



## The Iconic George Washington and His Sense of Style

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America's first recognizable fashion icon was neither a professional actor nor a supermodel. He was not a musician or stage performer – rather; he was America's first president, George Washington. Would it seem strange to some Americans that the craggy face of the one dollar bill was indeed a man of “commanding countenance” and “placid features,” whose appearance was “at all times composed and dignified”?<sup>1</sup> Could it be true that the austere figure of the Lansdowne portrait really rode a horse adorned with leopard skin?<sup>2</sup>

Washington's writings reveal that the Revolutionary War general placed extraordinary emphasis on his dress. In his rules of civility, a teenage Washington learned that one should not wear “Cloths, foul, unript or Dusty, but See they be Brush'd once every day at least and take heed that you approach to any Uncleaness.”<sup>3</sup> While these *rules* were not his creation (in fact they were copied from a European book), we

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<sup>1</sup> Mercer, George. Quoted in *Early sketches of George Washington*. Baker, William S., ed. (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott company, 1894). 13-14.

<sup>2</sup> Decatur Jr., Stephen. *Private Affairs of George Washington From the Records and Accounts of Tobias Lear, Esquire, his Secretary*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1933). 72-73.

<sup>3</sup> Washington, George. *George Washington's Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation*. (Carlisle, MA: Applewood Books. 1989) 43.



can see in his letters and diary entries that throughout his life Washington understood and certainly stressed the importance of self-presentation.

Interestingly enough, what made Washington our earliest, most easily identifiable fashion figure was not only his impeccable appearance but also his humility. In said rules, the young Virginian understood that “Apparel” should “be Modest and endeavour to accommodate Nature, rather than to procure Admiration keep to the Fashion of your equals Such as are Civil and orderly with respect to Times and Places.”<sup>4</sup> There is an irony to Washington’s personal style. Contemporary descriptions of the general described his manner as elegant yet natural and modest. In his personal life, however, Washington pursued fashionable clothing with an intensity that resembled some of his Mount Vernon fox hunts. Much like his military campaigns and political endeavors, his search for modish garments and accessories can be characterized incredibly precise and attentive to detail.

In addition to being a fashion symbol, Washington exhibited a uniquely *American* style. His was a rugged elegance born out of pragmatism in an eighteenth century America that consisted more of wilderness than sophisticated metropolises. The evolution of his dress in fact symbolized the evolution of the American republic itself. As William Sullivan put it, Washington’s nature “had been formed, long before he took command of the American Armies, in the wars of the interior and in the surveying of

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<sup>4</sup> Washington. *George Washington’s Rules of Civility*. 43.



wilderness lands, employments in which grace and elegance were not likely to be acquired.”<sup>5</sup> Yet one could argue that it was out of this roughness that Washington did find a grace and elegance—of the American sort.

His attention to clothing wove its way through American history from the colonial period of the mid eighteenth century to the French and Indian War to the American Revolution and finally to Washington’s two terms as president. The general’s stylistic taste distinctly shifted from his time as a loyal British subject to after the Revolutionary War. Considering the era in which Washington lived, his approach to clothing himself was not a revolutionary one. Nonetheless, the general persistently strove towards a practical yet refined way of dress. As a soldier, politician, and civilian, his emphasis on appearance remained one of Washington’s defining characteristics.

His letters to his tailors from 1759 to 1768 effectively characterized his personal stylistic disposition prior to the Revolutionary War; primarily they displayed his penchant for English clothing. At the same time, Washington managed to infuse an American element into his deliberately British apparel. Whether it was intentional or not, Washington’s ruggedness as a Virginian farmer and surveyor surfaced amidst his explicitly European threads.

In his younger years, as was common among many American colonials, Washington consciously aligned himself with contemporary British styles of dress; that

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<sup>5</sup> Leicester Ford, Paul. *The True George Washington*. (Philadelphia: BiblioBazaar, 2006) 41.



is to say, the fashion employed by the English gentry in the mid-eighteenth century.

One can see his adherence to these trends in early representations of the future president. During this time the accepted form of dress among English men was a suit. The suit consisted of a coat, waistcoat and breeches. Buttons as well as metallic linings normally adorned the coat, which was the outermost garment. The waistcoat, a piece underneath the coat that resembled what today would be considered a suit vest.

Among British elite the waistcoat contrasted in color to the coat. It always had buttons and sometimes displayed gold or silver lining. Breeches, the third essential piece, acted as trousers. Fashionable Englishmen would wear stockings made of white silk underneath their breeches.<sup>6</sup> Eighteenth century English shoes were considered elegant if they had buckles strapped over the tongue.<sup>7</sup> When they were dancing, Englishmen normally wore a pump—a light shoe with a low heel.<sup>8</sup> Finally, no stylish Englishman would be complete without a hat atop his powdered hair and queue (ponytail); the hat being perhaps the outfit's most indispensable item.<sup>9</sup>

Prior to the Revolutionary War, Washington sent his clothing inquiries exclusively to London. In a letter to the Robert Cary & Company, a twenty-seven year old Washington asked for a “New Market Great Coat with a loose hood to it made of

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<sup>6</sup> Buck, Ann. *Dress in Eighteenth-Century England*. (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1979) 28-29.

<sup>7</sup> Buck. *Dress in Eighteenth-Century England*. 31.

<sup>8</sup> Ribeiro, Aileen. *Dress in Eighteenth Century Europe 1715-1789*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002) 31.

<sup>9</sup> Buck. *Dress in Eighteenth-Century England*. 31.



Blew Drab or broad Cloth with straps before according to the present taste, let it be made of such Cloth as will turn a good shower of Rain and made long, and fit in other respects for a Man full 6 feet high and proportionately made..."<sup>10</sup> This request to Robert Cary showed Washington's eagerness to conform to English fashion and as well as his loyalty to the British empire. As an English subject, Washington's choice in clothing indicated his adherence to the current trends of the British aristocracy. The fact that he would send for clothing across the Atlantic indicated his strong determination in finding these fashionable garments.

Furthermore, Washington's interest in British style was not confined to garments; he also sent to England for shoes. In the Fall of 1761 he wrote to John Didsbury, requesting two pairs of boots, "one of which made of stout strong Leather for Winters use, the other pair to be light and thin for Summer" as well as "two pair of real turnd Pumps and four pair of neat, but at the same time strong Shoes."<sup>11</sup> While Washington inquired for clothing and shoes of the current fashion, he was by no means frivolous. In these requests the Virginian remained consistently shrewd; he asked for the garments and footwear of the highest style while still inquiring about practicality. His dress was to be elegant but at the same time appropriate for Virginia's harsh winters and sweltering summers.

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<sup>10</sup> GW to John Didsbury, 12 October 1761, PGW (C) 7:76.

<sup>11</sup> GW to John Didsbury, 12 October 1761.



Moreover, Washington's interest in self-presentation stretched to accessories like jewelry; he approached items such as watches with remarkable detail. There are almost ten occasions on record prior to the Revolutionary War in which he requested, with precision, the jewelry he desired from England. Interestingly, there is one record of Washington buying jewelry of American make. In March of 1771 he noted in his diary that he bought a watch from jeweler Thomas Lawson in Alexandria.<sup>12</sup> Aside from this instance, it seems that Washington sent his jewelry requests almost entirely to England. Upon examining these requests we can understand the defining characteristics of his constant hunt for fashionable items. He voraciously pursued the most stylish English jewelry and described his desired items in an unambiguously detailed manner. In January of 1758 Washington wrote to Thomas Knox seeking "1 doz'n watch Cristals better than an Inch and half Diameter."<sup>13</sup> In August of 1770 he requested from Robert Cary "A Handsome Gold Watch, [capped] And Jeweld with a handsome Gold Case" as well as a "Gold Chain, and Trinkets compleat for Ditto..."<sup>14</sup> In July of 1771 he sent another invoice to Cary asking for "Another stone fixd in the other gold Socket with the Washington Crest, and the Watch [Chain] [wrapped.]"<sup>15</sup> Jewelry clearly appealed to Washington; in that same summer he again asked Cary for "3 flash'e Watch Keyes..."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> 18 March 1771, DGW 2:11.

<sup>13</sup> GW to Thomas Knox, 1 January 1758, PGW (C) 5:87-88

<sup>14</sup> GW to Robert Cary, 20 August, 1770, WW 3:22.

<sup>15</sup> GW to John Didsbury, 18 July 1771, PGW (C) 8:500-501.

<sup>16</sup> GW to Robert Cary, 12 August 12 1771, PGW (C) 8:516-617



We see Washington's incredible attention to detail – its ubiquity certainly cannot be ignored – within his correspondence with shoe and cloth makers as well as jewelers in England. Interestingly enough, this preoccupation did not cease during times of battle. The earliest manifestation surfaced while Washington was a major in the British army during the French and Indian War. Even during a time of chaos, he remained concerned with his clothing. In a letter from January of 1757 John Carlyle wrote to Washington addressing a previous letter in which the latter "desired me to Send for a Quantity of Cloaths & Lace  $\frac{1}{2}$   $\frac{3}{4}$  & Inch Wide of one Patteron." We can tell from this letter that Washington had also ordered "Shoulder Knotts, Sashes & Gorgetts..."<sup>17</sup> The young major was well aware of and not bashful about his particularity when it came to his clothing. This, however, did not derail him. In a 1758 invoice to London, Washington acknowledged that "you will perhaps think me a crazy fellow to be ordering and Counterordering Goods almost in a breath." Nevertheless, he still provided a thorough sketch of his desired garments: "the best superfine Blue Cotton Velvet as will make a Coat Wastcoat & Breeches" as well as "a fine Silk button to suit it & all other necessary Trimmings & Linings together with Garters for the Breeches." As for accessories, the major desired "Six pairs Gloves, 3 [pair] of [which] to be proper for Riding & not to have Stiff Tops – the whole larger than the middle size."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> John Carlyle to GW, 22 January 1757, PGW (C) 4:96-98.

<sup>18</sup> GW to Richard Washington, 5 April 1758, PGW (C) 5:112.



Not only did he mind his *own* presentation as an officer, he determinedly encouraged and attempted to ensure the tidiness of his subordinates. On many occasions Washington wrote with exactness to his superiors to request better clothing for his soldiers. In a letter to Governor Robert Dinwiddie in September of 1755 Washington informed his superior that “All the shoes, stockings, shirts and hats may be had here; also one hundred complete suits at sixty shillings or less, which I think would not be amiss to engage.”<sup>19</sup> He did not merely send for generic items, but rather explained in detail how he wished them to look. In his correspondence with John Robinson, he explained that regarding uniforms, “I have desired Major Carlyle to Receive your Honours Directions in this particular; and for making the others below, a pattern is sent: it would be right to have them differing in size...”<sup>20</sup>

The French and Indian War served as a platform for two of Washington’s defining characteristics when it came to clothes: his American ruggedness and his knack for stylistic innovation. In the beginning of May 1758, Washington sent to a cloth-maker in Philadelphia (who would then surely send to England) for “as much green half-thicks’s, as will make indian-leggings for 1,000 men.” In the conclusion of his request Washington stated emphatically that “Unless those articles come to hand speedily, they will be useless...”<sup>21</sup> In another instance from the end of that month, the

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<sup>19</sup> GW to Robert Dinwiddie, September 1755, PGW (C) 2: 29.

<sup>20</sup> GW to John Robinson, 11 September 1758, PGW (C) 2: 32.

<sup>21</sup> GW to David Franks, 1 May 1758, PGW (C) 5:152



Virginian looked to Native American fashion to ameliorate his soldiers' clothing conditions. From a letter during the spring of that year, we see Washington's concern that his "regimental clothing can not possibly last the campaign" and that it would be "advisable to send for a supply..." Consequently, he explained that he had "sent to Philadelphia for 1,000 pair of Indian Stocking (Leggings) the better to equip my men for the woods," adding that his soldiers deserved "the clothing they are entitled to..."<sup>22</sup> Despite his decidedly more hectic surroundings, Washington sent for his soldiers' clothing with identical poise, exactness, practicality and innovation.

With regard to his own clothing and accessories, Washington knew exactly what he wanted and expressed his desires with great technicality. Furthermore, the variety of his requests displayed the breadth of his style sense. In a letter to Robert Cary & Co. in September 1760 he firmly requested "1 pair Crimson Velvet Breeches/ 1 pair black silk Ditto/ 1 pair black worsted ditto/ 1 pair light colourd silk Shag Ditto."<sup>23</sup> In addition, he desired "6 white neat gloves", "6 fine horn Combs" and a powder box for his hair as well as three "Sadle Cloaths" and two dozen "Hempen Halters" for his horses. In another request he asked for "A handsome Suit of Cloth Cloaths, for Winter Ware/ A handsome Suit of thin, Ditto, for Summer" and "A fashionable Cloke, for a Man 6 feet high and proportionable."<sup>24</sup> Washington's concise demands revealed how

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<sup>22</sup> GW to John Blair, 28 May 1758, PGW (C) 5:202

<sup>23</sup> GW to Charles Lawrence 28 September 1760, PGW (C) 6: 458-459

<sup>24</sup> GW to Richard Washington, 20 October 1761, PGW (C) 7:80-81



seriously he approached his look. He wished to describe his items with such detail so that his clothing would undoubtedly satisfy his craving to be fashionable, in the British sense, of course.

Despite his seemingly vain pursuit of modish clothing, Washington did order garments for his family and servants with a similar, if not equal attention to detail. He displayed a definite benevolence when it came to clothes. Prior to the Revolutionary War, a variety of letters and invoices showed Washington desires of the finest available clothing for his wife Martha. In one example from 1760, Washington asked a London tailor to send the former a “white persian quilted petticoat”<sup>25</sup> for Martha. In another invoice he sent to Richard Washington (a London Merchant of no relation to Washington) that following year; he specifically stated that he desired “12 pair course strong Shoes for [Servants]” as well as six pairs of “Norway doe Gloves” of “middle size & to have long [Fingers].” With similar detail, he requested for Martha two “fashion[ab]le fans” as well as 2 french Necklaces.” Washington certainly did not neglect the clothing needs of his slaves. In that same letter he wanted for them “Something proper for 4 suits of Summer Cloaths” with “[Buttons] & all necessary trimmings to be sent with the cloth.”<sup>26</sup>

Washington’s clothing requests revealed some puzzling components. Although he made his clothing requests with obvious precision and pragmatism, the Virginian

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<sup>25</sup> GW to Charles Lawrence, 28 September 1760, PGW (C) 6:458-459

<sup>26</sup> GW to Richard Washington, 12 October 1761, PGW (C) 7:79.



remained doggedly loyal to British tailors even when their clothing did not fit properly. It must not have been a surprise to Washington that the clothing would fit poorly; his exaggerated features would have been nightmarish to English tailors. Captain George Mercer of Virginia once described Washington's body by characterizing the latter's "bones and joints" as well as his "feet and hands" as being abnormally "large." In Mercer's estimation, Washington appeared as "wide shouldered" with "rather long legs and arms."<sup>27</sup>

In his correspondence with Charles Lawrence, a London tailor who worked for Robert Cary & Company, Washington continued to request garments despite the former's inability to create well-fitting clothing. In a letter from September of 1760, Washington explained to the tailor that "Cary and Company have sent me a suit of Cloaths of your making, that don't fit me so well as I could wish" and that in the future "if any faults should appear, I will endeavour to point them out in my next to you..."<sup>28</sup> In a letter from the following year, Washington openly complained to Richard Washington about Lawrence's ineptitude. He sent Richard an Invoice of clothing to be made in England and stated that "I have hitherto had my Cloathes made by one Charles Lawrence in old Fish Street but whether it be the fault of the Taylor, or the Measure sent I can't say but certain it is my Cloathes have never fitted me well."<sup>29</sup> Lawrence's cloth

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<sup>27</sup> Baker. *Early Sketches of George Washington*. 13-14.

<sup>28</sup> GW to Charles Lawrence, 28 September 1760, PGW (C) 6:458-459.

<sup>29</sup> GW to Richard Washington, 20 October 1761, PGW (C) 7:80-81



making clearly tested Washington's sagacity. However, the latter did not stop sending to Lawrence for clothing. Consequently, the Virginian's dissatisfaction became increasingly clear. In the spring of 1763 he wrote to Lawrence saying "I should have Inclosed you my measure, but in a general way they are so badly taken here that I am convinced it would [sic] be of very little service." He continued; "You will take care to make the Breeches longer than those you sent me last, and I would have you keep the measure of the Cloaths you now make, by you, and if any alteration is required in my next it shall be pointed out."<sup>30</sup> Despite his obvious frustration, Washington curiously carried on sending clothing requests to Lawrence. In June of 1768, Washington's wrote in an unmistakably perturbed tone. He asked that his cloths be made "in the best taste to sit easy and loose as Cloaths that are tight always look aukward and are uneasy to the Wearer." Washington directly addressed Lawrence: "I think you have generally sent my Cloaths too short and sometimes too tight," he complained, "for which Reason I think it necessary again to mention that I am full six feet high." He suggested that if his measure "should be lost" then to at least "let the breeches be made long"<sup>31</sup>

He did not direct his frustration exclusively towards Lawrence. On one occasion Washington openly conveyed his dissatisfaction with the watches of Webster & Son, a London jewelry company. In a memorandum from July of 1772 Washington wrote emphatically: "The Inclos'd new Watch key, is one of the 3 [that] were sent me last year

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<sup>30</sup> GW to Charles Lawrence, 26 April 1763, PGW (C) 7:201-202

<sup>31</sup> GW to Charles Lawrence, 20 June 1768, PGW (C) 8:98-99.



by Webster and Son in consequence of my desiring them to be very neat, the other two are exactly like it, and chargd at 1/6 each, when I could have bought as many as I pleasd in the Shops here (rather neater).” Much with the same tone he employed when writing to Lawrence, he demanded “to have two very different” watches “from this Common sort” and to have them “be of the size of the old one. He wanted “both to be of the best kind, and much handsomer and Neater than either.”<sup>32</sup>

Why would Washington continue to ask for the services of Lawrence and Webster & Son if the latter two went on producing ill-fitting clothes and poor quality watches? It is quite possible that Washington knowingly sacrificed quality for “flash’e” watches and “handsome” English suits made from “fashionable coloured Cloth.”<sup>33</sup> During these years Washington never made inquiries to any American tailors and only once bought American jewelry. His fashion sense almost exclusively coincided with English trends.

One pre-Revolutionary War artifact that strongly represented the dynamics of Washington’s earlier style is the 1772 portrait of Washington by American artist Charles Willson Peale. During May of that year Peale became a fixture at Mount Vernon; Washington referred to the artist in five diary entries at the end of that month. He also

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<sup>32</sup> GW to Webster, 15 July 1772, PGW (C) 9:67-68.

<sup>33</sup> GW to Charles Lawrence, 20 June 1768.



commissioned Peale to paint a miniature of Martha. In his diaries Washington recorded that the portraits cost a total of fifty-seven pounds and forty pence.<sup>34</sup>

In the late eighteenth century a portrait reflected the subject's high social standing, and taking into account the Virginian's fondness of English items, one can assume that Washington wanted to portray himself, at least in dress, as an Englishman. Considering how meticulously he pursued his clothing prior to May of 1772, Washington most likely viewed the setting as an opportunity to dress as ornately as possible. All his clothing seen in the portrait undoubtedly came from his orders to London. Their rich colors deliberately indicated the quality of his garments. His attire is a clear attempt to display military prowess. He adorned military outfit of dark blue and deep red that resembled his uniform of the Virginia Regiment during the French and Indian War.<sup>35</sup> We can tell from the many references Washington made in his writings that well after the war he reflected deeply about and remained fond of his regiment. It plainly exhibited a heightened English fashion sense. He donned a cocked hat with a medallion, a waistcoat that had silver trim and silver buttons and a lavender sash draped from his shoulder. Peale also painted the hilt of an English-made sword that Washington sent for in 1757 – one of the few items from this period when he

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<sup>34</sup> 30 May 1772, DGW 2:64.

<sup>35</sup> Rasmussen, William M.S., and Robert S. Tilton. *George Washington: The Man Behind the Myths*. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999) 39.



fancied himself an English gentleman that he carried during his inauguration as president in 1789.<sup>36</sup>

One can imagine that Washington intentionally chose to appear in a commanding officer's military outfit. Perhaps Washington felt the uniform would elevate him above others in society just as it did during war. This would certainly be true if he concurred with the Captain George Mercer, a fellow member of the Virginia Regiment during the war. In a letter to Washington in August 1757 Mercer wrote that we have been told here by the officers that nothing ever gave them such Surprise as our Appearance at entering Hampton, for expecting to see a Parcel of ragged disorderly Fellows headed by Officers of their own Stamp (like the rest of the provincials they had seen) behold they saw Men properly disposed who made a good & Soldier like Appearance and performed in every Particular as well as [could] be expected from any troops with Officers whom they found to be [Gentlemen] to see a Sash & Gorget with a genteel Uniform, a Sword properly hung, a Hat cocked...a White shirt, with any other than a black Leather stock...<sup>37</sup> Mercer's descriptions match Washington's appearance in the portrait almost identically. One can figure that Washington was well aware of the patrician image he projected.

Among these decorative and deep-colored English clothing items, there were two components of his attire during the sitting that revealed Washington's underlying

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<sup>36</sup> Rasmussen and Tilton. *George Washington*. 39.

<sup>37</sup> George Mercer to GW, 17 August 1757, PGW (C) 4:470.



*American* identity and fashion sense. One was the musket hanging over his left shoulder – curiously this arm was used more commonly in hunting fox rather than in warfare.<sup>38</sup> Whether he knew it or not, the musket displayed more about Washington’s rugged colonial roots than his adherence to English trends. The other peculiar item was the gorget hanging from his neck. It was a metallic shield that hung around Washington’s neck, a military item worn traditionally by medieval knights. The gorget, like Washington’s tidy red and blue uniform and lavender sash, signified military superiority. The interesting feature of this gorget, however, was that it displayed the Virginia coat of arms.<sup>39</sup> Considering his affection towards English style, Washington easily could have worn a gorget with the British coat. Is this significant? In all likelihood Washington did not wear this particular item to defy Great Britain. At the same time, this piece of apparel once again indicated Washington’s inherently, but not yet actualized, *American* approach to clothing. In terms of appearance, Washington could not suppress the influence of his upbringing.

In Washington’s writings only a few years after his sitting with Peale, one can sense that the Virginian’s attention to clothing had not diminished. As commander of the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War, the general displayed his characteristic shrewdness when it came to clothing himself as well as his fellow officers and soldiers. Moreover, the Revolutionary War tested Washington’s clothing savvy.

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<sup>38</sup> Rasmussen and Tilton. *George Washington*. 39.

<sup>39</sup> Rasmussen and Tilton, *George Washington*. 39.



The dismal conditions of his soldiers forced the general find innovative ways to provide quality clothing. At least one of Washington's officers acknowledged that the general's "Direction" in securing the best quality clothing for the troops and that Washington provided proper "advice of the best mode of Doing it..."<sup>40</sup> As commander of the Continental Army his stylistic foresight and brilliant choices with respect to clothing helped preserve the limited clothing supply his armies had. During the Revolutionary War, the general exhibited generosity concerning his troops' clothing. To one of his officers he declared that all of his men were "intitled" to "new cloathing...the troops in general should be put into uniform and comfortable cloathing."<sup>41</sup> He certainly viewed his men's clothing with pragmatism; a well-dressed soldier would undoubtedly be more effective in battle. At the same time, one can see compassion in Washington's appeals to have his men better clothed.

In the earliest stages of the War, Washington did not direct his meticulous and impatient manner at English tailors but rather to John Hancock, the president of the Continental Congress, which had the responsibility of providing the general's army with proper apparel. Washington appealed in scores of letters beginning in the spring of 1775, consistently pleading for sufficient clothing to equip his men in Boston for the impending winter. In July of 1775 Washington found himself "embarrassed for Want"

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<sup>40</sup> Jonathan Trumbull, Sr. to GW, 14 January 1778, PGW (R) 13:242.

<sup>41</sup> GW to Major General John Sullivan, 4 October 1778, PGW (R) 17:261.



of military clothing and figured that “these Embarassments” would “increase every Day.”

From his experience as a major in the Virginia Regiment, one can assume that Washington knew well the importance of high quality uniforms in times of war. Furthermore, in previous, extremely exigent letters to cloth makers in England, Washington’s efficiency in his approach to clothing became clear. Having an army clad in the poorest of garments, the General displayed his brilliance. Washington understood that it would be virtually impossible to receive uniforms of superior quality in a short period of time.

In a letter to Hancock he declared that “I am of the Opinion that a Number of hunting Shirts not less than 10,000 would in a great Degree remove this Difficulty in the cheapest & quickest Manner...” These garments, normally decorated with fringes and made of varying colors, opened in the front with a style that resembled a coat yet were comfortable enough so that soldiers could remove and layer them with ease.<sup>42</sup> The General felt that these hunting shirts, which resembled Native American more than European apparel, “if put in practice would have a happier Tendency to unite the Men, & abolish those Provincial Distinctions which lead to Jealousy & Dissatisfaction.”<sup>43</sup> In this simple request we see the brilliance of Washington, specifically his sagacity when

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<sup>42</sup> Baumgarten, Linda. *What Clothes Reveal: The Language of Clothing in Colonial and Federal America*. (Williamsburg, Virginia: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 2002) 69.

<sup>43</sup> GW to John Hancock, 10[-11] July 1775, PGW (R) 1:88.



dealing with clothing. He moved intrepidly through these moments of desperation. Not only would the hunting shirts be cheap, they would also work to bring together provincial soldiers that lacked cohesion.

Aside from this instance, the general took multiple steps to combat his lack of funding. In his issuance of General Orders, Washington instructed his commanders to enforce tidiness. "The General" was certainly "sensible of the [difficulty] and expence of providing Cloaths, of almost any kind, for the Troops." If he could not have the finest garments available, Washington would at least ensure that his soldiers knew the importance of clothing throughout the War. He felt it "absolutely necessary that men should have Cloaths and appear decent and tight." Specifically, he "earnestly encourage[d]" using his innovative clothing decision, "Hunting Shirts." In addition, the men were to wear "long Breeches, made of the same Cloth, Gaiter fashion about the Legs." Washington also saw to it that his soldiers wear "under-Cloaths" so that they "may be cool in warm weather, and warm in cool weather" without altering "outward dress."<sup>44</sup> This was indeed the same Washington who more than thirty years before implored men of civility to wear their clothing neither "foul" nor "Dusty."

Washington also moved efficiently to block "Makers" of clothing or others from "Monopolizing" garments. The General declared it his right to seize clothing from anyone attempting to hoard it and in November of 1777 he expressed that he would

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<sup>44</sup> GW's General Orders, 24 July 1776, PGW (R) 5:439



reprimand “Makers or people” who had attempted to “make a market by monopolizing” clothing. Washington declared that he had “taken” these articles of clothing “wherever they were to be found.” Washington took this as well as many other precautions to maintain his existing albeit incredibly low level of clothing.

The general took another measure to alleviate the overall lack of clothing—he created a cloathier general. Washington appointed Philadelphian James Mease, to be in charge of supplying Continental soldiers. Mease, like Washington’s London tailors, was taken aback by the General’s remarkable precision as well as his exigency.

In one letter to Mease from the fall of 1777, Washington deliberately laid out his desired items. The General told the Cloathier General that “proper steps should be taken to have” some leather the army had obtained because “Hides of Cattle” would be appropriate to make shoes for soldiers. Then, in his distinctly demanding tone, Washington concluded to Mease that “in short it lays with you to set every Engine at work to procure such articles of Cloathing as are of our own produce, and to have Agents ready to purchase all that is imported.”<sup>45</sup> Mease surely felt pressure from the demands of this self-proclaimed “crazy person” who asked much of him. At one point, Mease explained to Washington that “I had hopes I should been able to have answered all the demands that would have been made as to coats Jackets & breeches.” However,

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<sup>45</sup> GW to James Mease, 12 November 1777, PGW (R) 12:227-229.



the overwhelmed Mease conceded that “I confess myself entirely mistaken...”<sup>46</sup> One can figure that Mease was indeed stunned by the general’s voracity in pursuing clothing for his men. This became clear when Mease asked to resign from his post in 1778.

Evidence suggests that when Washington was not harassing Mease, he appealed to other garment sources to provide his ill-equipped men with apparel. The Philadelphia firm Otis & Andrews acted as one of these sources. In Washington’s approach to these men one notices that he sought out well-made clothing in the same way he searched for artillery and ammunition – intently. Otis & Andrews were certainly not exempt from the general’s doggedness, in a letter to the firm he left the latter no choice but to acquiesce, plainly establishing that, without doubt, the firm would have to “scrutinize carefully the quality of the articles you purchase or send for the use of the army.”<sup>47</sup> When ordering garments for his officers from these Philadelphians, Washington made sure that the former sent “an exact return of Cloths, Linens, and other Articles” that were “suitable” for wear.<sup>48</sup> At no point during these requests did Washington use language that implied even the slightest ambiguity. The cloth makers may have perceived this as pickiness, but certainly no one could accuse the general of being imprecise.

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<sup>46</sup> James Mease to GW, 4 November, 1777, PGW (R) 12:123-125.

<sup>47</sup> GW to Otis & Andrews, 4 October, 1778, PGW (R) 17:255.

<sup>48</sup> GW to Otis & Andrews, 27 September 1778, PGW (R) 17:255.



Another important aspect of Washington's attitude towards clothing involved the issue of importation. Clearly the American Continental Army did not import English clothing while they were at war with Great Britain. This, however, did not stop the import of European clothing to the colonies. During the Revolutionary War there are a variety of accounts that detail the Continental Army's use of French clothing. While Washington would have been glad to get a boost in uniforms from the French, there are instances in which Washington shows his displeasure with French garments and his preference towards clothing of American make. In a letter to Otis & Andrews, Washington expressed his dissatisfaction with French "articles of shoes." He described them as being "so slight" that he their service would be short-lived. "This is too much the case with the French shoes in general," he claimed.<sup>49</sup> This definitely does not indicate a complete rejection of all foreign clothing items. Yet when one couples this example the fact that Washington began to favor almost entirely American cloth during the War, it becomes evident that there was a change happening in Washington as well as in the colonies. After an American victory in the Revolutionary War, the war's undisputed hero would spearhead a movement towards wearing American made garments.

Washington truly became an American fashion icon from the moment he became president of the United States. He still followed styles that were popular in Europe, and

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<sup>49</sup> GW to Otis & Andrews, 4 October 1778.



most certainly still pursued garments of a “flash’e” kind – on state occasions

Washington’s horse would be decorated leopard-skin housings.<sup>50</sup> Yet curiously, many who met Washington described his manner as modest. One visitor of Washington’s at Mount Vernon described the retired president as having a “reserve but no hauteur in his manner.”<sup>51</sup>

Washington’s secretary Tobias Lear wrote that when attending affairs of state, the president normally wore “a coat and knee-breeches of brown cloth, with gilt metal buttons.” But after his mother died, Washington only wore black in public. He would normally don “a black velvet suit” and his “hair was well powdered, with the queue in a black silk bag tied with a solitaire.” On his hands he would wear “yellow gloves and held a cocked hat, with a cockade, trimmed with black feathers about an inch wide.” Even as he did in Peale’s portrait of 1772, he still infused military dress into his outfits. President Washington in public usually carried a “Sword, with sword knot, black silk stockings, silver knee and shoe buckles and highly varnished shoes.”<sup>52</sup>

Not surprisingly, Washington continued to seek out his clothing with a remarkable attention to detail, the difference being that during his presidency most of his clothing requests were made through Lear. This did not mean, however, that the president’s distinctive peculiarities did not show in Lear’s statements to tailors.

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<sup>50</sup> Decatur, Stephen Jr. *Private Affairs of George Washington*. 72-73

<sup>51</sup> C. Carter II, Edward, ed. *The Virginia Journals of Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, 1795-1798 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977) 1: 166.

<sup>52</sup> Decatur, Jr. *Private Affairs of George Washington*. 72-73



Washington must have dictated his wishes to his secretary with the utmost precision, Lear's requests cover all the minutiae of Washington's outfits including "ruffling"<sup>53</sup> for shirts, "lacing for the President's Vest"<sup>54</sup> and on one occasion eleven and a half yards of yellow cloth for a summer suit for Washington. Meanwhile Washington remained frugal about purchasing garments, acknowledging in one cash memorandum that he had "overpaid" a tailor.

The one significant contrast to the Washington prior to the Revolutionary War and President Washington was that the latter deliberately chose mostly American clothing. While on at least one occasion he acknowledged that American garments were not of the same quality as European clothing, it is clear in his writings as well as in Lear's records that the president remained loyal to American tailors. In October 1789, the president visited a wool factory in Hartford, Connecticut, where he described "their Broadcloths" as not being "of the first quality, as yet, but they are good; as are their Coatings, Cassimeres [cashmeres], Serges and Everlastings." Moreover, Washington ordered from this factory a broadcloth "suit to be sent" to him in New York as well as a "whole piece" of everlastings to "make breeches" for his servants. He noted that the factory's workers were mostly "Country people."<sup>55</sup> As a farmer most of his life, Washington might have considered himself "country," and it is possible that he enjoyed

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<sup>53</sup> Decatur, Jr. 264

<sup>54</sup> Decatur, Jr. 275.

<sup>55</sup> Washington's Diary, October 20, 1789. Quoted in William Spohn Baker, *Washington After the Revolution*. (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1898), 152.



the fact that these “country” Americans worked in the factory and therefore wanted to buy their products. Washington surely enjoyed distinguishing himself as an American farmer and displayed this pleasure through his clothing. When Joshua Brookes visited Mount Vernon in 1799, he recalled the General’s seemingly “country” dress. He described the former president as being “dressed in a blue great coat, large buttons, blue overalls and bespattered boots” as well as “a cassimere [cashmere] wais[t]coat” with a “cocked hat with a cockade.” Ultimately, Washington let it be known with a sense of pride to Brookes and others at dinner that his “cloathes were all of American manufacture...”<sup>56</sup> Another example of Washington’s fondness for American made clothing was his relationship with Hercules Mulligan, a tailor in New York City, whose work Washington clearly liked.<sup>57</sup>

Not only did Washington have an affinity for American clothing, but also he felt that the garment industry would figure heavily into the economic advancement of his young and developing nation. In a letter to Lafayette during the winter of 1789 Washington declared with brilliant foresight that “what has been considered at the moment as a disadvantage” – that is to say, America’s fledgling industries – “will probably turn out for our good.” He stated that “the usefull arts” such as American clothing manufacture “have been almost imperceptibly pushed to a considerable degree

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<sup>56</sup> R.W.G. Vail, ed. “A Dinner at Mount Vernon: From the Unpublished Journal of Joshua Brooked (1773-1859),” *The New-York Historical Society Quarterly*, Volume 31, Number 2 (April 1947, 72-85), 74.

<sup>57</sup> Tobias Lear to Hercules Mulligan. 6 February 1792, WW 31:474.



of perfection.” He relished the notion that America’s industries were quickly ascending. With unmistakable pride, Washington went on to describe the “great savings” being “made in many articles of apparel” and that specifically in places like Pennsylvania Americans “have attended particularly to the fabrication of cotten cloths, hats, and all articles in leather.” This letter essentially synthesized the development of Washington’s style. Not only did he place emphasis on his personal garment choice, he coupled the production of American clothing equally with the industries creating “Cordage, Glass and several other extensive and useful branches.” He mentioned shoes and nails in the same sentence; referring to American production of both as “incredible.” Clothing, an essential interest to Washington throughout his life, would now be a crucial component of the country he sought to create.

The moment that perhaps most adequately showed Washington’s transition to American clothing came at his April 1789 inauguration when he wore “homespun broad cloth, of the Hartford fabric.”<sup>58</sup>

American newspapers widely reported that the president on “the day of the inauguration appeared dressed in a complete suit of homespun clothes, but the cloth was so fine a fabric and so handsomely furnished that it was universally mistaken for a foreign manufactured cloth.”<sup>59</sup> George Washington – famous throughout the world and the most celebrated and recognizable man in the United States – wore garments

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<sup>58</sup> GW to Lafayette, 29 January 1789, PGW (P) 1:263.

<sup>59</sup> Decatur, Jr. 8-9.



made entirely of American cloth. While the president could have easily appeared in the finest French or English materials, he consciously chose American. He unequivocally displayed his allegiance to the clothing of his country and declared his preference for it throughout his presidency. According to Washington, it would simply “be unfashionable for a gentleman to appear in any other dress.”<sup>60</sup>

During his life George Washington’s life, clothing may not have received attention and adulation similar to the kind given contemporary pop stars and models. Nonetheless, Washington’s style certainly affected America as well as its citizens and the unique combination of unquestionable fame and craving for modish garments elevated Washington’s fashion sense above that of his peers. While many post-revolutionary Americans viewed figures such as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson as equal if not more elegant dressers than Washington, none of these American icons compared to Washington in terms of celebrity; consequently, the influence of their clothing sense could not have equaled the impact of Washington’s. Furthermore, it is essential to note that our nation’s first president always exhibited a distinctly *American* style sense (even when he did not wear American pieces). While from a young age he desired clothing of the most fashionable sort, Washington pragmatically chose garments that would interact most appropriately with the distinct climate and geography of North America.

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<sup>60</sup> GW to Lafayette, 29 January 1789.



More importantly, the evolution of Washington's clothing displayed a symbolic quality – it reflected the profound political changes that occurred in America during his lifetime. Washington, like all members of the Virginia gentry prior to the Revolutionary War, favored English clothing almost exclusively – this preference reflected his and many other colonists' firm loyalty to the British Empire. During the Revolutionary War, however, Washington began to lean towards the use of American made garments for his own use as well as for the use of his army. It can be argued that just as he reinforced his *loyalty* to the British Empire through his style of dress, Washington strengthened his *defiance* of the English with clothing as well. His stylistic inclinations from his presidency to his death solidified this preference for American clothing. As the leader of a fledgling nation, Washington had become an American icon who wore American made products with pride.

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