Creating the Sacred: George Washington’s Body and the Relics of Mount Vernon

Matthew Costello
Marquette University

My remains, with those of my deceased relations, and such others of my Family as may choose to be entombed there, may be deposited [in the Family Vault at Mount Vernon]. And it is my express desire that my corpse may be interred in a private manner, without parade or funeral oration.

-From the Will of George Washington

Washington’s family honored his wishes to bury him at Mount Vernon, but ignored his requests for privacy. Four days after his death, a group of soldiers, clergymen, Masonic brothers, musicians, and citizens gathered at Mount Vernon for his funeral. The procession to the tomb even included Washington’s rider-less horse, equipped with the general’s saddle and pistols. After the service the guards volleyed rounds over the tomb as Washington’s family closed the vault. This ceremony was not very private, but it seemed so compared to the public spectacles of mourning for Washington. Beginning in December 1799 and lasting through February 1800, hundreds of mock funerals, eulogies, and sermons were held in his honor across the country. While the death of Washington stunned the nation, it did not prevent his memory from shaping American culture and politics during the early Republic. As one columnist proclaimed, “The name of Washington—the American President and General—will triumph over death—the unclouded brightness of his glory will illuminate future ages.” Washington’s character was very much a product of his own design, but the transformation from man to symbol rested heavily on the efforts of his nationalist contemporaries. The founding generation praised Washington’s qualities and accomplishments, declared him the ideal citizen, and encouraged Americans to be more like him.

Historians have recognized the importance of memory to early American political culture and the process of nation-building. David Waldstreicher and Len Travers argued that civic celebrations

1 Matthew Costello is a Ph.D. candidate at Marquette University in Milwaukee, WI. He received his bachelor’s degree from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and his master’s from Marquette University. He has published research in Essays in History, the journal of the history department at the University of Virginia, and several short entries for the Digital Encyclopedia of George Washington at Mount Vernon. This research presented in this article is a part of his dissertation, which explores the meanings of George Washington’s body and relics, and how Americans interacted with tangible pieces of an American symbol during the nineteenth century. Matthew can be contacted at matthew.costello@marquette.edu.


permitted both citizens and non-voting Americans to shape the invented traditions of American nationalism. Supported by the proliferation of American newspapers, these occasions eased social and economic tensions by creating opportunities for cultural agency for those without political autonomy. While these days fostered the development of a nationalist identity, they were also primarily planned by government representatives, elites, organizations, and influential white men. These citizens defined the nation in their own political terms, and they vigorously disseminated this vision through the memory of Washington and the Revolution. Fraternal groups such as the Society of the Cincinnati, the Freemasons, and Revolutionary War veterans organized patriotic events that displayed their loyalty to the country, bolstered their statuses and political agendas, and reminded Americans that Washington once belonged to their respective organizations. Politicians also frequently used Washington’s memory in their rhetoric to unify factions, parties, and the populace. The adoption of George Washington as a symbol for America and the Revolution made his memory extremely powerful, both as an instrument of political cohesion and as a means to legitimize the nation to Americans.4

These cultural events constructed and reinforced the memory of Washington as the symbol of the ideal citizen, but national days of celebration shed little light on how Americans, citizens or not, remembered Washington personally. Historians have extensively explored Washington’s apotheosis and the culture built around it, but scholars have yet to examine two sources that connect the personal memory of individuals to the development of American nationalism: his tomb and physical remains.5 As Washington’s public memory became more contentious among local and regional identities, federal and state assemblies sought his body to validate their own conceptualizations of the American nation and Revolution. While these governments continuously fought over the possession of Washington’s body, individuals visited his grave and celebrated him in their own ways. Visitors were certainly influenced by the public memory of Washington, but the lack of a statue, monument, or gravestone allowed travelers the freedom to reconstruct Washington’s memory as they wished. Civic commemorations have illuminated the efforts of individuals and organizations to shape public memory, but pilgrimages were the result of a pilgrim’s conscious decision to commit a personal act of remembrance to the dead. These experiences can provide a deeper understanding of how individuals interacted with the dead and remembered their national heroes on a much more personal level.6

In his study of death in America, cultural historian Gary Laderman acknowledged the perceived sacredness of Washington’s remains, but reasoned that since Protestant culture rejected the seemingly Catholic veneration of the body, Americans primarily remembered the symbol of Washington instead. Yet while Americans revered the ideal citizen Washington, thousands of “pilgrims” traveled to Mount Vernon to experience Washington’s tomb during the early Republic. These visitors identified these trips as “pilgrimages” and journeyed to Mount Vernon to pay respect to the remains of George Washington. Laderman’s assertion that Protestantism dominated early nineteenth-century American society and culture is a valid one, but this religious ethos was also a fundamental component of American nationalism. In her study of American Protestant pilgrimages, cultural anthropologist Gwen Neville theorized that since Protestant pilgrims were without saints or martyrs to worship, their community of believers ritualized the experience by creating the sacredness of a site over time. The growing community of pilgrims and their continuous presence transformed Mount Vernon into the nation’s shrine and Washington’s body into the civic relic of the American Revolution.7

As local, regional, and nationalist interpretations of Washington’s memory grew, so too did federal and state efforts to acquire his body for political and cultural legitimacy. Outside the realm of politics, the constant stream of pilgrims clashed with Washington’s family at Mount Vernon over the personal memory of the man. Pilgrims often took objects from the estate with them as souvenirs. Tree branches, flowers, and sticks were identified as “relics” and considered sacred, but to Washington’s family, these guests were mostly strangers who wreaked havoc in the home and on the grounds. His nephew Bushrod Washington eventually took legal measures to reassert his authority over the property, and by restricting the pilgrimage, he attempted to limit the experience of personal memory to “respectable” individuals only. The stories of these pilgrims and the relics they took, and the efforts of state and federal governments to obtain the civic relic, highlight the significance of Washington’s body to public and personal expressions of early American political culture. During the visit of the Marquis de Lafayette in 1824, nationalists hoped that his pilgrimage might fuse the public and personal memory into a nationalistic tradition, and redefine Washington’s body purely as a national, American relic.8

This study employs a number of terms that deserve further clarification. Public memory is the collaborative construct that affects both the collective and the individual processes of identity formation. In the American example, different groups promoted national heroes, civic days of celebration, texts and symbols, and invented traditions to foster national identity and a greater sense of nationhood. The public memory of the “imagined community” was built around the political ideals of the Revolution, the cultural ethos of the founding generation, and the “ideal citizen” personified in Washington. This characterization, the “ideal citizen,” portrayed Washington as the

virtuous American patriot with undying devotion to country, its institutions, and its people, and these public events were designed to reinforce these nationalistic myths. In contrast, personal memory is the pilgrim’s self-constructed creation of remembrance. While personal memory was influenced by manifestations of American public memory, there was conceptual space for pilgrims at Mount Vernon to define Washington according to their own identities, loyalties, and traditions. These visitors ranged from a wide variety of social, economic, and political backgrounds, and the restriction of the pilgrimage by Bushrod Washington was based on his idea of “respectability,” a label ripe with class bias and high expectations of proper etiquette.9

The Construction of the American Nation and the Public Memory of Washington

After George Washington’s death, Congress unanimously approved a recommendation seeking Martha Washington’s permission to move his body to the new national capital, Washington, D.C. “There can be no doubt” wrote President John Adams, “that the nation at large, as well as all the branches of the government, will be highly gratified by any arrangement which may diminish the sacrifice she makes of her individual feelings.” Martha responded favorably to the resolution, citing her deceased husband as “the great example which I have so long had before me, never to oppose my private wishes to the public will.” While this agreement disregarded Washington’s will, there remained the fact that he himself had signed off on the design and construction of the Capitol during his Presidency. Martha’s blessing justified the federal proposal. Officials planned to build a “marble monument...designed as to commemorate the great events of his military and political life,” place it inside the center of the Capitol, and inter him underneath it during the celebration of its completion. The proposal, however, was not supported by everyone. In his discussion of the establishment of the capital city, one South Carolinian noted, “If anything would hasten the downfall of this tottering fabric of government, it certainly would be the ridiculous removal [of Washington’s body] in question.” This opinion, printed nearly a year after the resolution and correspondence, came much too late. Five days after Washington’s funeral, Congress secured assurances that the federal government would possess the remains of the nation’s preeminent citizen.10

In the meantime, Washington’s body remained in the family vault, and the grounds quickly became a haven for Federalist supporters who politicized the journey and criticized those who abstained from the pilgrimage. President John Adams and his wife Abigail traveled to the estate to visit the widow and pay their respects during the summer of 1800. After the momentous election of Democratic-Republican President Thomas Jefferson, Federalist newspapers in New York and

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10 Alexandria Times, 25 December 1799; The Providence Journal, 1 January 1800; Universal Gazette, 16 January 1800; City Gazette, 19 December 1800; this idea that Washington could be “rich and populous” as a city because of pilgrims resonates with medieval works on relics and pilgrimages. Washington was intimately involved in overseeing the design and construction process of the national capital and the Capitol Building. See C.M. Harris, “Washington’s Gamble: L’Enfant’s Dream: Politics, Design, and the Founding of the National Capital,” The William and Mary Quarterly, Third Series, Vol. 56, No. 3 (July, 1999), 553-4.
Philadelphia resurrected stories of Jefferson’s disloyalty to Washington, and how the new president dared to carry these sentiments with him to Mount Vernon. One account labeled that “he folded his arms, and assented the attitude of silent and expressive admiration. This was regarded by Mrs. Washington and friends, ‘as the unkindest cut of all.’” Another contributor proclaimed, “He who slandered Washington while living…has dared to violate the decency of mourning, trespass on the sanctity of sorrow.” These Federalist attacks on Jefferson changed little during his tenure as president. When he was leaving office in 1809, one columnist slandered, “That deceitful demagogue…hypocritically wept over his tomb. Yes! The man who has thus insulted the ashes and the memory of Washington.” Even as Jefferson and fellow Democratic-Republicans paid their last respects, political opponents characterized their pilgrimages as sacrilegious.11

Democratic-Republicans envisioned the American nation, Washington, and the Revolution quite differently from Federalists. They promoted the Declaration of Independence and its rhetoric of democracy and equality. They firmly rejected European forms of decadence and elitism, and accused Federalists of Anglo-aristocratic hero worship. While they acknowledged Washington’s contributions to America as a military commander, they dismissed his political accomplishments in an attempt to sever his memory from the Federalist Party’s control. Federalists responded by accusing Democratic-Republicans of obstructing efforts to memorialize Washington with statues, monuments, and mausoleums. One Federalist suspected the party of trying to “blot out the name of Washington, by refusing with disdain to commemorate his virtue.” Another writer blamed all Americans, asking “How then, fellow countrymen, have ye permitted two whole years to pass…the traveler still to ask in vain, Where is the National Monument, sacred to public and private virtue, to the manes of the illustrious Washington?” While Washington enthusiasts chastised Jefferson and his party, even former Federalist President John Adams struggled with the idea of using national means to memorialize his body in grandiose ways. One proposition to build a massive pyramid over his tomb appeared not only excessive but also monarchical. “I am unwilling, from principle, to waste even my might, entirely on a mausoleum, a huge pyramid of useless stone,” wrote Adams, “which might be well enough to guard the body of an Egyptian tyrant—but Washington will never, never want friends to protect his ashes, while virtue, patriotism, or pure republican principles are dear to the American people.” While many cultural contemporaries worked endlessly to elevate Washington to divine status, Congressmen failed to appropriate federal funds or space to match their nationalist efforts.12

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11 Philadelphia Gazette, 13 June 1800; Gazette of the United States, 17 August 1802; New York Evening Post, 10 August 1802; New York Gazette, 4 March 1809; Sarah Purcell, Sealed with Blood: War, Sacrifice, and Memory in Revolutionary America (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania, 2002), 137-42. Purcell chronicles the Federalist-Republican shift in national holiday celebrations and how these factions constructed American public memory to foster a sense of national identity. Similar uses of death in partisan politics can be seen amongst the Revolutionary dead. For more on the uses of the dead in local and regional politics, see Cray, Robert E. “Commemorating the Prison Ship Dead: Revolutionary Memory and the Politics of Sepulture in the Early Republic, 1776-1808.” The William and Mary Quarterly. Vol. 56, No. 3: July, 1999. While outside the scope of this essay, there are parallels with how visitors interact with Jefferson’s grave at Monticello after his death in 1826. See Merrill Peterson, The Jefferson Image in the American Mind (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1960), 237. Visitors frequently commented on the disfigurement of Jefferson’s tombstone, noting that pilgrims were chipping pieces off as souvenirs.

12 Boston Commercial Gazette, 12 Feb 1801; The Connecticut Centinel, 22 June 1802; The Independent Chronicle, 28 June 1802. One of the first ideas for a mausoleum for Washington’s body was a massive pyramid to be erected over his tomb at Mount Vernon. Some wanted it big enough so it could be seen from Washington, D.C. This idea fell on deaf ears because of cost and the opulence of such a structure. See Kirk
During the War of 1812, Democratic-Republican war hawks believed that the pilgrimage could inspire patriotism and encourage citizens to enlist in the fight against the British. “Youth of America, have you not ambition enough to imitate Washington...Go to the tomb of Mount Vernon. There call on the name of Washington, and seek if perchance his spirit may invigorate you.” This nationalist fervor quickly disappeared as the war dragged on, but this fading optimism did not mean that Washington’s body was no longer significant. The burning of the national capital by the British only furthered the divide between war hawks and doves, and the mere presence of the enemy facilitated disturbing rumors about their intentions. One writer suspected the British of trying to steal Washington’s body and transport it to Westminster Abbey. This gossip also imagined that the British might construct “a magnificent monument that would announce to future ages that ‘There lay the remains of the Founder of Independence of a nation that had neither valor to defend his ashes, nor gratitude to afford them a Tomb.’” These stories illuminate the perceived power of Washington’s body, and how politicians linked American morale and the protection of his remains with the defense of the nation.13

After the war, the rebuilding of the Capitol and the nation resurrected the 1799 resolution to exhume Washington’s body. The Virginian House of Delegates, however, petitioned Bushrod Washington for his uncle’s remains, hoping to inter it beneath a monument in Richmond. The Richmond Enquirer announced these plans and quipped, “If Congress have failed in doing their duty, it is time for Virginia to do her’s.” A writer for the Daily National Intelligencer in Washington, D.C. argued that Congress had received earlier consent from Martha Washington, and that “It should be ascertained...that Congress decline the charge [of reburial], before it be taken from their hands.” Benjamin Huger, a South Carolinian representative, brought up the Virginian resolutions during a Congressional session. Referencing Martha’s letter, he believed that “the remains of Washington were pledged to the nation.” Huger maintained that he meant Virginia no disrespect, and even considered that state his “second alma-mater.” His home state of South Carolina was “not less dear to him, nor could he forget her claims on the present occasion. She formed a portion of the great American nation. As such, she had her full interest in the pledge possessed, to the mortal remains of our father and chief.” Huger had been a member of Congress in 1799 and had voted in favor of claiming Washington for the nation. American nationalists, both North and South, began to contemplate the possibility of losing Washington to his native state of Virginia.14

While these resolutions created political discussion of the possession of Washington’s remains, the tomb and its contents still belonged to Mount Vernon’s proprietor, Bushrod Washington. One columnist hoped that Bushrod would decline both requests and “never suffer the sanctity of the tomb of Mount Vernon to be violated, either by the state, or the United States.”

Savage, Monument Wars: Washington D.C., the National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), 38-44; The National Intelligencer, 29 December 1799; sites of memory, or lieux de mémoire, is the work of Pierra Nora, who reasoned that sites of memory were constructed and maintained with symbolic, material, and functional efforts. See Pierra Nora, “Between History and Memory: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” Representations, No. 26 (Spring, 1989), 14-21. See also Catherine Albanese, Sons of the Fathers: The Civil Religion of the American Revolution (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1976), 169.

13 The Pittsfield Sun, 28 July 1814; Evening Post, 15 March 1815; Paul Wilstach, Washington’s Home and the Nation’s Shrine (Indianapolis, IN: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1916), 243-4.
14 Daily National Intelligencer, 16 February 1816; Daily National Intelligencer, 21 February 1816; The Albany Argus, 23 February 1816; Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser, 23 February 1816; Richmond Enquirer, 24 February 1816.
Bushrod was touched by the Virginian resolution to honor “her beloved son,” but reasoned that “obligations more sacred than anything...command me to retain the mortal remains of my venerated uncle.” These obligations were listed in Washington’s will, which also called for the construction of a new family vault and that his “remains, with those of his deceased relations...be entombed there.” Bushrod’s refusal silenced both federal and state claims, but it also opened him up to criticism from pilgrims. Their observations of the deteriorating tomb directly disputed his proclaimed commitment to his uncle’s will.¹⁵

Bushrod’s decision to decline Virginia’s application provided some hope to American nationalists, but it also encouraged other solutions to the possession problem. One columnist asked, “If the memory of Washington is so dear, what should prevent congress from purchasing Mount Vernon, so that it may remain to future ages, the property of the nation...He should be in death what he always was in public life, the property of the nation.” The author concluded, “Let us remember that he was not a Virginian, a Carolinian, a Georgian; but that he was indeed and in truth, an American.” The editor of the Baltimore Federal Republican suggested a similar plan, calling upon Congress to purchase Mount Vernon and erect a monument over the tomb of Washington. Advocating that Washington’s ashes “should be the property of the nation,” he argued that “as he devoted his life from his cradle to his grave to the service of his country, that country ought to guard his consecrated remains.” Nationalists found a new way to avoid challenging the authority of the state of Virginia or the Washington family. By offering to purchase the estate and tomb, the federal government could “nationalize” the property and Washington’s body, and cement their own construction of Washington’s legacy as the ideal American citizen. Again, political rivalries and factions failed to reach a consensus that would make this transformation possible.¹⁶

Civic commemorations of the early Republic celebrated the constructed public memory of Washington and the Revolution. These days were orchestrated by nationalist individuals and organizations, but as American politics became more divisive, so did political parties’ attempts to contest the meanings of these days. With the public memory in flux, both the federal and Virginia state governments attempted to acquire the body of George Washington. In order to fuse the public symbol with the body, these legislative assemblies recognized the importance of the civic relic to their respective national and state identities, and aspired to obtain it for its discursive political and cultural power. These efforts fell short, and without a federal or state designated site of remembrance, Americans and foreigners invented their own site of memory through pilgrimages to his tomb. While some were certainly influenced by the public memory of Washington, the journey to a private site without monuments or markers allowed pilgrims to commemorate different elements of his character that resonated within their own local, regional, or national identities.


Pilgrimages to Mount Vernon: The Personal Memory of Washington

In his groundbreaking work on relic thefts, medieval historian Patrick Geary reasoned that relics, removed from the realms of religion and culture, possessed no real value. A relic lacked any type of fixed code or text, and unless some type of marker, document, or tradition transmitted a specific type of significance to pilgrims, its meaning would continue to change over time. This was certainly the case with Washington’s tomb. Without any type of physical marker, monument, or tombstone, pilgrims remembered Washington as they pleased. They reconstructed Washington to shifting local, regional, and national identities, and they envisioned a Washington that resembled their own interests and ideas. Geary also argued that the veneration of the relic was a “reflection of the values assigned by the society that honored it.” As different conceptualizations of the Revolution and the nation began to develop, so did efforts to attribute differing values and meaning to Washington’s body the civic relic.¹⁷

Pilgrims from across the country converged on Mount Vernon to feel the aura of America’s first national hero. Visitors frequently called upon the owner of the estate, Bushrod Washington, for both tours and anecdotes about the general’s service, achievements, and daily activities. If the judge was available, he entertained “respectable” pilgrims with stories, offering his own interpretation of his uncle’s greatness. After hearing these tales, pilgrims were directed to the family vault to pay their respects through prayer, reflection, and moments of silence. Many pilgrims, overwhelmed with emotion, wept in the presence of his remains. Others, however, became disenchanted at the sight of Washington’s tomb. Composed of basic red brick and built into an earthen mound, the vault had an old wooden door, and was described by an aged Revolutionary veteran as “a hole, in which, by the God of Heaven, I would not even bury my faithful dog.” The weathered tomb appeared completely inadequate for the country’s greatest citizen, and these stories amplified demands for a national tomb or monument. The condition of the vault, however, did not stop pilgrims from visiting the site.¹⁸

Thomas Pim Cope, a Federalist merchant and Pennsylvania Assembly member from Philadelphia, made the pilgrimage in the spring of 1802. In his travel diary, Cope detailed the furniture, paintings, and relics of the mansion, including the Key to the Bastille, a gift from the Marquis de Lafayette. He walked down to the family tomb and described his companions’ reactions. “One [man] placed himself on the green turf and mused, with his head resting on his arms. Another stood alone among the thicket with folded arms and downcast eyes. A third reclined against a tree and wept...there was nothing artificial in this, nothing premeditated.” Cope believed that it was the “effect of the nature and the offspring of the moment” that stirred such patriotic, emotional responses, and that the trip brought “melancholy satisfaction” knowing that “these very grounds


¹⁸ Poulson’s *American Daily Advertiser*, 7 January 1811. This anecdote of the soldier was also reprinted on its own and included in George Washington Parke Custis’s speech to the Arlington Sheep Shearing Society on April 30, 1812. This was reprinted in the following newspapers; *Boston Commercial Gazette*, 25 May 1812; *Rhode Island American*, 29 May 1812; *Independent American*, 22 September 1812; for more on the number of visitors, see Hugh Howard, *Houses of the Founding Fathers* (New York, NY: Artisan Press, 2007), 270.
[Washington] trod ten thousand times before me, and that it still contained the cold remains of that matchless man.”

While Cope did not take anything from the vault, he did notice an unfinished poem on the bricks left by another pilgrim. Cope observed that there were “a few bricks crumbling into ruin...on which these lines are written with a pencil.” A past pilgrim had inscribed four stanzas on the bricks:

Columbia groans beneath the dreadful wound,
And Europe echoes to the mournful sound.
The sons of freedom shudder at the stroke,
And universal virtue feels the shock.

These lines were from a *Philadelphia Gazette* obituary of Washington’s death in December, 1799, and their presence on the tomb demonstrates a past pilgrim’s efforts to mark the tomb in a more personal manner with nationalistic overtones. Cope took it upon himself to add the following lines from Thomas Gray’s *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*:

The pomp of heraldry, the boast of power.
And all that beauty, all that wealth e’er gave,
Await alike the inevitable hour;
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

Published in 1751, this English poem described the beauty of a rural cemetery, the peacefulness of repose, and the narrator’s preoccupation with the inevitability of death. More specifically, these lines emphasized that regardless of status, power, or wealth, all of us will die. While it is difficult to know exactly what Cope’s intentions were with his contribution to the tomb, at the very least it served as a reminder to pilgrims that they will meet their maker just as Washington did, assuming they understood its meaning. Cope was a highly educated man, and his message would have surely spoken to wealthier, educated pilgrims. This was not the only instance of pilgrims embedding their own experience onto the tomb. A later pilgrim noted that others had carved their names on the oaken door of the vault, and “one of the stones in the top of the vault has been misplaced.” These stories suggest that the tomb had different levels of sacredness for different people, and for some it was important to leave some distinguishing mark of status and for others it was acceptable to alter the tomb in remembrance of the journey. Either way, these pilgrims were imposing their physical presence and personal memories onto the tomb of Washington.

Veterans of the American Revolution, many of whom also fought in the War of 1812, connected the most to Washington through the pilgrimage. These pilgrims shared fraternal memories of war and independence with the man who led them against the British, and found the tomb completely unacceptable for their commander. One man, writing under the pseudonym

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“Spirit of Seventy Six,” expected “to behold his country’s gratitude portrayed in towering brass or marble,” and instead he asked the question, “If it is here, that my countrymen have buried my General, where, in the name of God, would they bury me?” A few years later, Major John Reid visited Mount Vernon, “a spot rendered sacred to every American bosom,” and he was appalled to find the tomb in such disrepair. He described the tomb as “ill constructed and overgrown with shrubbery,” and that Washington’s sacred remains “have been permitted to molder in the dark narrow cell where they were at first deposited.” Reid believed that Washington’s family was offended by government inaction, and that “When Washington is forgotten, who of thy Sons can ever hope to be remembered!” “Spirit” and Reid’s sentiments reflected both the country’s poor treatment of veterans and, that the country, citizens, and representatives had failed to perform their civic duty to memorialize their greatest citizen-soldier.

Foreigners also journeyed to the tomb, and their experiences amplified calls for proper commemoration. An English traveler portrayed the site of repose as “A low, obscure, ice house looking brick vault,” which “testifies how well a Nation’s gratitude repays the soldier’s toils, the statesman’s labors, the patriot’s virtue, and the father’s cares.” It was “not the house, the garden, the oak, the mound” that made him breathless but the presence of the “Chief, the Warrior, the Patriot…these are the feelings of an Englishman—what should I feel were I an American?” One French visitor criticized Americans and their unwillingness to embrace the bodies of their national heroes. “Americans pay less attention generally to the depositories of their dead than almost any other nation: they seem to be no sooner laid in the earth than they are forgotten.” The Frenchman continued, “Mount Vernon has become, like Jerusalem and Mecca, the resort of the travelers of all nations who come within its vicinity; veneration and respect…lead all who have heard his name, to make a pilgrimage to the shrine of patriotism and public worth, and to stroll over the ground which has been hallowed by the ashes of heroism and virtue.” He also mentioned that pilgrims were taking objects from the site, noting that “A twig, a flower, or even a stone becomes interesting when taken from the spot where Washington lived and died and no man quits it without bearing with him some memento to exhibit to his family and his friends.” The removal of relics from around the tomb allowed pilgrims to imbue their own sacredness, share their personal memory with others, and possess a tangible link to the great Washington.

The taking of relics was quickly incorporated in the pilgrim’s ritual for both Americans and foreigners. One American gentleman took “from the surface of the tomb a flower” and reminisced that “it was emblematical of the man.” He also noted that he “never will forget the sensation it occasioned.” Nathaniel Carter, editor of the New York Statesman, took “a branch or two of cedar, growing on the summit of the mound, which with a sprig of mountain laurel, a few flowers presented by the gardener...[these] will be carried home with me as relics.” On one excursion to Mount Vernon, the Russian Minister, mimicking the American pilgrims, took a branch from a tree growing over the tomb, and planned to give it to Russian Emperor Alexander I. A pilgrim in 1824

22 Boston Commercial Gazette, 25 May 1812; Rhode Island American, 29 May 1812; Independent American, 22 September 1812; City of Washington Gazette, 26 January 1818; New-York Daily Advertiser, 27 February 1818; the issue of properly rewarding and recognizing the contributions of American Revolutionary veterans hounded the founding generation and politicians of the nineteenth century. These men also became political ammunition between Federalists and Republicans. See Robert E. Cray, “Commemorating the Prison Ship Dead: Revolutionary Memory and the Politics of Sepulture in the Early Republic, 1776-1808,” The William and Mary Quarterly, Third Series, Vol. 56, No. 3 (July, 1999), 565-590.

23 American Beacon and Norfolk Daily Advertiser, 22 September 1818; The National Register, 30 May 1818; American Beacon, 5 June 1818.
observed that “the cedars are nearly stripped of their green boughs by the great number of visitors, who pluck them and carry them away as mementos.” This ritual allowed pilgrims to share their individual experiences with others by infusing the relics with their personal memories of Washington. The growing community of believers transformed these otherwise ordinary pieces of nature into tangible pieces of Washington’s memory.\(^{24}\)

The dilapidated appearance of the tomb disturbed many pilgrims, and they called upon the federal government for some type of monument construction. Federal representatives advocated for a “monument over the remains of the late General Washington, where they now lie.” This solution, proposed by Senator Charles Goldsborough of Maryland, recognized the territorial sovereignty of Virginia, respected the wishes of the Washington family, and was much more cost effective that purchasing the entire estate. A monument over his entombed body would have given the federal government control over Washington’s memory, and nationalists would have certainly highlighted his nationalist characteristics and contributions to the American nation. While the federal government would not have had direct possession of the civic relic, nationalists in Congress would ultimately have had the power to reconstruct his tomb specifically as a site of “American” memory and reinforce his legacy as the ideal American citizen.\(^{25}\)

While many Americans emphasized the shared emotional and patriotic experience of the pilgrimage, the site also attracted unwelcomed guests. These individuals, eager to commemorate Washington in their own way, became a major source of agitation for Bushrod Washington. The constant influx of strangers to his estate had forced Bushrod and his family to abandon the lower rooms of Mount Vernon and live only in the upper chambers. “What was still more insufferable,” recalled Bushrod, “parties of pleasure accompanied by musicians, were in the habit of making Mount Vernon a resort for amusements and scenes of dissipation.” During his visit in 1822, Charles Ruggles noted, “The fame of General Washington is the property of the nation, and individuals appear to consider the mansion and lands which formerly belonged to him, so far public property as to entitle them to run through them and round them without regard.” One opinion piece acknowledged that “Mount Vernon is a favorite place for American pilgrims to resort...what would be our surprise, while full of such hallowed feelings...find it to be the repository of thieves and pickpockets.” Bushrod eventually gave public notice that he forbade “eating, drinking and dancing parties” on the grounds and even threatened steam boat captains with lawsuits for their poor regulation of passengers. These words and actions suggest that while elites initially dominated the pilgrimages, the ritual eventually reached beyond class boundaries, drawing non-elite pilgrims who choose to remember Washington within the bounds of their own traditions.\(^{26}\)

\(^{24}\) Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser, 14 January 1820; Agricultural Intelligencer, 24 March 1820; Providence Gazette, 10 August 1820; Essex Register, 18 January 1823; North Star, 20 February 1823; City of Washington Gazette, 28 July 1819; The National Recorder, 7 August 1819; Salem Gazette, 21 September 1824.

\(^{25}\) American Beacon, 28 November 1818; Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser, 4 December 1818; Alexandria Gazette, 15 February 1819; Boston Commercial Gazette, 18 February 1818.

\(^{26}\) Essex Register, 18 January 1283; Charles H. Ruggles to Sarah C. Ruggles, 28 April 1822, Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association Collection, excerpt featured in Experiencing Mount Vernon: Eyewitness Accounts, 1784-1865, ed. Jean B. Lee (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 116-7; Charles also took a “branch of cedar” and sent it with the letter to Sarah; Providence Gazette, 5 March 1823; Kathleen Conzen, “Ethnicity as Festive Culture: Nineteenth-Century German America on Parade,” The Invention of Ethnicity, ed. Werner Sollors (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1989), 52-3. While Conzen acknowledges that class played into American culture, she argues that the middle class and working class rarely mixed before the 1830s. In terms of my research, it appears that there was definitely a mixture of all classes taking the pilgrimage.
While Bushrod expressed a desire to preserve the pilgrimage for more respectable pilgrims, Americans had historically treated the private grounds more like public property. If Washington’s family was not home, or simply did not want to engage with visitors, pilgrims sought out slaves and immigrant workers for information and directions. Reflecting on the walk to the tomb, one English traveler noted, “The oak, that bank, the winding path and verdant mound are common objects. Why then,” he reasoned, “do we feel a breathless emotion in listening to the description of them from the artless tongue of a slave?” British Lieutenant Francis Hall remembered his guide as an “old German gardener” who directed him earnestly towards Washington’s tomb. Another gardener, who had “long been in [Bushrod’s] service,” guided Nathaniel Carter through the grounds, even pointing out “the chamber in which Washington died.” Not all guides performed their obligations so dutifully. One gardener, an “Englishman,” understood the economic potential of Washington’s body and unsuccessfully attempted to steal it “for the purpose of carrying the body of the General to England as a show.” These references suggest that while the pilgrimage gave individuals more freedom to remember Washington as they wished, immigrant laborers and slaves understood the power of Washington’s body and actively shaped the experiences of pilgrims and their personal memories.  

Bushrod’s efforts to shape and restrict the pilgrimage continued in 1823. He permitted only a “respectable party of citizens” to celebrate the Fourth of July at Mount Vernon. The occasion featured elderly soldiers of the Revolution, a party of ladies, a full band from the Marine Corps, French Legation, clergymen, distinguished strangers, and American citizens. The day consisted of prayer, orations, and Charles Goldsborough’s reading of Washington’s Farewell Address, but the highlight of the evening was the trip to the vault. Attendees slowly walked in a mock funeral procession. After they arrived, they gathered around the tomb and stared down in silence. “The hearts of all were melted,” wrote one witness, “when, they saw a venerable survivor of [Jean-Bapiste Donatien de Vimeur, comte de] Rochambeau’s army mingling his tears with those of American patriotism.” This combination of the Fourth of July holiday, American and French veterans of the Revolution, and the reading of Washington’s sage advice all reflected the public memory of Washington. The pilgrimage, reframed by class and American nationalism, was an incredibly powerful instrument of unification, but as long as Washington’s body remained at Mount Vernon, the civic relic was remembered freely the rest of the year. The tomb lacked any national symbols or markers, and visitors, present even on the Sabbath, continued to remember Washington on their own terms. So long as the Washington family owned the property and tomb, federal and state governments could not possess the civic relic or shape the pilgrimage to their own conceptualizations of Washington. The visit of the Marquis de Lafayette, however, offered nationalists the opportunity to transform the pilgrimage into a purely American ritual.


28 National Intelligencer, 9 July 1823; Richmond Enquirer, 15 July 1823; Rochambeau was a French nobleman who also fought in the American Revolution and was promoted to the rank of General. He assisted Washington and the Marquis de Lafayette in their strategy to trap British General Charles Cornwallis at Yorktown, Virginia; Essex Register, 18 January 1283.
The Living Relic and the Civic Relic: Fusing the Personal with the Public

The relationship between George Washington and the Marquis de Lafayette was one of resounding respect and mutual affection. The two leaders were integral to British General Charles Cornwallis’ defeat at Yorktown in 1781. After the American Revolution, Lafayette returned to his native France, but visited Washington just two years later in 1783. Washington never had his own son, and in many ways he came to see Lafayette as his child. This paternal warmth convinced the Marquis to name his son Georges Washington de Lafayette, who as a child would also spend time at Mount Vernon. In his last received letter to Washington, Lafayette wrote, “Adieu, my dear general, the adoptive father of the whole family, with every sentiment of affection and respect I shall to the last moment of my life be your filial friend.” Washington replied, “I shall now only add what you knew well before, that with the most sincere friendship, and affectionate regard—I am always Yours.” This was the last letter between the American Revolution’s father and son, as Washington passed away less than a year later.

In the early Republic, there were few events that created as much widespread nationalist cohesion and interest as Washington’s death and the period of national mourning. The visit of the Marquis de Lafayette in 1824, however, rivaled it both in terms of participation and duration. Lafayette, billed as the “nation’s guest,” arrived in New York City on August 15, 1824. President James Monroe, who observed Lafayette’s interactions with the American people firsthand, noted that “[LaFayette] is respected and beloved by all for his devotion to republican principles.” His presence electrified the country, and thousands of spectators turned out to see the French general. Lafayette participated in parades, oversaw military demonstrations, and visited Revolutionary battle sites. Andrew Jackson assured the Marquis that “the gratitude of ten millions of freedmen...is echoed from every bosom, and from none with more pure fervor that from the Patriotic citizens of Tennessee.” Senator Henry Clay recognized Lafayette’s massive popularity among the people and even acknowledged “that a feeling is prevailing in some of the Atlantic Cities to make the Marquis LaFayette V. President.” While an outlandish idea in hindsight, Clay’s observation demonstrates the appeal of Lafayette as a national icon and, uncorrupted by American sectional politics, the purest living relic of the American Revolution.

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The pinnacle of Lafayette’s tour came on October 17, 1824, when the Marquis embarked from Washington, D.C. on his pilgrimage to Mount Vernon. Traveling with his son Georges Washington de Lafayette and his personal secretary Auguste Levasseur, the Marquis and his party arrived Sunday morning and were greeted by the Washington family on the shores of the Potomac. After conversing in the house for some time, the group proceeded to Washington’s tomb. Upon their arrival, George Washington Parke Custis turned to the Marquis and addressed him directly: “Last of the Generals of the Army of Independence! At this awful and impressive moment...The child of Mount Vernon presents you with this token, containing the hair of him, who, while living, you loved.” Custis handed this golden ring to Lafayette and continued, “The ring has ever been the emblem of the union of hearts...this will unite the affections of all the Americans, to the person and posterity of Lafayette now and hereafter.” Pressing the ring to his chest, the Marquis replied, “I can only thank you, my dear Custis, for your precious gift, and pay a silent homage to the tomb of the greatest and best of men, my paternal friend.” The men embraced for a few silent moments. After they released each other, Lafayette continued his pilgrimage down into the tomb.

With tears in the furrows of his cheeks, Lafayette pushed open the vault door, “descended the steps and kissed the leaden cells which contained the ashes of the Great Chief and his venerable consort.” Lafayette emerged from the tomb and took the hands of Levasseur and Georges, leading them down into the vault. He pointed out Washington’s coffin, and all three men “knelt reverentially near his coffin, which [they] respectfully saluted with [their] lips.” Overcome with grief, they “threw [them]selves into the arms of Lafayette, and mingled [their] tears with his.” After completing the ritual, Lafayette and his company returned to the house for refreshments. “Georges assured us” wrote Levasseur, “that everything in the house was as he saw it twenty-eight years ago. He found everything in place where Washington himself had left it,” including “the principal key of the Bastille.” After about an hour of admiring the objects and house, the three men silently headed back to the boat, each bearing a “branch of cypress, cut from over the tomb of Washington.” Levasseur noted, “We resembled a bereaved family, who had entombed a beloved father, recently dead.” Considering their relationship, Lafayette’s reaction was expected, but his acceptance and taking of the relics through the pilgrimage fostered the bond of an adopted son to the memory of his father.

These were not the only Washington relics given to the Marquis; during his visit to the Navy Yard a few days earlier, Commodore David Porter gave the nation’s guest a cane “which was cut...from a tree that grew at the tomb of Washington.” These two relics, the cane and the ring, were very much symbols of power. While the cane was considered a sign of status, in this instance it appears more to be a memento and a thoughtful gift to a 67 year-old war veteran. Nonetheless, the relic was graciously accepted by Lafayette and in a strange way allowed Washington to guide Lafayette during his tour of the United States. The ring, however, had deep political and cultural roots in the Old World as European nobility often wore rings to distinguish familial influence and


31 Paul Wilstach, Washington’s Home and the Nation’s Shrine (Indianapolis, IN: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1916), 244-5; Saturday Evening Post, 30 October 1824; Richmond Enquirer, 2 November 1824; Saratoga Sentinel, 1 November 1824; The American Monthly Magazine, Nov 1824, 2; The Gazetteer, 2 November 1824; Essex Register, 4 November 1824; Niles’ Weekley Register, 6 November 1824; this account is reprinted in many more newspapers as well.

wealth. While the ring lacked a coat of arms, it was inscribed with the phrase, “Lafayette. 1777 Pro
novis orbis libertate decertabat Juvenis. Invenit. 1824,” meaning “Lafayette. In 1777 this young
man was fighting for liberty on behalf of a new world. He discovered it. 1824.” Filled with the hair
of Washington, the ring represented a link between Washington and Lafayette, America and France,
and the dead and the living heroes of the American Revolution. One columnist hoped that “the Ring
will descend in the family of LaFayette, a token of the affection which subsisted between the Father
and Son of American Liberty.” Reprinted accounts of Lafayette’s experience concluded, “The pilgrim
who now repairs to the tomb of the Father of his Country will find its laurels moistened by the tears
of La Fayette.” His pilgrimage consecrated the tomb as a national site of remembrance by reuniting
the greatest heroes of the nation and the American Revolution.33

American nationalists quickly incorporated Lafayette’s pilgrimage into American nationalist
myth by weaving together the constructed public memory with the private experience. According to
one account, Lafayette was accompanied by an eagle, which followed him to Mount Vernon and
flew over the tomb of Washington. After the French general “fulfilled his pious devotions,” the bird,
“representing the gratitude of the nation and emblematically the spirit of Washington, took its final
departure from that spot which contains the relics of Lafayette’s dear companion. There is no
doubt,” the author concluded, “of the fact which we communicate above. We could give the
testimony of hundreds of the most respectable names of its correctness.” While the columnist’s
statement appeared so definitive, he even suggested that the word of “respectable” witnesses could
verify this nationalist myth. Secretary of War and future Vice-President John C. Calhoun
accompanied Lafayette to Mount Vernon on the steam boat, and he made no reference to the
majestic eagle that blessed Lafayette’s pilgrimage. This lack of confirmation suggests that either
Calhoun somehow missed the eagle or this was an invented story filled with national symbols and
elements of the public memory of Washington. This myth attempted to redefine the pilgrimage and
disseminate it as an American tradition.34

These types of efforts to symbolically connect Washington, Lafayette, and the American
nation were not enough for some nationalists. Colonel William Lewis asked the French General to
“Stay with us...and when it shall please the God of universal nature to call you to himself...we will
then with holy devotion bury your bones by the side of your adopted and immortal father.” One
columnist was relieved to learn that “Congress may perform some act of National munificence
towards this war-torn veteran and philanthropist, calculated to induce him to spend his remaining
days near the tomb of his revered friend, at Mount Vernon.” The popular reactions to Lafayette
during his tour convinced nationalists that the nation’s guest possessed the power to unite the
country and remind American citizens of their nationalistic, Revolutionary legacy. His presence
seemed to represent the living Washington, and in order to fully transform him from French noble to
American hero, the federal government needed to persuade the Marquis to stay in America. Here,
his burial next to Washington would redefine the space and their bodies as the Father and Son of
American independence.35

33 *Saturday Evening Post*, 30 October 1824; *Salem Gazette*, 3 November 1824; *Rhode Island American*, 22
October 1824; *The New Hampshire Sentinel*, 22 October 1824; *The Gazetter*, 2 November 1824; *Essex Register*,
4 November 1824.
(Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1976), 351-3.
35 *Vermont Gazette*, 26 October 1824; *Salem Gazette*, 3 November 1824; Jean Lee, “Historical Memory,
268-9. Jean Lee briefly discusses the Marquis’ visit and the idea to bury him at Mount Vernon in her article.
After attending the anniversary celebration of the surrender of Yorktown, Lafayette returned to Washington, D.C., and joined Congress for its December session. Two weeks later, the Senate floor opened for debate on a resolution of gratitude for the French General. Some Senators argued for monetary or stock payments; others advocated for land, “partly from a hope that it might induce the settlement of the beloved family in our country.” Senator Robert Hayne of South Carolina informed his fellow representatives that “By bringing Lafayette to the United States, we place him in a new and extraordinary situation in society. We have connected him with our history...Lafayette will be a connecting link between the old world and the new.” Congress eventually passed an amended resolution that gave Lafayette $200,000 and 24,000 acres of land for his contributions to American independence. Lafayette was embarrassed by the donation, and initially considered declining it, but eventually decided that “he could not refuse it without offending the American nation.” Despite these generous gifts, the Marquis de Lafayette returned to France in 1825, but these conversations illuminate the efforts of nationalist politicians to convince the Revolution’s greatest living relic to stay in America.36

Conclusion

The stories of American and foreign pilgrims and the relics they took, and the efforts of state and federal governments to obtain the civic relic, highlight the importance of Washington’s body to public and personal expressions of early American political culture. Death and commemoration were critically important for the construction of nationhood and the forging of a national identity after the Revolution. Washington’s passing evoked widespread mourning and grief, but it also allowed contemporaries the opportunity to facilitate national sentiment by seizing Washington and his image. The 1799 Congressional resolution intended to secure the future possession of Washington’s body in hopes that it might serve as a source of political legitimacy for the federal government, reaffirm Washington’s centrality to the American nation, and encourage Americans to emulate him as the ideal citizen.

After the national Capitol building was completed and it was decided that Washington would not be disinterred, more and more pilgrims journeyed to Mount Vernon to experience Washington’s tomb and revere him through personal acts of devotion. These pilgrimages illuminate how individuals interacted with Washington privately, and while some were certainly influenced by the public memory, others choose to remember him as they wished. The lack of any type of monument, tombstone, or statue permitted pilgrims to create the sacredness of this site of memory within their confines of their own identities. Their experiences were also shaped by immigrant laborers and slaves, who reminisced with pilgrims by sharing their own memories of Washington. Visitors took relics from the site as tangible reminders of their journey, but the meaning of these objects varied greatly. For many, these were items imbued with Washington’s greatness. For others, they served

as reminders of how Americans should aspire to be more like Washington the ideal citizen. Some identified these objects simply as souvenirs, indicating that the tomb had not only many different meanings but also levels of sacredness. The pilgrimage, and the taking of relics, allowed individuals more freedom to define and redefine Washington and his legacy in their own terms.

Travelers to Mount Vernon shared their experiences with the wider reading public and consistently reframed their journey with distinctly religious language. The words pilgrim, relic, and pilgrimage seem to suggest that these visits and objects had quasi-sacred meanings to visitors during the nineteenth century. While it cannot be known for sure, there is something to be said about the pursuit and possession of these objects, and their importance to memory practices and rituals. These small mementos---flowers, sticks, tree branches, stones, etc., were tangible objects linked to the memory of George Washington. They embodied the pilgrim’s remembered experiences at Mount Vernon, and served as a powerful reminder of the man whom they deliberately sought out for last respects. Some pilgrims even fantasized that Washington himself planted these trees, flowers, or moved the stones by hand; while there is no proof that he did (or did not), these recollections attempted to transform these souvenirs from pieces of nature to authentic artifacts of American history.

While this was happening on a personal level through the pilgrimage, public officials were engaging Washington’s body in a similar fashion, vying for the opportunity to claim his remains as their own. The elevation of Washington as a national symbol transformed his body into an artifact of the nation, spurring competition to obtain Washington in order to ultimately define him. As differing interpretations of American nationhood polarized the political arena, Washington’s body became a tangible link to the Revolution and the future of the nation. While other physical objects, such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were considered historically national, these were documents with text that could be interpreted differently. Washington’s memory had a similar malleability, in that it contained so many identities: American, general, slaveholder, President, Virginian, Southerner, and aristocrat. These all played into the universal appeal for Washington and why he was unanimously picked to serve as America’s first President. After his death, the greater question in regard to his memory became which identity was the right one? The possession of the body therefore became a public way to answer such a complex personal riddle.

As political animosity and sectional rivalries evolved, so did competing local, regional, and national interpretations of Washington, and this eventual collision of memories made his body all the more valuable. Both American and foreign pilgrims were appalled to find the family vault in such poor condition, and their criticisms of both Bushrod Washington and the government produced discourse over how to properly commemorate Washington. As more and more pilgrims voyaged to Mount Vernon, the estate was overrun by Americans, foreigners, and respectable citizens. The constant influx of visitors irritated Bushrod and harassed his family so much that they even tried to restrict the pilgrimage to respectable pilgrims only.

During the visit of the Marquis de Lafayette in 1824, nationalists hoped that his pilgrimage might fuse the public and personal memory into an American tradition, and redefine Washington’s body purely as a national, American relic. Lafayette made the pilgrimage to pay his respects, and the massive diffusion of press coverage ensured that Americans experienced it with him as well. The populace’s outpouring of reverence towards Lafayette convinced American nationalist politicians that he could reunite the nation through the memory of Washington and the American Revolution. They attempted to entice Lafayette to stay, and even suggested that he could be buried alongside his adopted father. While these efforts failed, this transnational visit between Lafayette and
Washington integrated the public memory of Washington with the private experience of the pilgrimage. Lafayette’s journey to Washington’s tomb reinvigorated the memory of the Revolution and sanctified Washington’s body as the civic relic of the nation. Since his contemporaries successfully transformed Washington into a symbol for America, it came as no surprise that his memory was disputed by so many, as competing visions of America came to dominate the political and cultural landscape of nineteenth-century America. As sectionalism unraveled the threads of American nationalism, Americans began to envision the nation and Washington along local, regional, and sectional lines. Federal and state authorities would again clash over Washington’s body in 1832, and these groups fought for control of the civic relic because it meant possessing the tangible pieces of Washington’s memory and the Revolution’s greatest hero.

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