



Writings

George Washington , John H. Rhodehamel (Editor)

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For two centuries, George Washington has stood “first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen,” universally acknowledged as the one indispensable founder of the American republic. This Library of America volume—the most extensive and authoritative one-volume collection ever published—covers five decades of Washington’s astonishingly active life and brings together over 440 letters, orders, addresses, and other writings.

Among the early writings included are the journal Washington kept at age sixteen while surveying the Shenandoah Valley frontier and the dramatic account of the winter journey he made through the Pennsylvania wilderness in 1753 while on a diplomatic mission. Some two dozen letters written during the French and Indian War, including first-hand accounts of the controversial forest skirmish that sparked those hostilities and of Braddock’s bloody defeat, record Washington’s early encounters with the harsh challenges of military command.

An extensive selection of letters, orders, and addresses from the Revolutionary War make manifest Washington’s determined leadership of the Continental Army through the years of defeat and deprivation. Included are accounts of battles; letters to Congress and state governments vividly describing the army’s desperate need of supplies; Washington’s journal of the victorious Yorktown campaign; and letters and addresses showing how Washington upheld the supremacy of civil power in the new republic by peaceably disbanding the army at the end of the war.

Letters from the Confederation period (1783–1789) show Washington’s pleasure at returning to his Mount Vernon home, his continued interest in Western land speculation and river navigation, his growing concern with the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation, and his role in the framing and ratification of the Constitution. The writings from his two terms as President of the United States show how Washington strove to establish enduring republican institutions, to build public trust in the new government, to avoid the divisions of party and faction, and to maintain American neutrality during the war between Britain and Revolutionary France. Also included in the volume are letters revealing his close and careful management of Mount Vernon and his evolving attitudes toward slavery.

Washington’s writings demonstrate the keen, practical intelligence that distinguished his leadership in war and peace, as well as the patriotism, dignity, and devotion to the cause of republican government that won the admiration and trust of his contemporaries and his heirs.

Writings Details

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Gill says

“George is a really interesting guy. No matter what he's doing, he's always writing home to make sure the family business is being properly managed. Also he has a knack for dealing with other politicians in his letters as of course you'd expect of the guy who rose to the top.

It's the kind of book you dip into and maybe come back two months later and sip a little more. I have the leather bound edition and there is a sensual pleasure from the very white, high quality paper, printing, and binding that adds to the fun.

You have to like history and 18C English to enjoy this. Otherwise it is dull stuff. I do, so it gets five stars from me.

Erin says

Incredible, illuminating. I have never read a work more important, for giving context to the Revolutionary era. In several of his letters George Washington mentions his concern about preserving his papers, which he guessed would be important to later generations, and that was one of many things this man was absolutely prescient about.

Robin Friedman says

A new book by Joseph Ellis, "The Quartet: Orchestrating the Second American Revolution, 1783 -- 1789" prompted me to read more about George Washington (1732 -- 1799). Ellis' book discusses the inadequacies of the Articles of Confederation and the importance of four individuals, Washington, Madison, Hamilton, and Jay, in spearheading the movement for a constitution and a strong national government. Of these four, Washington emerges in Ellis' account as the towering, pivotal figure. I wanted to go back to him.

The Library of America is an outstanding national resource in publishing the best of America's cultural heritage, including literature, philosophy, history, and much more. Over the years, the LOA has published twelve volumes of original source material on the American founders. The books in this series that I have read include a volume of eyewitness accounts of the American Revolution, two volumes of the writings of John Adams, and a volume each of the writings of Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Marshall. Among the books in the series I hadn't read was the LOA's 1997 volume of the writings of George Washington. With Ellis' book as the immediate prompt, I took it off the shelf at last and read it.

The book offers a generous 1140 page selection of Washington's writings, both public and private. It includes the texts of 446 documents that the volume's editor describes as "official and private letters, military orders, addresses, proclamations, memoranda, and diary entries -- that were written by George Washington, or written at his direction, between 1747 and 1799." The texts are drawn from a large still ongoing edition of Washington's complete writings together with other less comprehensive editions of his writings that have been published over the years. John Rhodehamel edited the volume, selected its contents, and prepared a

detailed chronology of Washington's life to accompany the texts.

The five-part division of this book in itself shows Washington's pervasive influence in the formation and future of the United States. The first part covers the Colonial Period, 1747 -- 1775 and centers upon his military service in the French and Indian War and in his activities at Mount Vernon. It is important to recognize the esteem in which Washington was already held during this period, as shown by the role he assumed immediately thereafter.

The volume's second part covers Washington's years as Commander of the Continental Army, 1773 -- 1783 which secured America's independence from Great Britain. Many of the themes of Ellis' book come through in these documents as Washington described and struggled with the lack of a strong central government which hindered and almost destroyed the efforts to win American independence. Among the documents is Washington's final "Circular to State Governments" dated June 8, 1783, in which Washington urges eloquently at length the establishment of a constitutional, national government to replace the thirteen-headed governments of the states under the Articles. But there is much else that is rich and valuable in these texts, military, political, and personal. Among them is a small note of thanks to the African American poet, Phillis Wheatley in which Washington expresses his thanks for Wheatley's poem in his praise and invites her to visit.

Part three of the book covers The Confederation Period, 1783 -- 1789. Washington had retired to what he hoped would be private life at Mount Vernon. He continued to insist on the necessity of a strong national government and reluctantly came out of retirement to attend the Constitutional Convention as a delegate from Virginia and to serve as President of the Convention.

Part four includes documents from Washington's two terms as the first President, 1789 -- 1797, a position he assumed with expressed reluctance. This was a critical, difficult time as it was necessary to establish the new government and the duties of the presidency on a firm footing. I doubt that anyone else had the broad respect of competing segments of the population and the judgment and political wisdom to have done so. The documents cover Washington's role in the competing visions of Hamilton and Jefferson, foreign relations resulting from the French Revolution, the Jay Treaty with Britain, relationships with the Indian tribes, increasing domestic discontent and factionalization, among other things. Washington's Farewell Address, of course, is a highlight of this part, but there is much more.

The final and shortest part of this book covers Washington's retirement to Mount Vernon, 1797 -- 1799, his continued involvement in public life, efforts to involve him still further (including standing for the presidency again) and the text of his will.

I have focused in the above summary on Washington's public life, but the volume includes much more. One of the fascinating features of the book is the way the documents move back and forth between the public and private sides of George Washington. Documents describing difficult military or political decisions are often followed by (sometimes in a single document) documents in which Washington manages, or micro-manages, his Mount Vernon estate, borrows or lends money, buys and sells, and writes advice to family members and friends. It is striking to see Washington "multi-task" in the modern phrase. It is also valuable to see how practical and sometimes petty were his concerns. Washington was a person of large ego and ambition which he often concealed, even from himself, but which comes through clearly to readers of this book. Although a practical man more than a thinker, Washington had strong opinions, including his belief in the need for a strong central government, and expressed them forcefully. In his personal and business relationships, he often was unpleasantly blunt. The book allows the reader to see Washington's views on many matters, including his growing rejection of slavery, and his belief in a vague deism and strong sense of providence.

This is a lengthy collection of texts which is not always easy to read. Washington was not the most elegant of writers, and many of his famous public addresses or papers were heavily edited by others, such as Hamilton or Madison, or were ghostwritten. In addition, the book will be most suitable to readers with a working knowledge of the Revolutionary Era and of Washington's life. The chronology in the volume is useful but insufficient. Without a degree of background and patience, some readers will find it difficult to work through this book.

This book, and its subject, are treasures. George Washington, and the American experience, have come in for debunking and skepticism in recent years. The debunking, together with a widespread ignorance of American history, make this book invaluable. It enables readers to reflect on Washington and his lasting importance throughout the Revolutionary Era -- including colonial times, the Revolutionary War, the Constitutional Convention, and the first Presidency. There are few individuals who have served their country so broadly and well and who have a better claim to be studied and remembered with affection. The Library of America deserves gratitude for this volume and for its series on the Founders.

Robin Friedman

Bmankiewicz says

This edition is in white slipcover with companion Jefferson writings in another slipcover. Bound in blue fabric, hardcover.

Rene purchased for himself. Proposes that they go to Paul.

Craig Bolton says

George Washington : Writings (Library of America) by George Washington (1997)
