

Reflections on NEH Summer Institute

George Washington and His Legacy

By

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Why spend three weeks of a summer at a seminar? Why not relax? Why especially an activity

this relating to your vocation, particularly a great distance from home. What relevance does a person, in

lost case George Washington, have to us today? After all, having died over 200 years ago, he would be

in our modern world, or at least so our students think. Why not study/do something more relevant?

Maybe, A.J.P. Taylor, with his assertion that we study history “for pleasure, not for instruction” is

my correct. Can we learn from history, especially from people dead for centuries. Why do we study history, and in particular individuals? I will reflect, in some cases in a Washingtonian diary form,

in thoughts in the next few pages, some of what I learned/gained in the three week seminar experience

Boston.

Most teachers chose other activities in the summer than spending three weeks studying.

[self] Writing to Continental Congress from Valley Forge in the winter of 1777-78, Washington stated

That “interest is the governing principle and that almost every man is more or less under its influence.”

my is the primary reason I wanted to attend the NEH seminar in Boston. Attending will surely enhance

teaching, but I mainly came for me.

and, With the revisionism of the last few decades, George Washington seems to be downplayed,

in many cases, ignored. Since a youngster I was always drawn to biographies—Presidents, sports

figures, military leaders, etc. I am sure I developed my love for history as a result of reading about these figures while I was in elementary school. Twenty years later, already a teacher, I developed a great interest in Washington. I had the opportunity one summer to research his presidency and learned a great deal. Textbooks today often seem to have little time for certainly one of our greatest two presidents, which distresses me.

I decided three weeks of my time could not be better spent than studying Washington. Henry Kissinger stated “as a professor, I tended to think history as run by impersonal forces. But when you see it in practice, you see the difference personalities make.” Certainly, within limits, I agree with his comment. Washington was the “indispensable man” in the founding of the United States. I wished, personally, and as a teacher, to be reinvigorated by spending time with the man Washington this summer.

I purposely applied to the summer seminar on Washington because of the location in Boston. I have taught for thirty years and have never had the opportunity to travel in this section of the United States. I realized my knowledge and teaching suffered from my not having anecdotes of the locale. So much of my teaching will now be deepened as a consequence of this experience. I have so many accounts and first-hand experiences I will now be able to relate to my students (which I will mention later), many of whom later attend colleges and universities in Boston.

I learned a great deal at seminar this summer. We were to read five books on Washington before our arrival, had daily assigned readings while there, heard a number of varied speakers, engaged in provocative discussions (with the speakers, in small groups, and collectively), we had wonderful field trips—it was an engaging week. We were challenged to consider our teaching.

In the next few pages I will imitate Washington’s style of keeping a “Diary.” I will record my daily activities, with some reflection (more than Washington would).

by
July 19—Travelled from Miami, Florida to Boston, Massachusetts by airplane. Transported
public conveyance (taxi) to residence hall. I share quarters with three roommates, Orville, Greg and
Luis.

July 20—Convened at classroom with Peter Gibbon, our seminar director, and twenty-five
colleagues. We spent time analyzing Robert Jones' George Washington and Samuel Eliot
Morison's

Can
“The Young Man Washington.” We took considerable time discussing how to approach history—
we be objective? Should we be objective? Is history to be scholarly, or only popular? And many
other
ideas. How do we approach subjects like Washington? Are biographies relevant? Is Washington
even
“knowable?”

July 21—Heard Frank Grizzard, editor of the Washington Papers, who is very knowledgeable
and an approachable scholar, who was with us the entire seminar. He discussed his research and
some thoughts about Washington. In the afternoon we shared a fast-paced, lively period with Peter
Enriques. He presented “Washington and Women,” (that being Washington's mother, Sally
Fairfax,
and Martha Washington). Shopped for groceries in the evening and read assignment. Dined in the
evening at White Horse Tavern with Luis. Read assignment in the evening.

July 22—Frank Grizzard and Peter Gibbon discussed Washington's attitudes concerning death
and religion. Of course his religiosity is confusing. In the afternoon we enjoyed a field trip to the
Longfellow House across the Charles River in Cambridge. The residence was Washington's
headquarters upon taking command of the Continental Army in 1775. Longfellow later owned and
resided in the home. We the toured the grounds of Harvard University and dined at Casablanca.
Read
assignment in the evening.

July 23—Today was dedicated to George Washington and John Adams (and other family

members). We travelled by train southward to Quincy, Massachusetts to the Adams National Historical

Park. We visited the three homes where Adams lived in the vicinity—where he was born, the house next door where he later lived, and a larger home where he and Abigail raised their family. We dined together on the grounds of the larger Adams' residence, and Dick Ryerson (editor of the John Adams Papers) gave a lecture, "John Adams' view of George Washington." Read assignment in the evening.

Washington
July 24—Spent the morning in small groups sharing our thoughts on various George

quotes. Went with Greg by train to historical area of Boston. We visited Faneuil Hall and markets.

Walked to Paul Revere House and took very informative tour. Went to Boston Red Sox game at

Spent
July 25—Travelled by commuter train to visit Salem, Massachusetts with Greg and Orville.

(as
the day visiting historical sites, such as those relating to witch trials, Nathaniel Hawthorne's home well as the House of the Seven Gables), a museum, etc.

with
July 26—Toured much of Boston on trolley. Went on tour of U.S.S. Constitution. Dined Greg and Orville at White Horse Tavern. Read assignment in the evening.

primary
July 27—Howard Zinn, an amiable man of 86, gave a lecture "A Radical Critique of the Revolution." His socialist approach obviously stresses class conflict, almost exclusively, as the driving force in United States history. He views the Founding Fathers, as the elite, caring only for their self interest. He relies on select, biased sources, like Charles Beard, to buttress his approach. I believe he uses propaganda, not scholarship. While I largely disagree with his framework, he raises a number of important issues. What is the role of class? What about the poor? Is there objective history? Should we strive for objectivity in history? What should be taught? Should history include myth? These issues would resurface repeatedly throughout the balance of the seminar. Visited more historical sites in Boston with Greg and we attended a Red Sox game in the evening.

July 28—Read assignment in the morning. The day was dedicated trying to get to know the

supposedly “unknowable” man, George Washington. We read Parson Weems early accounts of Washington, to present day authors, Richard Brookhiser and Daniel Boorstin. In the afternoon we had a delightful presentation by William Martin, a novelist of historical fiction. He discussed his organization of material into five acts for his Citizen Washington. Read assignment in the evening.

The July 29—William Martin continued discussing his approach to writing novels. We viewed Man Who Wouldn't Be King, a somewhat sensationalized story of Washington, written and narrated by Martin. Read assignment for tomorrow. Worked on paper for several hours in the evening. Dined at the White Horse Tavern with Greg and Orville.

the July 30—Frank Grizzard discussed the Washington Papers, as well as some of Washington's writings. We particularly noted his Circular to State Governments and his Farewell to the Armies of the United States, both written in 1783. Read assignment in the evening, and worked on paper for several hours.

later July 31—Peter Wright, our master teacher, reviewed visually many web sites relating to Washington. He also continued to discuss our papers. Peter Gibbon further reviewed Howard Zinn, and approaching the teaching of history. Worked on my paper several hours in the evening, and attended concert at the TD Bank Garden.

Plimouth August 1—Travelled by car southward with Amy, Amy, Lora, Greg, and Orville to visit Plantation and the Mayflower II, a 1957 replica now at Plymouth, Massachusetts. We visited the reproduction of the 1627 Pilgrim town and Wampanoag Indian village. We dined together at Plymouth tavern. Worked on paper for several hours.

August 2—Travelled by commuter train to Concord and Lexington, Massachusetts to visit

historical sites. Toured Concord Museum, which contains a number of historical items, including the lantern relating to Paul Revere, and many things relating to Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. I visited Louisa May Alcott's home, where she composed Little Women. I also toured Emerson's and Hawthorne's homes. I took a trolley ride to see many sites in both Concord and Lexington, and Thoreau's Walden Pond. I went to the Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, where many of the literary figures from Concord are buried. Worked on paper in the evening.

August 3—Karal Ann Marling discussed the changing views of Washington in the last two centuries, as well as his relevance today. She used slides in her humorous, face-paced presentation. She stressed the use of artifacts, not simply written materials, in understanding history. In the afternoon we discussed our papers with Peter Wright. Read assignment for tomorrow. Worked on paper in the afternoon.

August 4—Having read Edmund Morgan's The Genius of George Washington, we discussed at length his view of Washington, as well as some Washington's letters which reflected his ideas about various topics. We focused on Washington's use of power. We viewed a video presentation by Henry Wiencek about his book, An Infallible God, concerning Washington and slavery, which we discussed. I found the book he has written to be journalistic and inaccurate (which Frank Grizzard verified); more sensational than scholarly. We also spent time reviewing and discussing Dorothy Twohig's "That Species of Property: Washington's Role in the Controversy Over Slavery." Worked on paper in the afternoon. Dined with Greg at the White Horse Tavern in the evening.

August 5—We travelled by bus to Bunker Hill Monument in Charleston. A park ranger discussed the sixteen Indians fighting with the Patriots in the Battle of Bunker Hill in 1775. We went up 294 steps in tower, and visited the museum across the street. We then drove to Dorchester Heights Historic Site (a unit of Boston National Historic Park). We had a working lunch, with two park rangers speaking

with us. Read assignment in the afternoon and worked on paper. A number of seminar participants came to visit our room in the evening.

Useful August 6—Frank Grizzard led a discussion of Paul Longmore’s article “The Foundations of Knowledge,” and “George Washington” by Joseph Epstein. Peter Gibbon shared some thoughts concerning Ron Briley’s “More Than Just A Slaveholder.” Peter also gave some information regarding the Battle of Bunker Hill. Completed paper in the afternoon.

presented August 7—Peer Gibbon shared some more ideas about the Battle of Bunker Hill. We our papers in small groups. We were given wrap up information—evaluation of seminar, downloading paper to website, etc. Checked out of residence hall and travelled by taxi to the airport for flight to Miami, Florida.

Boston. A great benefit to me, and therefore to my students, was the setting of the seminar in

so in This was my first visit to the city. I apparently might never have visited this area, as I had not done 58 years, without the seminar. I tried to visit as many sites in the area as time permitted. I saw many historical locations and landmarks in Boston, many dating back to the time of Washington. I also travelled to Salem, Plymouth, Concord, and Lexington. My personal experiences in these areas and visiting numerous historical sites will enhance my teaching greatly.

just I study history because it is fun. While I do believe we can learn some things, it is mainly, for me, just exciting; at times inspirational. To me biography may be instructive at times, but largely uplifting.

seminar As to why study George Washington, I find a 1998 article in the Baltimore Sun by our

leader, Peter Gibbon, to hold great truth. He wrote Washington had many traits which were heroic
and

worth study. Washington was courageous by growing and changing. He put his “country’s welfare
and before his personal happiness.” He “endured and preserved.” Our first president “had character,

He “exercised self-control.” Washington valued “honor and reputation more than wealth and power.”

He avoided extremes. He was human. Surely he is worth our study. I believe persons are vital to
history.

We are diminished, I think, if we do not have “mythical” figures. We must have people we can
admire

and look up to. We all have them.

This seminar was informative and reinvigorated me. I will be much more knowledgeable, with
so many stories to share. Therefore I will be a better teacher as a result of my attendance this
summer.

The variety of scholars, readings, travels, and experiences have enriched and excited me again about
history. A valuable three weeks.