

Answers to questions posed by students to Paula Felder, March 2010

Stephanie:

What sorts of resources did she need to look into when writing the articles?

Wills, deeds, court orders, letters, journals, diaries, newspaper accounts. Primary source documents.

If the articles were a series, what inspired that topic?

Desire to let people know more about Mary Ball Washington based on the facts we have available vs. conjecture based on inferences drawn by other authors.

Any notable discoveries/something that stood out while writing the articles/doing the research?

This is speculation on Ms. Felder's part, but it seems that the qualities we admire in George Washington came to him from his mother Mary, and to her from her mother, the "missing fourth grandparent" of George Washington – a woman we identified in the series as Mary Johnson Ball Hewes.

Kari:

Why did she decide to research Mary Washington and what was her purpose of these articles -- to inform, was there a specific angle she took when writing?

- *Make Mary Ball Washington "come alive" to readers by showing that she had a substantial life in the Northern Neck, a life with fine belongings and good horses. She was not by any means a less than desirable "old maid" when Augustine Washington married her when she was 23 years old. She led a full, interesting life for a woman of her time. Images of her as an ill-tempered old woman were based on inferences drawn by other authors from George Washington's letters and diary excerpts. They did not take into consideration other factors, such as events going on in GW's life, and jumped to conclusions that gave them a good "story line".*
- *Speculate on identity of Mary Ball's mother and her origins*

Did she run into any problems while doing her research i.e. conflicting source, lack of information etc.?

No conflicts in primary sources, though there were gaps in available information. Biographers of George Washington made assumptions and followed previous lines of inquiry. Excerpts from GW's letters and diary entries were taken out of context (for example, that she went up to Mount Vernon and threw a tantrum when she learned George was going back into military service).

Historians in different counties – Lancaster, Northumberland, Middlesex, Westmoreland for example, have seldom if ever shared information with each other – making it difficult to piece together a complete picture of the history of individuals or families.

Local historians in some cases hold preconceived notions about what could and could not have happened. For example, “A person of Joseph Ball’s social rank would never have married a woman who had been an indentured servant,” and “There is no way Joseph Ball would ever have gotten together with Richard Hewes to arrange a marriage for Mary Johnson Ball after Joseph’s death.” Speculation and conjecture, no matter how enticing or plausible, are just not considered.

What was the hardest and best part about her research/writing the articles? Any advice or tips for our research?

Research: The hardest part was gathering material from many different places and piecing it together. Sometimes it was difficult to find people with the interest, time, and expertise to cooperate in elements of the research. In one instance, someone Ms. Felder had initially interviewed with great success withdrew from the project when he did not like the conclusions she was coming to.

The best part was uncovering bits and pieces of evidence she could use to piece together a plausible, interesting story.

Writing: The hardest part was organizing the material chronologically from many different sources, then writing, editing, and re-writing again and again to make the material fit the newspaper’s space requirements, yet tell a compelling, coherent story.

*The best part was seeing the articles published at last, and well received!
Happy to share resources and information with you.*

Caitlin:

What was the most influential thing about Mary Washington?

Her strong, determined, practical, independent nature, which she passed on to at least her son George and daughter Betty Washington Lewis.

What effect would you say she has on Fredericksburg residents and UMW students?

Outside of local history buffs and employees and volunteers at the George Washington Foundation (Kenmore and Ferry Farm) and Preservation Virginia (Mary Washington’s House and Rising Sun Tavern) – none. Most probably have no idea who she was, or confuse her with George’s wife Martha. UMW students – mild curiosity perhaps, except again for history students.

Has interest in her decreased over the decades? Why?

Interest in history in general has decreased over the decades because most people are too busy with their lives and have learned to settle for shallow entertainment, or for second-hand easily available information in “sound bites” with no interest in learning the truth about historic persons and places (which is often more interesting than the stories).

Who were you able to network with to get answers to your questions? *I guess here just ask for more references/people to interview, etc.*

Margaret Lester Hill, genealogist, Lancaster County. Carolyn Jett, historian, Lancaster County. Richard Gamble, friend with great interest in Mount Vernon. Gail Braxton, Preservation Virginia (Mary Washington House). John Copley, friend with great interest in colonial shipping records. Milford Nolan, friend with great interest in General George Weedon. Jeffrey Edmunds, reference librarian, Central Rappahannock Regional Library, Headquarters Branch. Various people at George Washington Foundation. There may have been others. Will provide contact information if you wish.

Why do you think little is known about her?

There was not much primary source material to go on. Early biographers (late 1800s, early 1900s) canonized Mary Washington. Starting in the 1920s, George Washington's biographers pictured her as an ill-tempered old woman, not someone you would like to learn more about.

Did this have any effect on your research (sources, inspiration, etc.)?

Inspiration: desire to make Mary Ball Washington known as a whole person with a full life. Had to look beyond both the characterizations of other writers and draw conclusions based on available fact.

Would you be interested in our website/Based on your research on Mary Washington, how could we enhance our website to make sure more people know about her and know her significance?

Interested? Yes. Delighted you are doing it!

How to enhance Web site? No idea technologically. Make her as real and alive and relevant as possible.

Jenn:

What do you think led to her choice to marry Augustine Washington?

Don't know as it was truly a "choice". George Eskridge knew both Augustine and Mary. He knew that Mary had valuable land near Accokeek Creek in Stafford County. He also knew that Augustine had property there himself and was very involved in the iron mining business. Mary likely had experience helping with her half-sister Elizabeth Johnson Bonum's children, which was another factor making her a desirable choice as Augustine's second wife. He would have appealed to her as a husband because he was a member of the gentry. She not only was the daughter of a gentleman but had grown up with her mother's aspirations that she (Mary Ball) become "gentry" herself.

She knew he was a widower and had children, therefore wouldn't be able to provide as much for them...

Why do you think she didn't remarry as was common for widows of that time?

Mary was a strongly independent woman. She had coped well with young children during Augustine's absences in England. It could be that she did not want to be "subject" to another husband. Based strictly on facts, Augustine's will left Mary in charge of their sons' estates until they reached 21. If she remarried, her new husband would have been in charge of them.

You mentioned in the article that she managed Mt. Vernon while George was away. Were there people against this? Was because she was female, and for that time women didn't really manage plantations/estates?

I don't think anybody was against her looking after Mt. Vernon while George was away (during the French and Indian War). One author (Noemie Emery) wrote that she "had a tantrum" at Mt. Vernon when George re-entered the military. In later years, George wrote to her that he didn't think life at Mt. Vernon would suit her, as the house was frequently full of visitors. Mary had managed the Rappahannock Farm, and when she was a teenager she most likely lived with her half sister Elizabeth Bonum, who managed the property at Cherry Point after the death of her husband Samuel. As far as women managing plantations/estates, some may have been cast into that role by their husbands' absence from home or death.

Then later, why do you think she rebelled against the idea of moving into Fredericksburg?

George purchased land and a cottage for her in 1761, but she didn't move until 1772. She may have preferred the more rural life on the farm in Stafford County. She may have felt that moving to Fredericksburg would lessen her connection to the Northern Neck where she grew up. Bills from Dr. Hugh Mercer to Fielding Lewis indicate that someone in the Lewis household was very ill in late 1771. That may have been Mary, and the severity of her illness may have convinced her of the advisability of living closer to her daughter and son-in-law.

What is your opinion of Mary Washington's personality? And how did that affect her relationships with people around her (George, Betty, Martha, Colonel Eskridge and so on)?

Mary Washington was strong, determined, strict – but also kind (see reminiscence of Lawrence Washington of Chotank, George's cousin). She was probably a strict but loving parent; George and Betty held her in great esteem. She might not have felt comfortable with Martha, who had led a more lavish existence. Colonel Eskridge was a good friend of Mary's mother and a source of strength and guidance for Augustine Washington. Mary no doubt admired and respected him tremendously.

(Answers supplied by Marian McCabe after discussion with Paula Felder. Marian has worked closely with Ms. Felder for eight years and is quite familiar with her files, sources, and research methods.)