

George Washington on attending church, 1762

Introduction

In 1762, Virginia planter and future president George Washington, just thirty years old, had reason for optimism. He had inherited Mount Vernon a decade earlier, and it had prospered under his management; plus he had married Martha Dandridge Custis, widely regarded as the wealthiest marriageable woman in Virginia, some three years earlier.

This August 1762 letter from Washington to his brother-in-law Burwell Bassett (who had married Martha's youngest sister, Betty Dandridge) reveals the young Washington as a lively and convivial correspondent—remarkable for a man who would come to be known as extremely remote and unbendingly formal, evincing little lightheartedness even with close associates. In his letter, Washington facetiously chastises Bassett for writing when he “ought to have been at Church, praying as becomes every good Christian Man who has as much to answer for as you have.” Washington also alludes to his own church attendance—which we know to have been infrequent: “could you but behold with what religious zeal I hye me to Church on every Lord's day, it wo[ul]d do your heart good, and fill it I hope with e[qual] fervency.”

Burwell Bassett, the recipient of this letter, was one of Washington's closest friends—one of very few. Perhaps the intimate friendship between Bassett and Washington helps explain the future president's light, jocular tone in this letter. Washington and Bassett's other extant correspondence conveys a sense of easy familiarity rarely encountered in Washington's letters, but the bantering levity of this August 1762 letter is completely unparalleled. Though Washington would be remembered for his gravity and his accomplishments, this letter offers us a glimpse of another side of the man who would become president.

Excerpt

I was favoured with your Epistle wrote on a certain 25th. of July when you ought to have been at Church, praying as becomes every good Christian Man who has as much to answer for as you have – strange it is that you will be so blind to truth that the enlightening sounds of the Gospel cannot reach your Ear, nor no Examples awaken you to a sense of Goodness – could you but behold with what religious zeal I hye me to church on every Lords day, it [*text loss*] do your heart good, and fill it I hope with [*text loss*] fervency.

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Questions for Discussion

Based on the introduction, transcript, document image and your knowledge of American History, answer the following questions.

1. The introduction by the Gilder Lehrman Collection archivist notes that George Washington's popular image has been "known as extremely remote and unbendingly formal." From a biography of George Washington, written by a well-respected historian such as Joseph Ellis, locate some description of Washington's gravity and compare it to this letter.
2. In his letter, Washington twice refers to tobacco. Research the effort needed to plant, grow, harvest, and market tobacco in the eighteenth century and connect this to Washington's comments.
3. What events and changes in circumstances might explain the shift in Washington's personality between 1762 and his Revolutionary / Presidential period?

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Image

Mount Vernon 28th August 1762

Dear Sir

I was favoured with your Ovis.
 He wrote on a certain 25th of July when you ought to
 have been at Church, praying as becomes every good
 Christian Man who has as much to answer for as
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 that the enlightning sounds of the Gospel can not reach
 your ear, nor no Examples awaken you to a sense of
 goodness - could you but behold with what religious
 zeal I see me to Church on every Lords day, it w^d
 do your heart good, and fill it I hope with the
 glory - but hear see - I am told you have
 by introduced into your family, a certain produce
 which you are lost in admiration of, and spend so
 much time in contemplating the just proportion of its
 parts, the case, and conveniences with which it abounds,
 that it is thought you will have little time to animad
 vert upon the prospect of your Crop - pray
 this to be reconciled to that anxious care and e
 which is so essentially necessary at a time when our
 growing Property - meaning the Tobacco - is afflicted by
 every villainous worm that has had an existence
 since the days of Noah. (How unkind it was of
 Noah ^{you have mentioned his name} to suffer such a brood of Vermin to get a birth
 in the Ark) but perhaps you may be as well off as
 we are - that is, have no Tobacco for them to eat and
 here I think we riched the Dogs. as I think ^{you expect your}
 - but not without a full assurance of being with a
 very sincere regard

Dear Sir
 affect'd Obed^t
 G. Washington

P.S. don't forget to make my
 Compl^t to Mr. Bassett, Miss Dudy, &
 the little ones, for Miss Dudy cannot be
 elap'd, with small People without offering
 her great Injustice - I shall see you I expect about the first of
 November.

George Washington to Burwell Bassett, August 28, 1762. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC07545)

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Transcript

George Washington to Burwell Bassett, August 28, 1762. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC07545)

Mount Vernon 28th. August 1762

Dear Sir

I was favoured with your Epistle wrote on a certain 25th. of July when you ought to have been at Church, praying as becomes every good Christian Man who has as much to answer for as you have – strange it is that you will be so blind to truth that the enlightening sounds of the Gospel cannot reach your Ear, nor no Examples awaken you to a sense of Goodness – could you but behold with what religious zeal I hye me to church on every Lords day, it w[*text loss*] do your heart good, and fill it I hope with [*text loss*] fervency – but heark’ee – I am told you have [*text loss*]ly introduced into your Family, a certain produc[*text loss*] which you are lost in admiration of, and spend so much time in contemplating the just proposition of its parts, the ease, and convenience with which it abounds, that it is thought you will have little time to animadvert

&c^a

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is

Tobacco – ^ assailed by every villainous worm that has had an existence since the days of Noah:

now I have mentioned his name

(how unkind it was of Noah ^ to suffer such a brood of Vermin to get a berth in the Ark.) but perhaps you may be as well of as we are –that is, have no Tobacco for them to eat and there I think we nicked the Dogs, as I think so do you, – but not without a full assurance of being with a very sincere regard

D^r Sir Y^r Ms^t Affect^e. & Obed^t.

G^o: Washington

P.S. I don’t fo[*text loss*] to make my comp^{ls}. to M^{rs}. Bassett, Miss Judy, & the little ones, for Miss Judy cannot be classed with small People without offering her great Injustice – I shall see you I expect about the first of November. –