



## The Fairfax Connection: George Washington & the Fairfax Family

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George Washington was born into a modestly wealthy Virginia planter family, the oldest son of Augustine Washington's second marriage to Mary Ball Washington. George received a fairly conventional education for a boy of his standing in Virginia society until age 11. It is likely that Augustine hired a private tutor to instruct George with the intent of sending him to England to attend school like both of George's older half brothers Lawrence and Augustine Jr.<sup>1</sup> However, Augustine's untimely death in 1743 left George's education and future more generally very much at risk. Upon Augustine's death George inherited from his father Ferry farm, half of a 4360 acre tract on Deep Run, ten slaves, three small tracts in Fredericksburg and a small share in the residual estate.<sup>2</sup> This may seem like a lot but was certainly not to enough to sustain George as apart of the lower Virginia gentry. Especially because his mother was to manage the estate until George came of age and she proved to be an egregiously bad

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<sup>1</sup> Paul K. Longmore, *The Invention of George Washington* (London: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Deed for Ferry Farm Land, 7 July 1748, *The Papers of George Washington Digital Edition*, ed. Theodore J. Crackel. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2007 (PGW:DE). Colonial Series (Col.) vol. 1. ed. **Philander C. Chase**, p. 5.



businesswoman.<sup>3</sup> In addition, she would not relinquish true control over George's Ferry Farm inheritance for nearly another 30 years.<sup>4</sup> Given the reality of George's circumstances at this time it must have become clear to him that in order to improve his standing in society he would have to benefit from the good favor of powerful and influential men in the Virginia elite. Fortunately for George his older half-brother Lawrence married Ann Fairfax, daughter of Colonel William Fairfax of the extremely powerful Fairfax family.<sup>5</sup> This link would mark the beginning of influential and lifelong bond with the family. This paper will explore the relationship that members of the Fairfax family had with George Washington and how influential his association with them was in his rise to prominence.

## **Fairfax Family**

First, one must understand how the Fairfax's came to be such a powerful family in Virginia. Thomas Fairfax, sixth Baron Fairfax of Cameron (Lord Fairfax) inherited from his mother the Northern Neck Proprietary – originally granted by King Charles II in 1649 – encompassing all of the land between the Potomac and Rappahannock rivers, the western boundary lying just west of the Shenandoah Valley.<sup>6</sup> To help administer such an enormous amount of land Lord Fairfax appointed his cousin Colonel William

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<sup>3</sup> Longmore, 19.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> George Washington to Lawrence Washington, 5 May 1749, PGW:DE, Col. Series, vol. 1, p.5,5n.

<sup>6</sup> George Washington to Lord Fairfax, October-November 1749, PGW:DE, Col. Series, vol. 5, p.40n.



Fairfax as his agent in Virginia. Colonel William Fairfax took up residence along the Potomac River at Belvoir, a few miles from Mount Vernon, where George Washington was a frequent visitor throughout his youth and eventual owner upon Lawrence Washington and Ann Fairfax's death.<sup>7</sup>

Here Washington forged influential associations and in some cases lifelong friendships with various members of the Fairfax family. Among them are Lord Fairfax, Colonel William Fairfax, George William Fairfax, Sarah Cary (Sally) Fairfax and Bryan Fairfax. George William and Bryan were both sons of Colonel William Fairfax and Sally Fairfax was married to George William Fairfax.

It is at Belvoir that Washington would have become accustomed to English aristocratic society. Feeling under prepared and unknowledgeable in social graces expected of him Washington – age thirteen - copied into one of his notebooks the “Rules... of Civility & Decent Behaviour in Company and Conversation”<sup>8</sup>. This accompanied with the informal education he undoubtedly received from Fairfax's would have formed the basis of his social etiquette. The importance of this is hard to measure but cannot be overlooked because in Virginia gentry society there was an “acute attention to social rank and to one's own place within that ranking”<sup>9</sup>.

Washington's social worldview was formed and based on this understanding and his

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> School Exercises, PGW:DE, Col. Series, vol. 1, p.2.

<sup>9</sup> Longmore, 9.



place within this social structure was clear to him. One very important way to distinguish oneself was through dancing. Dancing as with many things in colonial Virginia was seen as a competition, a way to prove one's worthiness. Many within the Virginia gentry would hire dancing instructors to teach their children how to dance this is most likely true for Washington, but he would have certainly learned the skill or perfected it at Belvoir.<sup>10</sup> Many accounts of Washington being a very skilled dancer, in his diary he commented that "Dancing was the chief entertainment"<sup>11</sup> at a Ball he attended in Alexandria.

The final general point to make on Washington's association with the Fairfaxes is simply that he was associated with them. This fact alone would bring him into contact with powerful people he most likely would have never associated with had it not been for the Fairfaxes. Opening up opportunities that never would have existed for him was it not for their relationship.

## Surveying

Surveying was perceived as a "respectable occupation for a young Virginian in 1749, roughly on a par with law, medicine, the church, or military service, and most of

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<sup>10</sup> A New Mill and a Journey to the Ohio, 13 March 1770. PGW:DE, Diaries, vol. 2, edited by, p.220.

<sup>11</sup> Washington the Planter and Farmer, 15 February 1760. PGW:DE, Diaries, vol. 1, edited by, p.239.



the surveyors were drawn from the Virginia gentry”<sup>12</sup>. Also surveying allowed young men without estates the opportunity to amass land of their own. The biggest opportunity that came to Washington through his relationship with the Fairfaxes was the beginning of his surveying career. Although Washington was instructed in simple mathematics and trigonometry and thirty-nine pages of one his school books was entitled “Art of Surveying and Measuring Land”<sup>13</sup>. Washington had no known practical experience until he accompanied George William Fairfax on a surveying mission for Lord Fairfax in the spring of 1748 at the age of sixteen.<sup>14</sup> Not only would this trip open the door to the beginning of a respectable surveying career but it would also allow for Washington and George William’s friendship to strengthen as they spent the next two months together.

Washington kept a journal of the trip recording information about where they went, who they saw and some of the adventures that they encountered throughout the trip. The journey over the mountains as Washington called it proved to be an extremely eventful and informative one. Washington starts the journal by noting “began my Journey in Company with George Fairfax... we travell’d this day 40 miles”<sup>15</sup> the next day Washington notes that “nothing remarkable happen’d”<sup>16</sup>. But the next day

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<sup>12</sup> George Washington’s Professional Surveys, PGW:DE, Col. Series, vol. 1, p.9n.

<sup>13</sup> School Exercises, PGW:DE, Col. Series, vol. 1, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Surveying for Lord Fairfax, PGW:DE, Diaries, vol. 1, p.7.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.



Washington records that the surveying party “rode to his Lordships Quarter”<sup>17</sup> possibly referring to Lord Fairfax’s home at Greenway Court. This is important for two reasons. First, it marks the farthest Washington had ever traveled away from home and also it would have possibly given Washington a chance to become personally acquainted with Lord Fairfax. Washington would later carry on a correspondence Lord Fairfax directly about surveying and various other things, solidifying their relationship.<sup>18</sup> A few days later Washington noted that they rode “as far as Major Campbells”<sup>19</sup> Andrew Campbell was one of the Burgesses of the area and one of its most prominent residents. He served as one of the first justices for the county as well as the third sheriff of the county.<sup>20</sup> On the Journey Washington met many other influential men in the Northern Neck Proprietary region. The tangible affects of these associations are hard to gage but simply running in the same circles as wealthy, prominent men would certainly allow Washington to become acquainted with their expectations for a gentleman, something Washington was desperate to be considered.<sup>21</sup> Also, Washington spent a lot of time with George William Fairfax on the trip. Recording in his journal that they were able to eat dinner together and sleep in a house one night of the trip and two days later noting that they stayed in the tent together while everyone began that days work of

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>18</sup> George Washington to Lord Fairfax, October-November 1749, PGW:DE, Col. Series, vol. 1, p.40.

<sup>19</sup> Surveying for Lord Fairfax, PGW:DE, Diaries, vol.1, p.12.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 12,12n.

<sup>21</sup> Longmore, 72.



surveying.<sup>22</sup> The bonds of friendship that were strengthened throughout this experience together cannot be understated. Washington and George William would prove to be lifelong friends and the basis of that friendship was most likely forged during this trip. Equally important Washington learned the practical skills of surveying most likely from James Genn, a prominent surveyor in Prince William County.<sup>23</sup>

After Washington's trip with George William he worked as a professional land surveyor from age seventeen to twenty. Nearly all of Washington's roughly 190 surveys were done on the frontiers of Lord Fairfaxes Northern Neck Proprietary.<sup>24</sup> In July of 1749 Washington received his commission from the College of William and Mary to be the Surveyor of Culpeper County, the county lay entirely within the boundaries of the Northern Neck Proprietary. In the charter for the College of William and Mary the college was granted the right to appoint county surveyors in Virginia and the right to collect 1/6 of their surveying fees.<sup>25</sup> Generally college authorities were more concerned with the income from their surveyorships than who actually got the appointment and "regularly deferred to the wishes of powerful men"<sup>26</sup> when deciding who would receive commissions. Clearly, this is how Washington received his commission. In May of 1752, two months before Washington received his commission Lt. Gov. Robert

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<sup>22</sup> Surveying for Lord Fairfax, PGW:DE, Diaries, vol. 1, p.19.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 5n.

<sup>24</sup> George Washington's Professional Surveys, PGW:DE, Col. Series, vol. 1, p.9n.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 10n.

<sup>26</sup> George Washington's Professional Surveys, PGW:DE, Col. Series, vol. 1, p.10n.



Dinwiddie wrote Lord Fairfax asking who he thought “proper to appoint a private Surveyr”<sup>27</sup> because the college president, William Dawson, said he would “always have a due regard to any person recommended to the Coledge for their Commission”<sup>28</sup>. It is most likely that when Colonel William Fairfax went to Williamsburg to attend the governor’s council meetings from March to May of that year he procured the commission for Washington on the directions of Lord Fairfax.

Washington’s Fairfax connection proved to be invaluable in obtaining the commission on several levels. If Washington had not accompanied George William on the surveying trip a year earlier he would not have had the requisite experience necessary to survey on his own. Lord Fairfax recommending Washington to the officials at the College of William and Mary essentially guaranteed him the appointment even though he lacked the apparent experience necessary to warrant such a position. There were also unintended affects of obtaining the position as surveyor that would benefit Washington greatly in the years to follow.

## **Military**

Washington’s surveying career, made possible by the Fairfaxes, provided the basis for his military career. In the summer of 1752 Washington was anxious to secure an appointment to be adjutant of the Northern Neck, a post his brother had held for the

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.



entire colony prior to his death, so Washington wrote Lt. Gov. Robert Dinwiddie to offer his name for the post.<sup>29</sup> Here Washington was able to take advantage of the name recognition he undoubtedly had with Lt. Gov. Dinwiddie after the Fairfaxes introduced them several years earlier when Washington was seeking an appointment as a surveyor. However, the governor's council, on which Colonel William Fairfax sat, appointed Washington adjutant for the southern district, giving Washington the title of "major and a yearly stipend of £100"<sup>30</sup>. A little over a year later Lt. Gov. Dinwiddie received instructions from London to find if anyone had illegally erected forts on Virginia soil, warn them to "peaceably depart"<sup>31</sup> or be driven off "by force of arms"<sup>32</sup>. Many of Washington's surveys had been done in the Shenandoah Valley in Frederick County, then considered to be the frontier. This made him more familiar with the fringes of Virginia geographically than most men in the colony, making him a plausible choice to lead the envoy to the French officials. Again, as so many times before Washington relied on the Fairfaxes influence.

Washington, as he frequently did, offered his name to Gov. Dinwiddie for the position. Again, Colonel William Fairfax from his position on the governor's council was able to push Washington's name through and on October 30, 1753 Dinwiddie

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>30</sup> Commission as Adjutant for Southern District, 13 December 1752, PGW:DE, Col. Series, vol. 1, p.54.

<sup>31</sup> Commission from Robert Dinwiddie, 30 October 1753, PGW:DE, Col. Series, vol. 1, p.58.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.



formally offered Washington the commission, stating that he had “especial trust & confidence in the ability of conduct & fidelity”<sup>33</sup> in Washington. But, one must keep in mind the gravity of the situation that Washington was entering upon and how truly ill-equipped he was to handle it. His military experience as adjutant for the southern district had been little more than a title offering him no true experience in military affairs. Washington’s experience as a surveyor had made him familiar with the Shenandoah Valley but it is very unlikely he ever traveled as far as present day Pittsburgh where the French fort was. Essentially to this point the only thing that made Washington’s meteoric rise to prominence possible was his extremely close ties with the Fairfax family. At almost every turn in Washington’s public life to date the Fairfaxes had vouched for him, pushed his name through to the upper circles of Virginia society or given him opportunities themselves. On almost all logical, objective bases Washington was simply over-his-head on this mission.

But Washington proved adequate in this mission, and Dinwiddie published Washington’s account of the mission he labeled in his diary as “Journey to the French Commandant”<sup>34</sup>. Sensing that the conflict would escalate Washington again sought an appointment that, as he himself put it, was “too great for my youth and inexperience to

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Journey to the French Commandant, October 1753-January 1754, PGW:DE, Dairies, vol. 1, p.130.



be intrusted with”<sup>35</sup>. But again Washington received a command through the bidding of “Corbin and probably others”<sup>36</sup> the others most likely referring to the Fairfaxes. During this mission Washington would prove too inexperienced and naïve in regards to foreign affairs. Noting in his diary that they had killed “Mr. de Jumonville, the Commander of that Party”<sup>37</sup> and essentially starting the French and Indian War.

Washington’s military career was made possible by the patronage of the Fairfaxes. Time and again they assisted Washington giving him access to people of power and influence that helped him reach the upper-echelon of the Virginia militia by the age of 23.

## Politics

An often overlooked aspect of Washington’s career is his entry into local politics and election to the Virginia House of Burgesses. Washington first expressed interest running for office in a letter – from May of 1755 - to his brother John Augustine Washington (Jack) saying “if I thought my chances reasonably good...I should be glad to take a pole”<sup>38</sup> in either Frederick or Fairfax County. On December 10<sup>th</sup> of that year, most likely unbeknownst to Washington “his name was presented to the voters at

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<sup>35</sup> George Washington to Richard Corbin, February 1754, PGW:DE, Col. Series, vol. 1, p.71.

<sup>36</sup> Expedition to the Ohio, March 1754 – June 1754, PGW:DE, Diaries, vol. 1, p.165.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 196.

<sup>38</sup> George Washington to John Augustine Washington, 28 May 1755, PGW:DE, Col. Series, vol. 1, p.290.



Winchester”<sup>39</sup> for Frederick County. He lost the election handily, receiving only 40 votes compared to 271 and 270 each of the two winners received.<sup>40</sup> After serving as colonel of Virginia’s colonial regiment for several years during the French and Indian War Washington became disenchanted with his pursuit of a military career. It became increasingly clear to him that there was an “anticolonial bias”<sup>41</sup> and that he would never get the commission into the British Royal Army that he sought, resigning in December of 1758. However, in the spring of that year – with his military career near its end – Washington decided to try his luck in politics again, this time with the Fairfaxes at his side.

By February of 1758 Washington’s intentions of running for the House of Burgesses was clear.<sup>42</sup> Washington decided to run in Frederick County, even though he was a resident of Fairfax County. At this time Virginia law permitted any man “to vote and hold office in any county in which he owned sufficient property”<sup>43</sup>. The fact that Washington was not running from his home county may seem unimportant, but it is worth noting, because in all likelihood Washington amassed the required property to run in Frederick County while he was surveying for Lord Fairfax. Washington’s surveying was done “almost entirely in the Shenandoah and Capacon valleys of

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<sup>39</sup> Adam Stephen to George Washington, 23 December 1755, PGW:DE, Col. Series, vol. 2, p.228n.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Longmore, 54.

<sup>42</sup> Nathaniel Thompson to George Washington, 20 February 1758, PGW:DE, Col. Series, vol. 5, p.96.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 57.



Frederick County”<sup>44</sup> giving Washington “ample opportunities to patent choice tracts of land”<sup>45</sup> and acquire holdings of several thousand acres. Washington’s surveying in the years prior to 1758, made possible by Lord Fairfax, allowed him to run for office in Frederick County. Here the Fairfax influence is not apparent at first but is no less important to the opportunities presented to Washington.

Washington was personally unable to attend the election because of his military obligations. To manage his campaign Washington selected Gabriel Jones and Colonel James Wood, two of the most prominent men of the area.<sup>46</sup> Wood wrote Washington noting “I have done my endeavour to search into the Opinions of the people, and cannot percieve Your Interest on the decline”<sup>47</sup> but my “own Experience has convinced me there is no relying on the promises of the common Herd, the promise is too oft forgot when the Back is turned”<sup>48</sup>. To combat this uncertainty among Virginia’s yeomanry Washington had Colonel William Fairfax, George William Fairfax and John Carlyle a Fairfax son-in-law “exert their influence among the small farmers and common planters with whom they had personal connections”<sup>49</sup>. Voting in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century was done much different then it is today. Then each man was called by name, came to the front and “announced for all to hear the two candidates he supported to sit

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<sup>44</sup> George Washington’s Professional Surveys, PGW:DE, Col. Series, vol. 1, p.10.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>46</sup> Longmore, 57.

<sup>47</sup> James Wood to George Washington, 7 July 1758, PGW:DE, Col. Series, vol. 5, p.271.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Longmore, 57.



as Burgesses”<sup>50</sup>. This way every voter knew who the most influential men backed and with Lord Fairfax voting first and backing Washington it is logical that his decision would have had a large impact on those that looked up to him and relied on his good favor.<sup>51</sup> As with all of Washington’s endeavors in public life to this point the Fairfaxes exerted their influence to Washington’s benefit, making what seemed unlikely an actuality for their young protégé.

## Lord Fairfax

Washington’s personal relationship with Lord Fairfax is uncertain and hard to piece together, however, there are several important bits of evidence available enabling one to shed light on the nature of their relationship. Lawrence, George’s older half-brother married Ann Fairfax, daughter of Colonel William Fairfax, in July of 1743.<sup>52</sup> After their marriage Washington, age eleven, was a frequent visitor of Belvoir throughout his youth. In 1747 Lord Fairfax took up permanent residence in Virginia, living with his cousin Colonel William Fairfax at Belvoir until the fall of 1749 when he took up permanent residence in Greenway Court, it is at this time that Washington would have personally met Lord Fairfax. Because of Washington’s young age and lack of personal accounts from this time it is almost impossible to discern the nature of their

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 59.

<sup>51</sup> Charles Smith to George Washington, Enclosure V: Frederick County Poll Sheet, 24 July 1758, PGW:DE, Col. Series, vol. 5, p.335.

<sup>52</sup> George Washington to Lawrence Washington, 5 May 1749, PGW:DE, Col. Series, vol. 1, p.7n.



relationship at this point. However, in the spring 1749 Washington was invited to join a surveying party for Lord Fairfax, certainly Lord Fairfax approved or at the very least did not disapprove of Washington's inclusion on the trip.<sup>53</sup> From this one can infer that by this time Lord Fairfax had formed a favorable impression of the young Washington.

The next telling piece of evidence that exists is a letter Washington wrote to Lord Fairfax in May of 1755. In the letter Washington asks to borrow money because he had the "misfortune to loose 3 of [his] horses"<sup>54</sup> since he left home and did "not bring money enough to buy others"<sup>55</sup> and cover all of his other expenses. A few things can be taken from this request. Since it is certainly embarrassing to need to borrow money because of a lack of it; Washington must have felt at least comfortable asking Lord Fairfax for money without being too embarrassed and fairly confident that his request would be granted. Washington's request was granted and he would later repay Lord Fairfax in full without interest.<sup>56</sup> This also demonstrates that Lord Fairfax believed that Washington would repay him, showing a trust and confidence in Washington.

After Washington resigned from the Virginia colonial regiment his correspondence with Lord Fairfax greatly diminished, carrying on a correspondence sparingly at best for the remainder of Lord Fairfax's life. The final bit of evidence that illustrates Washington and Lord Fairfax's relationship from this time on are a number

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<sup>53</sup> Surveying for Lord Fairfax, PGW:DE, Diaries, vol. 1, p.2.

<sup>54</sup> George Washington to Lord Fairfax, 6 May 1755, PGW:DE, Col. Series, vol. 1, p.265.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 266n.



of journal entries Washington made over the years. Washington's journals were generally characterized by short entries, typically, of only a few sentences summarizing what he did or who he saw that day. In February of 1760 Washington notes he "Waited on Lord Fairfax at Belvoir & engd. him to dine at Mt. Vernon on Monday next"<sup>57</sup>. The following Monday Washington recorded "Lord Fairfax, Colo. F[airfa]x & his Lady, Colo. Martin, Mr. B. F[airfa]x, Colo. Carlyle, & Mr. Green & Mrs. Green dind here"<sup>58</sup>. This shows that even though Washington and Lord Fairfax may not have been fast friends they were clearly cordial and enjoyed each other's company. It is also interesting to note that Washington invited Lord Fairfax to Mount Vernon. By this time Washington had risen on the social ladder, in large part because of the Fairfaxes, and while he and Lord Fairfax were certainly not equals, Washington could invite Lord Fairfax to Mount Vernon knowing it was seen as a respectable plantation. In the years to come Washington sporadically made entries referring to Lord Fairfax. Noting things such as "dind at Belvoir with Lord Fairfax"<sup>59</sup> or "went fox huntg with Lord Fairfax"<sup>60</sup>. Again it is clear that their relationship was not intimate but certainly genial and they enjoyed each other's company and looked forward to it.

## Colonel William Fairfax

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<sup>57</sup> Washington the Planter and Farmer, 22 February 1760, PGW:DE, Diaries, vol. 1, p.244.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 246.

<sup>59</sup> Where & How My Time Is Spent, September 1768, PGW:DE, Diaries, vol. 2, p.94.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.



*GW*



## **George William Fairfax**

## **Sally Fairfax**

## **Bryan Fairfax**

## **Conclusion**

Virginia as colonel of its colonial regiment

But Washington decided to try his luck again in 1758, this time with the Fairfaxes at his side.

Sometime in late 1757 or early 1758 Washington became disenchanted with his pursuit of a military career. It became increasingly clear to him that there was an “anticolonial bias”<sup>61</sup> and that he would never get the commission into the British Royal Army that he sought, resigning in December of that year.

Sometime in 1758 it became clear to Washington that there was an

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<sup>61</sup> Longmore, 54.



and that he would never get the commission into the British Royal Army that he sought, eventually resigning in December of that year. But earlier that year in the spring

Washington instructed Jack to test the waters

Washington was only twenty-three years old.

I should be glad to \take/ a pole, if I thought my chance tolerably good

As early as 1755 Washington was considering running for public office.

Sometime in 1758 it became clear to Washington that there was an “anticolonial bias”<sup>62</sup>

and that he would never get the commission into the British Royal Army that he sought, eventually resigning in December of that year. But earlier that year in the spring

In the spring of 1758 – before he officially resigned his position in Virginia’s provincial regiment – he

Realizing that he would never get the

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<sup>62</sup> Longmore, 54.



With Washington's growing disenchantment with his prospects for a military career

The other area in which the Fairfaxes jumpstarted Washington's career was in politics.