

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, February 23, 2015

George Washington (1732–1799): Yesterday, February 22, used to be celebrated as George Washington's birthday. Several generations revered him as the father of his country. As I have studied him in recent years, I would say that title is an understatement. There is no question that he was not only a towering figure but an exemplary man in all respects.

When I was very young, when reading of Washington's birth on February 22, 1732, at Wakefield in Westmoreland County, Virginia, there appeared a notation that he was born on February 11, 1731, on the Julian calendar that was then in effect. I soon learned that the western world lost 11 days when the change was made to the slightly more accurate Gregorian calendar in 1752. That accounted for 11 days, but why was there a difference of one year and 11 days? It took something like 50 years to find out. When looking at Thomas Jefferson's tombstone at Monticello, the 11 days' difference was still there when he was born in 1743, but "George's extra year" did not apply. The reason was that January and February were the last two months of the year on the Julian calendar, with each new year starting on March 1. When Washington was born in February, it was near the end of the 1731 Julian year, but this would have been the second month of 1732 on our present Gregorian calendar. Only 11 days were affected when Jefferson was born in April 1743. Now that this is settled, feel free to pursue your life as usual.

The two most important things, in my opinion, that Washington did for his country, were 1) to prevail against a far-superior British army to win the Revolution, the longest war in our history, and 2) to say in 1796 without hesitation that he would not accept a third term as the country's new president.

Despite impossible odds and much intrigue from within to remove him from command, he just wouldn't give up. He was not a general directing things from a comfortable headquarters, he was directly involved in the war's most important battles and had several horses shot out from under him. Patrick Ferguson, a Scotsman in the British army who had invented the Ferguson breech-loading rifle, could have shot Washington in the back at Chadds Ford during the Battle of the Brandywine, but wartime gallantry of those days considered that inappropriate. Throughout his life, Washington admitted he had been very lucky on many occasions.

Washington was the only president in our history to be elected unanimously, and that happened in 1788 and 1792. Had he wanted a third term, he would not have had a challenger. He declined, John Adams was elected, and the father of our country went home to Mount Vernon. In Washington's words: "We are through with Kings in this country." He died a few days before Christmas in 1799, two months shy of his 68th birthday.

When I was growing up, there was a family birthday party about this time each year. Uncle Bassett Ferguson was born on February 21 (1878) and I on February 20, with George Washington awaiting his on the 22nd. I remember well when our country celebrated George's 200th in 1932.