



Courtesy of the Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields

King George III by Allan Ramsay, ca. 1762-1766



PAINTING

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King George III was only 22 years old when he became the ruler of Great Britain. Born to Frederick, Prince of Wales, and Augusta of Saxe-Gotha in 1738, he never actually saw his father reign as King; Frederick died in 1751, while his own father, George II, was still on the throne. When George III became king, it was his grandfather's name he carried on. Interestingly, he was the first monarch in his line to be born in Britain and speak English as his first language; he came from the house of Hanover, a German royal family.

George was born and educated in London. He spoke and wrote in both English and German, and studied science, math, geography, political science, languages and the arts. This was impressive for a child few had thought would survive infancy – George had been born 2 months prematurely. He would continue several of these interests into adulthood, collecting books and art, and even had his own astronomical observatory. A keen interest in agriculture led to the nickname – sometimes used positively and sometimes negatively – “Farmer George.”

A year after taking the throne, George married Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz. Before the day of their wedding, they had never met, but they went on to have a notably happy marriage and had 15 children together, 13 of whom survived into adulthood.

As a ruler, King George III began his reign relatively well-liked across his empire. However, frustration with the costly Seven Year's War, which had begun during his grandfather's reign, created troubles both in England and abroad. Though he was King, he served in a constitutional monarchy, meaning he shared power with the British Parliament. Decisions during this war and afterwards to repair and strengthen the empire were the result of constant negotiations, compromises and changing alliances, all of which shaped the conflict with the American colonies that followed. By the time the Revolutionary War ended in 1783, King George III had been dealing with these challenges and frustrations for 23 years, just over half of his life. He was still only 45 years old.

Did You Know? Hanover (Brunswick-Lüneburg), Saxe-Gotha and Mecklenburg-Strelitz are principalities in what is now known as Germany. When the Revolutionary War began, King George hired soldiers from Brunswick and several other principalities – including Hesse-Cassel, Hesse-Hanau, and Anspach-Beyreuth – to supplement the British troops.



Brooklyn Museum, Dick S. Ramsay Fund

George Washington by Charles Wilson Peale, 1776



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George Washington was born on February 22, 1732 in Westmoreland County, Virginia to Mary Ball and Augustine Washington. The elder Washington was a wealthy planter who owned a tobacco plantation and also served as a local Justice of the Peace. George Washington was the pair's first child, but because his father had previously been married, Washington had several older siblings, including two half-brothers. His parents would go on to have five additional children.

Washington's father died when he was 11 years old. He left most of his property to his older sons, including the property that would become Mount Vernon, but left Washington a farm and ten enslaved people. Because of his father's death, Washington was not able to receive a strong formal education – his two older brothers had been schooled in England – but he was taught the basics of reading, writing and mathematics, and he used observation, reading and social relationships to teach himself upper class manners.

His first job, taken at the age of 17, was as a surveyor, measuring land and boundaries for property-holders in Virginia. He continued in this line of work professionally for three years, and continued to do it for his own lands throughout his life. Washington's next career was in the military, perhaps inspired by his older half-brother, Lawrence, an officer in a British infantry regiment in Virginia when he died of tuberculosis in 1752. That same year, Washington began training and drilling, and by 1753 was involved in expeditions to defend British colonial territory in Virginia against the French, ultimately resulting to his participation in the French and Indian War as the only officer in the British forces who came from the American colonies.

The French and Indian War saw Washington experience both defeats and successes. And while it did not lead to a career with the British military as he had hoped, it did build his reputation. This, and his status as a large and wealthy landowner, opened the door to a political career. Washington served as a representative for his county in Virginia's governing body for seven years. He balanced life both actively running his farms and business ventures, including managing both enslaved and paid laborers, and engaging in leisure activities like fox hunting, attending dances and parties, fishing and going to the theatre. He also met and married wealthy widow Martha Dandridge Custis, and began helping raise her two young children from her first marriage.

When conflict with Britain began, Washington was in his thirties, a prominent landowner, respected war veteran, local politician, husband and father. He was also very ambitious, and even showed up at the Second Continental Congress wearing his military uniform, hoping to be selected to command the newly-formed Continental Army. He was successful. By the end of the Revolutionary War, he was 51 years old and wanted nothing more than to return to his land and family in Virginia. Instead, a new adventure awaited him.

Did You Know? Before becoming a surveyor, Washington had actually wanted to join the British Royal Navy, but his mother wouldn't let him.