

Washingtons and Lees

The 2005 meeting of the Society was in Lexington, Virginia, which is primarily known as the site of Washington and Lee University and the Virginia Military Institute. This reminds us to think about connections between the Washingtons and Lees, and perhaps reminds us too that the most famous Washington and the most famous Lee were military heroes.

George Washington and Robert E. Lee were only very remotely related to each other, if we define “related” as sharing descent from some known common ancestor, so as to make them cousins in some degree. Their nearest known common ancestor was Augustine Warner (1611-1674), from whom Washington descended in four generations and Lee in six. Thus, they were third cousins, twice removed, and one can be certain neither knew or would have been interested in such a remote tie.

They were, however, “connected” genealogically, as the old Virginia ladies would have expressed it. The connection can be described by saying George Washington (1732-1799) married a young widow, Martha Dandridge Custis (1731-1802), widow of Daniel Parke Custis (1710-1757). While they had no children, Martha, by her first marriage had had two children who survived infancy, Martha (1756:1757-1773), who was called Patsy, and John Parke Custis (1754-1781). Patsy had epilepsy and died at seventeen, but Jackie, George Washington’s stepson, grew up and married Eleanor Calvert (1757-1811). When he died of camp fever at Yorktown in 1781, he left three daughters and an infant son with the impressive name of George Washington Parke Custis (1781-1857). Martha Washington was now childless, so when Eleanor Calvert Custis soon remarried Dr. David Stuart, she allowed Martha to keep and raise the two youngest grandchildren, Nellie (1779-1852), and George Washington Parke Custis.

Brought up at Mount Vernon by his grandmother and by her husband, his step-grandfather George Washington, Wash Custis, as he was sometimes called when a child, grew up to be almost excessively devoted to the memory of “the Chief,” as he liked to refer to General Washington, and he thought of and spoke of himself as “the child of Mt. Vernon.” He built the house called Arlington, which still looks down on the city of Washington, where he occupied himself with agricultural fairs, painted huge historic paintings, gave dramatic performances, and guarded memorabilia.

Custis and his wife, Mary Lee Fitzhugh, had four children, but only one survived early childhood, a daughter, Mary Ann Randolph Custis (1807-1873), who was thus a great-granddaughter of Martha Washington, and so, I suppose, can be called a step-great-granddaughter of George Washington. She grew up to marry a young army Lieutenant named Robert E. Lee (1807-1870), and I will then, until corrected call Lee a step-great-grandson-in-law of George Washington.

Lee’s father, Major General Henry Lee (1756-1818) nicknamed Lighthorse Harry, had been a favorite young officer in George Washington’s army, and Robert E. Lee revered

Washington as deeply as his father had. It was the father, Lighthorse Harry, who first used the words, "First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen," in a eulogy after Washington's death.

In his will George Washington confirmed a gift he had made to a struggling school in Lexington called Liberty Academy. This was a large block of stock in the James River Company, which had been given to him in gratitude for his public services, and which he was willing to accept only with the understanding that he would in turn give it to some worthy cause. For many years this was the only endowment the institution had, and in gratitude the trustees renamed the academy Washington College.

When the College reopened after the war in 1865, it scored a great coup by persuading General Lee to become President and manage its rebirth. On his death, it is no surprise that the name became Washington and Lee. So it is that, while George and Martha Washington's remains rest, of course, at Mt. Vernon, General Lee and many of his family lie at the Lee Chapel at Washington and Lee University.

The Washingtons and Lees, from the middle of the sixteen hundreds, were neighbors in the Northern Neck in Westmoreland County. There were not many intermarriages between the two families as one might expect, but doubtless many connections, if not relationships, could with sufficient diligence be teased out of the genealogical webs of these two numerous clans. One obvious example can be noted. Of the nine children of Richard Henry Lee (1732-1794), two daughters and a son married two nephews and a niece of George Washington.

submitted by John A. Washington , 2005