

An Imperfect God

George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America

By Henry Wiencek. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003. 404 pp. \$26.00

Reviewed by Willard and Anne Webb

With the apotheosis of George Washington as Revolutionary War hero and father of his country, we tend to overlook that he was throughout his entire life a Virginia planter and slave owner. He inherited ten slaves from his father, and when he died he possessed 123 slaves. He actually worked and managed a large number of additional slaves on his Mount Vernon farms. These were Custis slaves and part of Martha Washington's dower inheritance from her first husband.

George Washington was not alone. Many of the founding fathers owned slaves. Thomas Jefferson, author of the most famous words in modern history, "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all Men are created equal," owned nearly 200 slaves and only ever freed six of them.

In *An Imperfect God*, Henry Wiencek examines in depth Washington's attitude toward slavery and his relations with his slaves, an area of Washington's life never treated in such detail previously. He has made no startling discoveries, but has examined a wide range of sources and presents a perspective of Washington different from the usual. Wiencek does not malign Washington, but rather admires him for his change of mind over the ability of black troops during the Revolution and for the ultimate decision to free his slaves. Some have criticized the work for making unsubstantiated assumptions. This may be so in a few specific instances, such as the cases of the slaves West Ford, who Wiencek says may have been fathered by Washington, and Ann Dandridge, possibly a half-sister of Martha Washington. The documentation concerning the relationship of these two slaves to Washington is suggestive at best, but Wiencek lays it all out very clearly. For the most part, the treatment of Washington and slavery is straightforward and well documented. Overall, it is a fascinating book and anyone interested in Washington will want to read it.

In the years before the Revolution, Wiencek relates, George Washington was the typical Virginia planter and slave owner. Less cruel than some, he was a hard master. He worked his slaves from dawn to dusk six days a week. He did not hesitate to have slaves flogged for misbehavior, to separate slave fami-

lies, or to sell unruly slaves. Some of his famous false teeth were even yanked from the mouths of slaves and fitted into his dentures, though he did pay the slaves for their teeth. Washington stopped growing tobacco in 1765 and planted wheat and other crops instead, crops requiring less labor, but he continued to acquire additional slaves.

Washington's attitude toward slavery and blacks changed during the Revolution. Initially, he thought that blacks would make poor soldiers and opposed having them in the Continental army. But as the war dragged on and the need for additional soldiers grew desperate, he reluctantly accepted black troops, including former slaves, and became impressed with their performance. Witnessing the heroism and patriotism of his black troops may have first stirred the idea of freeing his slaves. Washington's change in attitude may also have resulted to some extent from the influence of Alexander Hamilton, his brilliant young aide who was an avid opponent of slavery. During his early years in the Caribbean islands, Hamilton had witnessed the worst aspects of slavery where sugar planters worked their slaves to death in the harshest of conditions.

Following the Revolution, slavery became repugnant to George Washington and he vowed to purchase no more slaves. Even so, in the often bitter debate over slavery during the constitutional convention, Washington, the presiding officer, sat completely quiet and never voiced his opinion on the matter. Later, in 1789, when George and Martha Washington traveled to New York to assume the Presidency, they brought seven slaves with them from Mount Vernon.

At some point during these later years, Washington grew convinced that slavery was wrong and decided to free his slaves. In 1799, just a few months before his death, George Washington revised his will without informing his family. The first item of the new document made provision for Martha. The second stated: "Upon the decease of my wife, it is my Will & desire that all the Slaves which I hold in *my own right*, shall receive their freedom." Thus George Washington became the first and only founding father of America to free his slaves. The Custis slaves were not his to free, and following Martha's death, they passed to Martha's four grandchildren, none of whom was interested in freeing slaves.

Although Wiencek does not relate it, a large portion of the Custis slaves came to George Washington Parke Custis and he brought many of them with him to his Arlington estate. The others remained on the Custis plantations, White House and Romancoke in New Kent and King William Counties, which Custis had inherited. Custis proved a lackadaisical farmer and an easy master who did not work his slaves hard. On his death in 1858, George Washington Parke Custis, in his will, provided for the manumission of his slaves within five years of his death. Execution of that provision fell to Robert E. Lee, Custis's

son-in-law and executor. Lee, who never owned a slave, was meticulous in carrying out Custis's wishes regarding the freeing of the slaves. Of course, the outbreak of the Civil War intervened before the slaves received their freedom and the Emancipation Proclamation made the issue moot. But Lee continued to worry about the freeing of the slaves during the early years of the war and had manumission papers delivered to the Custis slaves at the required time where the conditions of the war allowed it.¹

Endnotes

¹ See Robert E. Lee, Jr., *Recollections and Letters of Robert E. Lee* (Garden City, NY: Garden City Publishing Co., Inc., 1904), pp. 89-90.