomac known as Little Hunting Creek, and a managing interest in an iron foundry built on his land.

Mary Ball Washington, born in the winter of 1708–1709, was 23-years old when she married Augustine. After the deaths of both of her parents she had lived under the guardianship of George Eskridge, a highly-respected lawyer, landowner, and burgess. It appears that when she gave birth to her first child she chose to honor her guardian by naming her son after him. And so, on February 22, 1732 George Washington was born. At this time the Washingtons lived in Westmoreland County, Virginia at a farm known as Popes Creek. In 1735 Augustine relocated his growing family sixty miles northward to Little Hunting Creek and in 1738 they moved again, this time to a 260-acre plantation on the Rappahannock River across from the burgeoning town of Fredericksburg. By this time Mary had given birth to all six of her children: George, Elizabeth, Samuel, John Augustine, Charles, and Mildred, the latter dying soon after in 1740.

The Washingtons lived comfortably at the new property, named Ferry Farm due to its proximity to the boat that took people across the Rappahannock. An inventory of their possessions lists curtained beds, silver spoons, napkins, tablecloths, and some 50 slaves, but the home’s primary value was its nearness to Fredericksburg, a growing town that offered tremendous investment opportunities for someone as ambitious as Augustine. Fredericksburg also gave young George his first glimpse of a real town and he likely took the ferry to explore all it had to offer.

In 1738, Lawrence Washington returned from England and George met his half-brother for the first time. He was 20 or 21 (his exact date of birth is unknown), graceful and refined after years of thorough schooling. George was quite taken with his brother and admired and revered his polish and worldliness. That reverence expanded in late 1740 when Lawrence was commissioned captain of a Virginia company being raised for the British army’s campaign in Cartagena. Britain was embroiled in a conflict with Spain – known as the War of Jenkins’ Ear – over trade in the Caribbean and launched this operation to obtain one of Spain’s principal ports. Though he
did not actually participate in the battle, Lawrence sent home a detailed account of the fighting and made sure to emphasize that he had quickly learned to disregard the roar of the cannons. It is unclear whether Lawrence’s adventure awakened a military spirit in the then nine-year old George, but it seems likely that his deep admiration for his brother would have inspired him to follow in his footsteps, wherever they led.

In the spring of 1743 George was visiting his cousins in the Chotank district of the Potomac when he received word that his father was very ill. He returned home immediately, in time to see his father pass away on April 12. Augustine’s death had a profound impact on George, though likely not due to any particular emotional closeness between the two. In the few years before his death, Augustine had been overseas, spending much time in England consulting with partners on his financial interests. Rather, Augustine’s death directly affected George’s education and created circumstances that forced his childhood to come to a rapid end.

Augustine’s hard work and investments allowed him to bequeath land to each of his six sons, but the bulk of the property went to the eldest. Lawrence received Little Hunting Creek, his father’s interest in the foundry, town lots in Fredericksburg, and the largest share of slaves. By comparison, George received Ferry Farm – a property 1/5 the size of Little Hunting Creek and much less fertile – three lots in Fredericksburg, a half interest in an undeveloped tract in Stafford County (land so bad and unfertile that he never tried to develop it) and ten slaves. On its own, Ferry Farm would allow George to be a second-class planter, but not until he turned 21 and could inherit the property outright. For the time being all of George’s inheritance would remain under the control of his mother. And so would George. Even though Mary Washington’s youth and property made her attractive to potential suitors, she never remarried. It is unclear why she did this, though one possibility is that she did not want to run the risk of a new husband distributing her family’s property among his children and leaving hers without. Whatever her reasons, Mary’s decision forced the 11-year old George, as the oldest male at Ferry Farm, to absorb the family burdens and assist his mother with the maintenance of the plantation. This new day-to-day duty, plus the family’s newly diluted income, made it impossible for George to go overseas to receive a formal education like his eldest brothers had. Whatever education he would receive would be basic, disjointed, and sporadic.

Historians and biographers have posited many different theories about the alternative and informal education young George received during this period. Some have stated that he was taught by one of Augustine’s tenants, a man by the name of Mr. Hobby. Others have suggested that he attended Reverend James Marye’s school in Fredericksburg, but there is very little direct evidence to validate either of these statements. David Humphreys’ Life of General Washington states that George was educated by a domestic tutor, but no further information is given (Zagarri (1991) 6). What is known
for sure is that from the ages of 10 to 13 George completed exercises in geometry and trigonometry, calculated money conversions and interest, and copied poems and legal forms. Over 200 pages of these exercises and documents have survived and they very clearly indicate that young Washington’s education was focused on learning the basic financial and agricultural understandings of a planter (see PGW, *Colonial*, 1: 1–4).

Noticeably absent from those surviving documents are lessons in philosophy, languages like Latin and French, and books of classical and English literature, all of which were the hallmarks of an 18th-century gentleman’s liberal education. We do not know how the 10–13-year old George felt about not receiving instruction in these areas. We do know how he felt later, however. In 1785 he referred to his education as “defective” and refused to write his memoirs because he believed he did not have the talent (PGW, *Confederation*, 3:148–151). Later, he turned down all invitations to France because he did not want to speak through an interpreter. He felt intellectually inferior when in the company of Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, James Madison, and many of the other founders. Whereas his peers had studied the arts and humanities and gone to college, he had scratched out texts and solved practical geometry problems. He had to work exceptionally hard to master his native language, let alone a second one. But his own sense of academic inadequacy inspired him to desire the best for his family. In a letter to Jonathan Boucher about the education of his step-son, John Parke Custis, Washington lamented the fact that Custis was “unacquainted with several of their classical authors … ignorant of Greek … knows nothing of French…little or nothing acquainted with arithmetic and totally ignorant of the mathematics,” of which, “nothing can be more essentially necessary to any person possessed of a large landed estate” (PGW, *Colonial*, 8: 495).

Whatever the type and amount of schooling Washington experienced, he received it at a time when he was living at home with his mother. Much has been written about Mary Ball Washington, ranging from adoring presentations of her as the ideal republican mother to ruthless critiques of her as an unrelenting shrew. 19th-century hagiographers intent on idolizing the woman who raised the father of the nation, created the former interpretation, one that 20th-century historians took great pains to destroy. They, in contrast, promoted the latter image, one based on Washington’s frustrated letters and references to Mary from the 1780s. Historians have recently refuted that interpretation as well, declaring that while George and his mother’s relationship may have been strained in the later years of her life, it is unfair to also assume that it had always been like that (see Warren (1999) 5795–5796).

This is not to suggest, however, that Mary Washington in the 1740s was a passive and subdued woman who did what she was told. Instead, she was a 34-year old widow with five children, in charge of a plantation and a
few dozen slaves. To ensure that Ferry Farm ran in working order she had to be stern, determined, and exacting; and under her guidance, young George learned firsthand what it was like to give orders and see to it that they were followed. The farm reports that the Washingtons demanded from their overseers are incredibly detailed and suggest that the farm was run with great precision and discipline. But the similar management styles and personalities that allowed Ferry Farm to succeed likely created tension between Mary and her son. George was, after all, entering his adolescence and undoubtedly preferred to explore the countryside and visit his brothers than to stay home with his mother and younger siblings.

Upon inheriting the Little Hunting Creek property Lawrence renamed it Mount Vernon in honor of his admiral from the Cartagena campaign. The house was exciting, fancy, and bustling and not stifling, rough, and overly disciplined like Ferry Farm. George became a frequent visitor at Mount Vernon and Lawrence regaled him with stories from his brief stint as a soldier, making him an infinitely more welcome housemate than Mary (of whom, one of his cousins claimed, he was more afraid than his own parents) (Conkling (1858) 22). George still harbored a tremendous amount of respect and admiration for his brother who reciprocated through taking an active interest in seeing George succeed.

In September 1746 Lawrence informed George that he wanted him to apply for an open position of midshipman aboard a royal ship currently anchored at Alexandria. Much later in his life Washington acknowledged that he had had little desire to go to sea, but that at the time he recognized his brother’s authority and influence and resolved to fulfill his wish (Zagarri (1991) 7). As he was only 14, however, the final decision rested with Mary. Initially, she did not veto the proposal, but Robert Jackson, a Fredericksburg friend and neighbor of the Washingtons, believed that she was just waiting for someone to give her a good reason to reject it. “I find that one word against [George’s] going has more weight than ten for it,” he wrote to Lawrence (PGW, Colonial, 1:54). Mary finally appealed to her older brother Joseph, a successful merchant and lawyer living in London, and got exactly what she wanted to hear. In his response dated May 19, 1747, Joseph quipped that if George were to join the navy he might as well be apprenticed to a common tinsmith. As a colonial and not a Briton, Joseph continued, George would be used “like a negro, or rather, like a dog” and he very bluntly added that “as for any considerable preferment … there are always too many grasping for it here, and he has none” (Warren (1999) 5808). Joseph’s response was exactly what Mary was looking for. She decided against George becoming a sailor and the subject was never mentioned again.

A few years earlier, in July 1743, Lawrence married Ann Fairfax, the daughter of Colonel William Fairfax and niece of Thomas, Lord Fairfax. The union made Mount Vernon all the more attractive to young George
as it made him a welcome guest at the Fairfaxes' nearby estate, Belvoir. Located four miles downstream from Mount Vernon, Belvoir, with its stately brick facade, two floors, nine rooms, and outbuildings, was the pinnacle of life among the Virginia gentry. George spent a great deal of time at the estate over the next few years and witnessed firsthand the prestige and privilege of elite landowners. He was by no means poor, but he did not live on the same level as the Fairfaxes. With his second-tier upbringing and informal education, George did not quite fit into Belvoir's elite image – but that did not deter or embarrass him. He was very much his father's son and as he entered his adolescence began to demonstrate a prominent streak of ambition and drive that inspired him to hone his rugged and informally educated self into a refined and polished gentleman.

One of the easiest changes George could make was to upgrade his appearance. In 1748 he drafted a diary entry entitled "Memorandum of What Clothes I Carry into Fairfax" and listed the necessary items for his upcoming visit to Belvoir. Shortly afterward he drafted another memo, this one giving very specific instructions about a new frock coat he wanted made. It was "not to have more than one fold in the Skirt and the top to be made just to turn in and three Button Holes" (PGW, Colonial, 1:46). George took steps to look the part, but he also needed to act it. At least five years earlier he had, as part of a writing exercise, copied out the "Rules … of Civility & Decent Behaviour in Company and Conversation," a book of etiquette that originated with French Jesuits in the sixteenth century. While it does not seem that he consciously sought to heed the rules when he first wrote them out, it is possible that he referred to them at this time. The rules outlined such crucial aspects to gentility as dress, posture, manner, and attitude. They spoke to a level of refinement that George had not experienced as a boy running around Ferry Farm, but that he would need if he wanted to continue visiting Belvoir.

Polishing his manners and presenting a respectable figure was also significant to George as he began to take an interest in women. Sometime in 1749 or 1750 he wrote to his cousin Robin that while there was a "very agreeable Young Lady" at Belvoir, her presence "revives my former Passion for your Low Land Beauty." It is unclear who this girl or what the nature of her relationship with George was, but it is certain is that she left a profound impact on him. In the same letter he wrote that the only way to end his heartache was "by burying that chast and troublesome Passion in the grave of oblivion or etarnall forgetfuless" (PGW, Colonial, 1: 41). Despite his heartache over the "Low Land Beauty," (PGW, Colonial, 1:41) however, the "agreeable" lady at Belvoir certainly intrigued George and he mentioned her in two further letters. It is likely that this young woman was Mary Cary, the sister of Sarah “Sally” Cary Fairfax (PGW, Colonial, 1:43). George probably first met the sisters in December 1748 before Sally’s marriage to George William Fairfax, son of Colonel William Fairfax. Sally was a beautiful and vivacious 18-year old, just two years older than George.
They exchanged a number of letters throughout the 1750s that reveal that George was quite taken with her – much more so than her sister – but historians agree that despite Sally’s playful return of the flirtation, George probably never acted upon his feelings.

The Fairfaxes offered George much more than the dream of wealth, prestige, and gentility, however. They offered patronage and connections and the means through which that dream could be achieved. Lawrence reaped the benefits of marrying into the family, gaining a seat in the House of Burgesses, accumulating much land, and becoming Adjutant General of the Virginia militia. He encouraged George to take advantage of the marriage as well. Colonel Fairfax saw great potential in him and even participated in Lawrence’s plan to have George join the navy. William had served in the navy and with the infantry in Spain and like Lawrence, it is possible that he later inspired George to pursue a career in the military. At this time, though, the Colonel inspired George to become a prominent landowner. All he had to do was look at the Colonel, the five million acres he managed for his cousin, Thomas, Lord Fairfax, and the opulence of Belvoir to know that land was the means to great wealth and esteem.

George took his first step on the road to distinction by becoming a surveyor. It was the most logical choice. Socially, surveying was a respectable profession for young potential landowners. Practically, it would allow him to make a good deal of money in a short amount of time and enable him to scout the best lands ahead of everyone else. In addition, his father’s old tools were locked in a shed behind Ferry Farm, so he would not have to buy new instruments. Surveying was also a profession that suited his skills. Surviving documents suggest that he was meticulous and exacting, good at math, and had some level of instruction in the craft (see PGW, Colonial, 1:1–4; and Chase (1998) 163–169). He conducted at least three practice surveys at Mount Vernon, the most remarkable of which is strikingly laid atop a compass rose and completed two weeks after his sixteenth birthday.

In early 1748 George began a brief apprenticeship with James Genn, the surveyor for Prince William County. Around this time George first introduced himself to the great Proprietor, Thomas, Lord Fairfax, who had crossed the Atlantic to view his land holdings. As the Proprietor was staying at Belvoir, George could not resist the opportunity to meet someone from the British peerage. Additionally, George had to have thought that a favorable impression on someone as invested in land speculation as the Proprietor could be advantageous to his burgeoning career as a surveyor. He was right. Shortly afterward, Thomas, Lord Fairfax, commissioned Genn to lead a surveying expedition to the South Branch of the Potomac. George William Fairfax, the dashing and well-educated son of Colonel Fairfax – and husband of Sally – would serve as the Proprietor’s representative. At 23 he was seven years George’s senior, but the two young men had struck up a friendship and George was invited along on the expedition.
George could not refuse the offer, which would provide him with surveying experience at the hands of the Fairfaxes, and take him farther from home than he had ever ventured before. It also offered the tall and rugged 16-year-old the possibility of adventure on the frontier. George kept a diary during the journey, and early on related a story that emphasized his inexperience with the outdoors. As he was preparing for bed one night he removed his clothes and climbed into his cot, only to find that it consisted of no more than straw and a threadbare blanket, covered in bugs and vermin. He jumped out of the bed and put his clothes back on, resolving to sleep in the “open air” whenever a proper bed was unavailable. George ruefully acknowledged that he was not “so good a Woodsman as the rest of my Company” (PGW, Diaries, 1:9).

One week later the expedition encountered a party of Indians returning from a battle. This was likely the largest group of Indians George had ever seen, and he subsequently wrote a lengthy description of the war dance they performed after sharing the surveyors’ alcohol. Throughout the next three weeks George described crossing rivers on horseback, sleeping in a tent while rain and wind howled around him, dining without tablecloths or utensils, and having to improvise when provisions ran out. By April 9 he and George William Fairfax had left the expedition, and they returned to their respective homes on April 13 (PGW, Diaries, 1:13–23). It is unclear why they left, though it is possible that the novelty of living in the wilderness had worn off and they were both anxious to return to the bountiful food, clean beds, and roofs at Mount Vernon and Belvoir.

In 1749 George assisted surveyors as they laid out the new city of “Belhaven,” later to be known as Alexandria. Lawrence was one of the city’s trustees and likely played a role in getting him the job. Similarly, that July, George was appointed the surveyor of Culpeper County. At 17 years old he was the youngest official surveyor in Virginia history and he had Colonel Fairfax to thank. As a member of the governor’s council, the colonel had likely recommended George for the position. As the county surveyor, George could work as he pleased and spent most of his time conducting surveys for the Fairfaxes who, along with Lawrence, had engaged in a new speculative endeavor called the “Ohio Company.” They had received a land grant of 500,000 acres from the king and hoped to return a profit by attracting settlers and building a fort and Indian trading post. The venture allowed George to return to the frontier, only this time as a fully qualified surveyor. The family’s involvement in the Ohio Company also introduced George to the business of land investment and ownership, and in October 1750 he made his first significant land purchase: 1,500 acres on Bullskin Creek in the Shenandoah Valley. He also tried to sell two of the three Fredericksburg lots he had inherited from his father, but to no avail.

George recognized and appreciated the impact the Fairfaxes had on his life and encouraged his siblings to get to know them, just as Lawrence had
encouraged him. In 1755 he wrote to his younger brother, John Augustine, that he was pleased to hear that he had begun to visit Belvoir. He advised him to visit often, as the Fairfaxes had the power to be very helpful to “us young beginner’s” (PGW, Colonial, 1:289). “To that Family I am under many obligation<ś>particularly to the old Gentleman,” George wrote (PGW, Colonial, 1:290). The gentleman was no doubt Colonel Fairfax. But George, so keenly aware of the importance of knowing powerful people, was not satisfied receiving the patronage of the Fairfaxes alone and actively expanded his circle of benefactors. On November 4, 1752 he entered the newly established Fredericksburg Masonic Lodge. He joined as one of five apprentices and within the year rose to the position of Master Mason. Much has been written about this affiliation, but it appears that he joined the fraternity for the connections and prestige it offered. The brotherhood provided an opportunity for the ambitious 20-year old to rub shoulders with the most prominent men in Fredericksburg, if not northern Virginia.

In 1749, just as George was beginning to earn his own money and blossom into independent adulthood, Lawrence contracted tuberculosis. His illness was so severe that he had to relinquish his seat in the House of Burgesses, and George would have to dedicate a considerable amount of his time to caring for him. In the summer of 1750 the brothers visited the therapeutic springs in Berkeley, West Virginia and while the baths ultimately made no improvement on Lawrence’s condition, George was able to conduct a few surveys in the region and earn a little money on the side. Then, on September 28, 1751, in the midst of the fall surveying season, the brothers set sail for Barbados with the hope that the tropical air would solve Lawrence’s cough. George kept a diary of the 37-day passage, making note of the winds, the ship’s course, and passing merchant vessels. He also wrote about the island, marveling at the foliage and fruit, noting what ships passed by, and commenting on the island’s fort and drilling soldiers. He attended a production of “George Barnwell, a Tragedy,” very possibly his first experience with theater, and was entertained by the island’s dignitaries – all the while Lawrence followed his island doctor’s orders and stayed indoors. Two weeks after he arrived, however, George contracted smallpox and had to put his exploring aside for three weeks while he recovered. The disease would leave pockmarks on his nose but ultimately would have the overwhelmingly positive impact of making him immune. Smallpox would assail the Continental Army in 1775 and 1776 but would thankfully spare the Commander in Chief. His experience with the disease and subsequent immunity may have inspired his advocacy of the inoculation of all Continental troops – one of Washington’s most crucial and significant orders during the Revolutionary War.

Leaving his brother to continue with his treatment, George set sail for Virginia on December 21, 1751. After an initial bout with seasickness he
dined with the captain on Christmas Day and made ground a month later on January 26, 1751. This would be the last ocean voyage he would ever take. Immediately upon his return he hired a horse and rode to Williamsburg to present himself to Governor Robert Dinwiddie. After the meeting George included Dinwiddie on his ever-growing list of benefactors, and the governor would prove to be a powerful advocate for George in the next few years. Upon his return home, George continued surveying and bought more land, pushing his holdings to over 2,000 acres. But he had to stop once again when he contracted pleurisy. The sickness also interrupted another one of George’s ventures: courtship. On May 20, 1752 he wrote to William Fauntleroy, explaining that as soon as he recovered his strength he would again wait on his daughter, “Miss Betcy,” in the hope that she would change her mind about his proposal (PGW, Colonial, 1:49). No response has ever been found and it is possible that, despite the patronage of the Fairfaxes and his ambition and drive, the Fauntleroys rebuffed George’s advances because he wasn’t wealthy or prestigious enough.

Lawrence died on July 26, 1752, and George’s fortunes changed forever. He served as the executor of Lawrence’s estate and inherited three parcels of land in Fredericksburg. Lawrence left the 2,100-acre Mount Vernon property to his infant daughter, but stipulated that George would inherit it, along with his other Fairfax county properties, should she die without an heir and George outlive his widow, Ann. Within the next two years Ann remarried and her daughter died, allowing George to rent Mount Vernon until he could inherit it in full upon Ann’s death in 1761.

Land was not the only thing George looked to inherit. At the time of his death, Lawrence was serving as the Adjutant General for the Virginia militia. Despite his complete lack of military experience, George actively sought his brother’s vacant position and as one historian has suggested, demonstrated a sense of entitlement and ambition that was “completely in the Fairfax tradition” (Flexner (1965–72:1–2). Furthermore, George may also have seen the position as a way to launch a career in the military and fulfill a lingering martial interest inspired through his interactions with Lawrence and Colonel Fairfax. Despite his lack of proper qualifications he was ultimately successful and received one of four new adjutancies carved out of Lawrence’s old position. But George remained unsatisfied. He had received the adjutancy of the southern district of Virginia, the least prestigious out of the four sections. He had his eye instead on the adjutancy of the Northern Neck and was so preoccupied with obtaining it that he likely did not fulfill any of his duties in the southern district. Rather, he spent his time appealing to his benefactors and pleading his case to the man who was the likely candidate to receive the Northern Neck adjutancy, William Fitzhugh. A veteran of Cartagena herailing from one of Virginia’s most prominent families, Fitzhugh was a fitting choice for the appointment, but that did not deter young George from relentlessly pursuing it.