George Washington

By Scott Casper, professor and chair of the Department of History

1. George Washington’s great-grandfather, John Washington, came to Virginia from England in 1656. Eighteen years later, he secured the title to a tract of land that his grandson, George Washington’s father, would call Eppsewasson, the Indian name for a small creek on the property.

2. As a 14-year-old, George Washington wanted to go to sea, in the British Royal Navy or on a merchant ship. He was inspired by his older half-brother Lawrence, who had served in the War of Jenkins’ Ear (really?) in 1740-1742. He never went because his mother and his uncle were adamantly opposed.

3. Lawrence inherited Eppsewasson and renamed it after his commanding officer, the British admiral Edward Vernon.

4. George Washington took only one trip away from the North American mainland in his entire life: to Barbados, with Lawrence, in 1751.

5. Many letters and proclamations by George Washington as general and president appeared in print during his lifetime—but only one book, published when he was 22 years old. That book, The Journal of Major George Washington, described his 1753-1754 diplomatic mission into the Ohio Valley. Virginia’s royal governor had it printed in Williamsburg in 1754, and it was reprinted in London.

6. When Washington inherited Mount Vernon, the one-and-a-half story house had four rooms on the ground floor and another four above. Over the next 40 years, he quadrupled its size, adding a third story and wings on both sides.

7. By the early 1770s, Washington abandoned tobacco farming, which depleted the soil and increased Virginia planters’ dependence on English merchants. Instead, he experimented with grain farming and started a grist mill, a fishery, and eventually a distillery. (Visitors today can see replicas of his grist mill and distillery.)

8. George Washington was immune to smallpox, because he had suffered a mild case in Barbados. During the Revolution he ordered his troops to be inoculated because British and German soldiers were carriers of the disease. Martha Washington, who spent much of the war in camp with her husband, underwent the procedure as well. So did Washington’s slaves at Mount Vernon.

9. After Washington died on Dec. 14, 1799, cities and towns all over the United States staged re-enactments of his funeral, complete with processions, riderless horses, and coffins—everything except a corpse.

10. In his will, Washington stipulated that his slaves would be free upon Martha Washington’s death. She released them in 1801, a year before she died. But slavery continued at Mount Vernon. George Washington’s descendants who inherited the estate brought slaves of their own. And after the Civil War, the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association—which purchased the property in 1860 and governs it to this day—hired some of those African Americans as employees.

Scott Casper is the 2005 recipient of the Regent’s Teaching Award. He is the author of award-winning Constructing American Lives: Biography and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America and co-editor of Perspectives on American Book History: Artifacts and Commentary—now in use at more than a dozen universities. His latest book, Sarah Johnson’s Mount Vernon: African American Life at an American Shrine, from Slavery to Jim Crow, is slated for publication this spring.