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This essay is an excerpt from the "Introduction" to volume 1 of Donald Jackson and Dorothy Twohig, eds. *The Diaries of George Washington*, 6 vols. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976-79). In it the editors discuss the nature of the diaries and their history. They offer an overview of the six-volume documentary edition of the diaries that is available as part of this online collection of the George Washington Papers.

Abbreviations for repositories and references to source documents have been expanded. The "Introduction" as published in full may be found in the online presentation of Volume 1.

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"Introduction" to *The Diaries of George Washington*

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Washington as a Diarist

The diaries of George Washington are not those of a literary diarist in the conventional sense. No one holding the long-prevailing view of Washington as pragmatic and lusterless, a self-made farmer and soldier-statesman, would expect him to commit to paper the kind of personal testament that we associate with notable diarists. Even when familiarity modifies our view of the man, and we find him warmer and more intense than we knew, given to wry humor and sometimes towering rage--even then we do not find in these pages what we have come to expect of a diary.

But let us not be unfair to a man who had his own definition of a diary: "Where & How my Time is Spent." The phrase runs the whole record through. He accounts for his time because, like his lands, his time is a usable resource. It can be tallied and its usefulness appraised. Perhaps it was more than mere convenience that caused Washington to set down his earliest diary entries in interleaved copies of an almanac, for an almanac, too, is an accounting of time.

That his diaries were important to him there is no doubt. When in the spring of 1787 he journeyed to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia and discovered that he would be away from Mount Vernon many weeks, he wrote home for the diary he had accidentally left behind. "It will be found, I presume, on my writing table," he said. "Put it under a good strong paper cover, sealed up as a letter" (GW to George A. Washington, 27 May 1787, Henry Huntington Library, San Marino, California).

We can be unfair to Washington in another way by calling this collection of diaries uneven, mixed, or erratic. That is not his fault but ours, for it is we--his biographers, editors, and archivists--who have brought these items together since his death and given them a common label. It would surprise Washington as often as it does his readers to find between the same boards his "where and how" diaries, weather records, agricultural notations, tours of the North and South during his presidency, together with such documents as a travel journal published in 1754 under the title, *The Journal of Major George Washington, Sent by the Hon. Robert Dinwiddie, Esq;... Commander in Chief of Virginia, to the Commandant of the French Forces on Ohio* (Williamsburg, 1754).

Even when his preoccupation with other matters reduces Washington to a mere chronicling of dinner guests, the record is noteworthy, although at times the reader may feel he has got hold of an eighteenth-century guest book rather than a diary. What a diarist chooses to set down, and what not to bother with after a busy day, can be worthy of scrutiny: the number of "respectable ladies" who constantly turned out to pay Washington homage during his southern tour in 1791, tallied so precisely

that one suspects Washington of counting heads; his passion for fruits and flowers and the resulting diary notes that very nearly constitute a synopsis of eighteenth-century horticulture; his daily horseback rides, necessary to any large-scale Virginia farmer but clearly a ritual with him; his notices of the dalliance, both planned and impromptu, of his male and female foxhounds--a vital record if canine bloodlines were to be kept pure.

The Washington of the diaries is not the Washington who penned hundreds of letters to neighbors dealing for farm produce and to foreign potentates attending to the affairs of the eighteenth-century world. He is not on guard here, for he seems unaware that any other eyes will see, or need to see, what he is writing.

"At home all day. About five o'clock poor Patcy Custis Died Suddenly," runs [the complete entry for 19 June 1773](#). Good enough for his purposes; it was what happened on that day. His curt entry would serve to remind him of his devotion to his ill-fated stepdaughter, dead in her teens after a life made wretched by epilepsy. The place for sorrow was in communications to friends, not in the unresponsive pages of a memorandum book, and so it was [to Burwell Bassett](#) that he wrote of his grief for the "Sweet Innocent Girl" who had entered into "a more happy, & peaceful abode than any she has met with in the afflicted Path she hitherto has trod"(GW to Burwell Bassett, 20 June 1773, in John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799* [Washington, D.C., 1931-44], vol. 3, p. 138).

Reading these diaries from beginning to end can become a tedious exercise, though rewarding. Sampling them in brief sessions can become an equally rewarding way to probe the depths, those uneven depths, of a man who has come to personify the spirit of America in his time. John C. Fitzpatrick realized this essential value of the diaries in the 1920s when he undertook to issue the first compilation, the edition which the present one is intended to supersede. Writing to a committee of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union in 1924, he said: "Now that I have read every word of these Diaries, from the earliest to the last one, it is impossible to consider them in any other light than that of a most marvelous record. It is absolutely impossible for anyone to arrive at a true understanding or comprehension of George Washington without reading this Diary record."

The Worlds of Washington

As he rode about Mount Vernon on his daily inspection trips, Washington could turn his eyes frequently to the shipping traffic on the Potomac, his principal link with the great outside world. Vessels with such names as the *Fair American*, the *Betsy*, and the *Charming Polly* plied the river, some trading with the ports of Virginia and Maryland and some bound for far more distant anchorages in North America, the West Indies, or Europe. Most of the schooners, brigs, and ships that Washington watched come upriver were bound for Alexandria's docks and warehouses, and often their cargoes included goods for him: fine clothing and fabrics, bridles and saddles, books and surveying instruments, tools and nails, delicate chinaware and jewelry, fruits and spices, and great wines from France and the Madeiras. Outward bound, they carried the tobacco--and in later years the wheat or flour--that were sent to pay for his imports.

Now and then his commercial representatives in London, Robert Cary & Co., would err and place his shipment aboard a vessel bound for another Virginia river, such as the Rappahannock, and he must endure not only the inconvenience of further transportation but also the risk of loss. On one occasion he warned the Cary company never to ship by any vessel not bound for the Potomac, for when a recent cargo via the Rappahannock finally reached him, he found "The Porter entirely Drank out" ([10 Aug. 1760, George Washington Papers, Library of Congress](#)).



Letter To Burwell Bassett

Transcription from the *Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799*. John C. Fitzpatrick, Editor. Volume 3. [About the Collection](#)

Mount Vernon, June 20, 1773.

Dear Sir: It is an easier matter to conceive, than to describe the distress of this Family; especially that of the unhappy Parent of our Dear Patsy Custis, when I inform you that yesterday removed [*sic*]the Sweet Innocent Girl Entered into a more happy and peaceful abode than any she has met with in the afflicted Path she hitherto has trod. [In Washington's "Diary" appears the following entry: "June 19. At home all day. About five o'clock poor Patsy Custis Died Suddenly."]

She rose from Dinner about four o'clock in better health and spirits than she appeared to have been in for some time; soon after which she was seized with one of her usual Fits, and expired in it, in less than two minutes without uttering a word, a groan, or scarce a sigh. This sudden, and unexpected blow, I scarce need add has almost reduced my poor Wife to the lowest ebb of Misery; which is encreas'd by the absence of her son, (whom I have just fixed at the College in New York from whence I returned the 8th Inst) and want of the balmy consolation of her Relations; which leads me more than ever to wish she could see them, and that I was Master of Arguments powerful enough to prevail upon Mrs. Dandridge to make this place her entire and absolute home. I should think as she lives a lonesome life (Betsey being married) it might suit her well, and be agreeable, both to herself and my Wife, to me most assuredly it would.

It do not purpose to add more at present, the end of my writing being only to inform you of this unhappy change.

Our Sincere Affections are offered to Mrs. Bassett, Mrs. Dandridge, and all other Friends, and I am very sincerely [The text is from Ford.]

Back to [Washington as a Diarist](#)

Moving along the growing network of roads that ran from New England to Georgia were more goods and the all-important packets of letters and newspapers that kept Washington in touch with an expanding nation in a restless world. Besides the English journals that came to him, he regularly read American newspapers and periodicals from Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Annapolis, and Williamsburg.



[Washington's Extended Neighborhood](#)

There was little isolation from the world at any time during his life. His diary for 1751-52 relates a voyage to Barbados when he was nineteen, with his dying half brother Lawrence. The next two accounts concern the early phases of the French and Indian War, the momentous struggle for control of the North American continent in which he commanded a Virginia regiment. By the 1760s, when Washington's diaries resume, young George III was on the British throne, and the American colonists were beginning to feel an ominous sense of discontent that during the 1770s grew into rebellion and placed Washington in command of a revolutionary army.

After the War of Independence, Washington never again fought on a field of battle, but military matters and political affairs of national and international import continued to engage his attention. In 1787 he journeyed to Philadelphia for the Constitutional Convention, which he chaired. During his two terms as president of the new nation there were no wars, but serious diplomatic problems arose with Great Britain, France, and Spain in 1793 and 1794. Even in retirement near the end of his life, Washington could not escape the turmoil among nations. When in 1798 relations with France deteriorated to the point that a sea war was developing, old General Washington was placed at the head of a nominal land force that never took the field.

In such a world, Washington felt happiest within a much smaller region bounded on the south by the James River and on the north by the Potomac. This was his neighborhood, somewhat extended, a world of very different responsibilities and pleasures that is best revealed in his diaries.

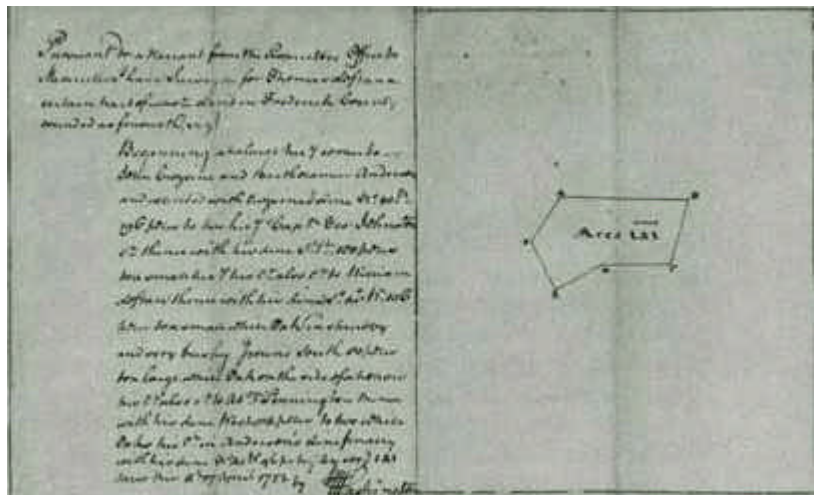
At the heart of this world lay Mount Vernon, the Potomac River plantation that Washington's father Augustine had established in the 1730s on an old family patent and which his half brother Lawrence had inherited and built up before his death in 1752. It was to Mount Vernon that young Colonel Washington came when, in 1758, his involvement in the French and Indian War was finished, for the plantation was now his home, Lawrence's widow having leased it to him four years earlier. It would become permanently his by right of inheritance when she died in 1761. In the meantime, Washington settled at Mount Vernon, thinking that his military career had ended forever. He was prepared for country living, a bit of politics, and plenty of riding to the hounds. The good life truly began for him in January 1759 with his marriage to Martha Dandridge Custis, a sensible young widow with a handsome dowry and two small children nicknamed Patsy and Jacky.

Washington was passionately devoted to Mount Vernon, eagerly extending its borders during the next three decades with numerous purchases of surrounding lands and striving constantly to improve its buildings, fields, and furnishings. But he did not neglect his immediate neighbors in Fairfax County nor did they disregard him. He became a vestryman of the local parish, a magistrate of the county court, a trustee of Alexandria, and one of Fairfax's two burgesses in Virginia's legislature, a position that he held from 1765 to 1775. In the course of carrying out the duties of those offices and of conducting the daily

business of his plantation, he came to know well a host of local merchants, craftsmen, farmers, and planters. One of the most notable was George Mason of Gunston Hall, with whom Washington traded horticultural specimens and with whom he sometimes disagreed politically.

But Washington's closest ties, both of friendship and personal interest, were with the Fairfax family, members of the British aristocracy, whose principal American seat was at Belvoir only a few miles down the Potomac from Mount Vernon. There until 1773 lived George William Fairfax, member of the governor's Council and collector of customs for the south Potomac Naval District. His influence was derived from his father's cousin, Thomas Fairfax, sixth Baron Fairfax of Cameron, proprietor of all the land between the Potomac and the Rappahannock rivers from their mouths to their headwaters, the area that was known as the North Neck of Virginia in Washington's time. Lord Fairfax had the exclusive power to grant lands in the Northern Neck and the right to collect annual quitrents of two shillings per one hundred acres on lands he granted, privileges that he retained until the Revolution.

The proprietor's home was a hunting lodge called Greenway Court, west of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Frederick County. It too was an area that Washington knew well, for as a youth he surveyed dozens of Lord Fairfax's grants in the Shenandoah Valley and the valleys beyond. He himself acquired lands along Bullskin Run, a tributary of the Shenandoah River, lands which he retained until his death. During the French and Indian War he was charged for a while with the defense of this region, and for seven years before he was elected a Burgess from Fairfax, the freeholders of Frederick sent him to Williamsburg as one of their representatives. In the 1770s and 1780s two of Washington's three younger brothers, Samuel and Charles, also found opportunities west of the Blue Ridge, settling on lands of their own within a few miles of Bullskin.



[Washington made this survey of land in Frederick County, Va., for Thomas Loftan in 1751. \(Smithsonian Institution photo no. 49445\).](#)

At the other end of the Northern Neck, south and east of Mount Vernon, lay another part of Washington's extended neighborhood, a region of concern to him mainly because of family ties. Westmoreland County, stretching for about forty miles along the Potomac, was the first home of the Washington family in the New World. There lived Washington's half brother Augustine and his favorite younger brother, Jack, and it was there, on the bank of Pope's Creek, that Washington was born. Farther up the Potomac, about halfway between Westmoreland County and Mount Vernon, was the Chotank area, part of Stafford County until 1776 and then of King George County. In that locality lived a number of Washingtons: brother Sam until 1770, and many distant cousins, some of whom Washington had known from his childhood. Several miles west of Chotank, at Fredericksburg on the south bank of the Rappahannock, was the home of Fielding Lewis, husband of Washington's sister Betty, and before 1780, the home of brother Charles. Across the river from Fredericksburg was the Ferry Farm, where Washington lived as a boy and where his mother, Mary Ball Washington, resided until old age obliged her in 1771 to retire to a house in the town, there to spend the last eighteen years of her life.

At the southern extremity of Washington's extended neighborhood was the provincial capital of Williamsburg and near it, on the York and Pamunkey rivers, were the principal lands of the Custis

family and the homes of their relations, the Dandrighes and the Bassetts. For Washington this was an area to which he came to fulfill his duties as a burgess, to settle accounts with merchants, and to see that the affairs of his Custis stepchildren were properly managed. But it was also the place in which he attended the theater and balls, dined with men of note, and began to move into the role of an American leader, which eventually took him away from his beloved neighborhood again. Indeed, the network of interconnecting regions between the Potomac and the James that made up that neighborhood helped to develop in Washington that broad feeling of kinship and responsibility for men of differing experience and outlook which enabled him to enter the larger world beyond with ease.

But seldom was his home on the Potomac far from his thoughts, and never did he fail to return there when he could, for it was at Mount Vernon that all his worlds came together. From both inside and outside his extended neighborhood came a galaxy of people from all walks of life to visit him. Some were friends and relatives who came for a holiday, to play cards, to ride to the hounds, or to shoot ducks. Others came on business, to discuss politics and land transactions, to deal in wheat, flour, fish, and other commodities, to bring their mares for breeding, to call at his mill and, in the last years, at his distillery, or sometimes just to ask for help in solving their problems.

After the Revolution he wrote his mother, who had suggested that she might wish to move to Mount Vernon, that "in truth it may be compared to a well resorted tavern, as scarcely any strangers who are going from north to south, or from south to north, do not spend a day or two at it. . . . What with the sitting up of Company; the noise and bustle of servants, and many other things you would not be able to enjoy that calmness and serenity of mind, which... you ought now to prefer" ([15 Feb. 1787, George Washington Papers, Library of Congress](#)).

With this endless flow of friends, neighbors, and the idly curious coming to his home, Washington must have thought it an unusual day indeed when on [30 June 1785](#), at a time when he truly believed that he was done with service to his country, he wrote in his diary that he "dined with only Mrs. Washington which I believe is the first instance of it since my retirement from public life."

Washington and the New Agriculture

No theme appears more frequently in the writings of Washington than his love for the land--more precisely, his own land. From the ordered beauty of the mansion house grounds to the muddiest fields on Bullsken plantation in the Shenandoah Valley, his estate and those who inhabited it were his constant concern. The diaries are a monument to that concern.

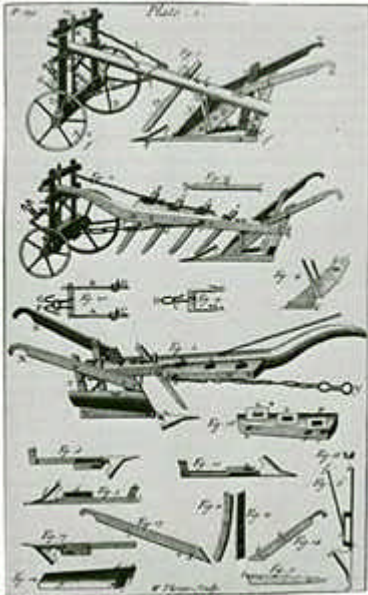
In his letters he referred often, as an expression of this devotion and its resulting contentment, to an Old Testament passage. After the Revolution, when he had returned to Mount Vernon, he wrote the [marquis de Lafayette 1 Feb. 1784](#): "At length my Dear Marquis I am become a private citizen on the banks of the Potomac, & under the shadow of my own Vine & my own Fig-tree". On the occasion of another joyous homecoming after his two terms as president, the phrase came back to him. He wrote [to Oliver Wolcott, Jr., 15 May 1797](#), that if he ever were to see distant friends again, "it must be under my own Vine and Fig tree as I do not think it probable that I shall go beyond the radius of 20 miles from them" (George Washington Papers, Library of Congress).¹

1. "And Judah and Israel dwelt safely, every man under his vine and under his fig tree," 1 Kings 4:25. For similar passages, see 2 Kings 18:31, and Micah 4:4. The allusion occurs at least eleven times in GW's letters of 1796 and 1797, written to such old comrades as Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, Rufus King, Charles Vaughan, and Lafayette. [To the earl of Buchan he wrote 4 July 1797](#): "Be these things however as they may, as my glass is nearly run, I shall endeavour in the shade of my Vine & Fig tree to view things in the 'Calm light of mild Philosophy'" (George Washington Papers, Library of Congress).

Maintaining the mansion house and its grounds, which required constant attention from carpenters and gardeners, was in part a diversion; farming, on the other hand, was a profession in which he took immense pride. "I shall begrudge no reasonable expence that will contribute to the improvement & neatness of my Farms," he wrote manager William Pearce on 6 Oct. 1793, "for nothing pleases me better than to see them in good order, and every thing trim, handsome, & thriving about them; nor nothing hurts me more than to find them otherwise" (Long Island Historical Society, Brooklyn, New York).

The surviving diaries which deal with agriculture begin in 1760, a year sometimes used to denote the beginning of a new agriculture in England. It was also the year of the ascension of George III, a monarch so fond of farming that he maintained experimental plots at Windsor and submitted articles for publication under the name of his farm overseer. The influence of English agriculture on Washington and others in this country--Jefferson included--was indeed great.

Before the agricultural revolution in England, farmers there had relied upon a three-year crop rotation: winter grain, a spring crop, and a year of fallow. The revolution brought forage crops, roots, and "artificial," or nonnative, grasses, an entire new system of cultivation pioneered by Jethro Tull. Tull mistakenly believed that plants were fed by tiny particles of soil and that the secret of good farming was to keep the soil well pulverized so the roots might take up the particles. To accomplish this he devised "horse-hoeing," or deep plowing, with crops drilled in rows so that the cultivating implements could pass between them. Although his theory about soil particles was wrong, his cultivating practices marked the beginning of mechanization. But the science of agriculture was changing rapidly. In 1760 Washington was a practitioner of Tull's horse-hoeing husbandry. At his death in 1799 he was devoted to the more sophisticated experiments and writings of Arthur Young and practiced a seven-year rotation.



[Jethro Tull's Horse-Hoeing Husbandry, London, 1733, influenced Washington's early attempts at scientific farming. \(Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University\).](#)

The period extending from his return after the Revolution until his death was a time of intensive scientific agriculture for Washington. He was faced with the prospect of rebuilding his very large farms after the years of neglect they had suffered while he was the commanding general. He also faced the realization, with many of his fellow Virginians, that soil exhaustion and the evils of a one-crop agriculture were, together with slavery, edging them toward disaster. A general agricultural depression in the United States added to the problem. Washington wrote [to George William Fairfax 10 Nov. 1785](#) that he never rode to his plantations "without seeing something which makes me regret having [continued] so long in the ruinous mode of farming which we are in" (George Washington Papers, Library of Congress)

At this point, Arthur Young (1741-1820) came into Washington's life. The English agriculturist had read a letter which Washington had written extolling the virtues of manure.² Young then began a correspondence which was to last for many years, saying he thought it possible that Washington was as good a farmer as he was a general. Sending the first four volumes of his *Annals of Agriculture* (1784-1808), Young also offered to obtain grain seeds, farm implements, and other items for Washington.

2. GW had asked [George William Fairfax 30 June 1785](#) to help him find a farm manager in England who knew how to plow, sow, mow, hedge, ditch "& above all, Midas like, or who can convert every thing he touches into manure, as the first transmutation towards Gold" (George Washington Papers, Library of Congress).

On 6 Aug. 1786 Washington sent him a grateful response. "Agriculture has never been amongst the most favorite amusements of my life, though I never possessed much skill in art, and nine years' total inattention to it, has added nothing to a knowledge which is best understood from practice; but with the means you have been so obliging as to furnish me, I shall return to it (though rather late in the day) with hope & confidence" (Rosenbach Foundation, Philadelphia). Washington ask Young to sent him two plows with extra shares and coulters and the best varieties of cabbage, turnip, sainfoin, winter vetch, and ryegrass seeds, as well as any other grasses which might seem valuable.

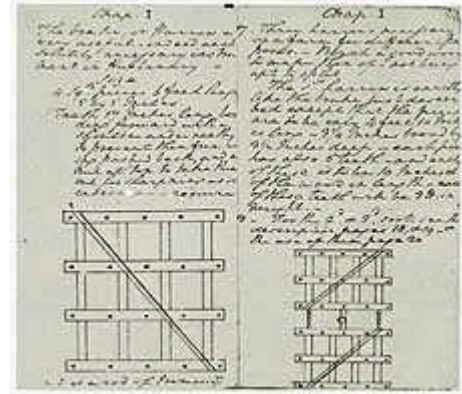
One of Washington's great preoccupations, during his whole career in agriculture, was finding the right crops for the soil, climate, and practical needs of his Mount Vernon establishment. His determination to throw off the bondage of single-crop farming seemed at times almost too dogged. The number of field crops he raised, attempted to raise, or at least experimented with on a small scale is well above sixty. In a set of ["Notes & Observations" he kept for 1785-86](#) (George Washington Papers, Library of Congress) he mentions planting barley, clover, corn, carrots, cabbage, flax, millet, oats, orchard grass, peas, potatoes, pumpkins, rye, spelt, turnips, timothy, and wheat.

His experience with tobacco typifies the change in his thinking. Early in the diaries it is his all-important cash crop--the shipment he sends to England every year to exchange for goods he cannot obtain in America. When he drastically reduced his tobacco production he became, in the terminology of the day, no longer a planter but a farmer. One English observer wrote that Washington had no land left which would bring in a good crop of tobacco without appropriating woodland badly needed as a source of firewood for his family and slaves. Also, it required more manure to raise tobacco than his farms could produce (Richard Parkinson, *A Tour in America, in 1798, 1799, and 1800. . . .* [London, 1805],

2:423-24) By 1766 he was saying that he raised no tobacco at all except at his dower plantations on the York River, and in 1768 he repeated this assertion. He said he raised no tobacco at all on the Potomac.

He could never give up tobacco entirely, however; it was still being raised in 1790 on the Mount Vernon farms. George Augustine Washington's farm report for 20 Aug. reveals that for the preceding week twenty man-days were spent at Muddy Hole in weeding, topping, and suckering tobacco, and similar work was being done at Dogue Run, River Farm, and Union Farm.

Washington raised alfalfa from 1760 to 1795, then gave it up in favor of chicory. He tried the horsebean, as did Jefferson, but it could not thrive in the hot Virginia summers. He tried buckwheat with enthusiasm, both as a feed for livestock and as a green manure, and finally concluded that it depleted as much as it enriched the soil. He raised burnet, sainfoin, ryegrass, hop clover, tick trefoil, guinea grass, hemp, Jerusalem artichoke, Siberian melilot, field peas, and potatoes. He kept on with flax even after Arthur Young had chided him for wasting his time and lands on it; it was essential for his spinning and weaving operations. He even hoped to give up most of his corn crop late in life and buy what he needed, because the hard substratum of clay on his farms made it difficult to till the crop properly without serious erosion. He needed corn because he believed that his slaves did not thrive as well on wheat as on cornmeal, and because he was fond of it himself. "General Washington had so habituated himself to eating the Indian corn bread, that I know some instances of tavern-keepers having to send several miles for it, for his breakfast" (Richard Parkinson, *A Tour in America, in 1798, 1799, and 1800*. . . . [London, 1805], 2:632).



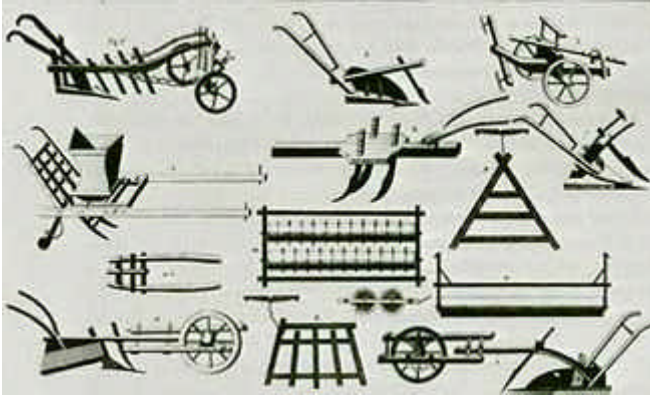
[A drag harrow, sketched by Washington from a contemporary work on agriculture. \(Library of Congress\).](#)

Experimentation with all these many crops was one of Washington's chief delights as a farmer. He tried drill culture instead of broadcasting the seed; he varied the distance between rows; he planted potatoes and peas between the corn rows. He tried different rates of seeding, carefully noting them in his diaries and other memoranda. In Sept. 1764 he sowed oats on the Dogue Run farm to see if it could endure the winter as his wheat did. Apparently the crop failed. Learning of his interest in experimental agriculture, admirers at home and abroad were eager to assist him. If tabulated, Washington's experiments in agronomy might not appear too different from those of agronomists in the twentieth century.

His experiments with manures extended to animal dung, marl, green crops plowed under, and in at least one instance mud from the Potomac River bottom. In Oct. 1785 he borrowed a scow from Col. George Gilpin to use in collecting mud "to try the efficacy of it as a manure" (GW to Gilpin, 29 Oct. 1785, Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union).

The growing shortage of timber with which to make rail fences caused him to turn to live hedges for fencing. He tried honey locust, Lombardy poplar, cedar, and some of the hundreds of species of thorned trees and shrubs. His plan was to start such fences with the fast-growing willows and poplars (which he then thought would turn back any farm animal but a hog), while the slower cedars and locusts were coming up to thicken the hedge. He told manager William Pearce 22 Nov. 1795 that nothing concerning his farms--even the crops--made him so solicitous as his desire to get all his fields enclosed with hedge fences. And the following year, when his crop of honey locust died, he lamented to Pearce that "it would seem I think as if I never should get forward in my plan of hedging" (22 May 1796, Long Island Historical Society, Brooklyn, New York). By then he had become resigned to the fact that no live hedge would turn back a hog, but that any tree which would tolerate close planting could be used to fence in

other livestock. Another decade was to pass before Lewis and Clark would send back to Jefferson specimens of the Osage orange, *Maclura pomifera*, from the West--one of the most successful of all hedge plants in restraining livestock. Except hogs, of course.



[Cultivating tools from an eighteenth-century work, La Nouvelle Maison rustique, Paris 1798. \(Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union\).](#)

Improved cropping calls for improved machinery, as Washington knew, and he shared Jefferson's interest in the mechanical aspects of agriculture. The two men visited the farm of Samuel Powel, near Philadelphia, in 1791 to see the operation of a new threshing machine. It was a primitive device harvesting only six bushels an hour "fit for the miller," but Powel felt that a larger unit might produce 100 to 130 bushels a day (Arthur Young, *Annals of Agriculture & Other Useful Arts* [London, 1784-1815], 17 [1792], 206-8). Five years later Jefferson built a similar thresher, and Washington was enthusiastic about it. [He wrote](#)

[Jefferson 6 July 1796](#): "If you can bring a moveable threshing Machine, constructed upon simple principles to perfection, it will be among the most valuable institutions in this Country" (George Washington and Thomas Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress). When the farms of the Mount Vernon estate were inventoried in 1800, the listing for the River Farm included one threshing machine, probably a stationary one ViMtV).³

3. Other equipment at River Farm was less sophisticated: 8 plows, 10 harrows, 3 ox carts, a horse cart, 20 weeding hoes, 8 axes, 2 mortising axes, 6 mattocks, 2 spades, 3 shovels, 8 rakes with iron teeth, 3 mauling wedges, a pair of steelyards, and a flax rake. Among the more complicated implements at Dogue Run were Dutch fans, double moldboard plows, cultivators, wheat and corn drills, and a machine for gathering clover seed (Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union).

Like most farmers through the ages, Washington was most fascinated by the plow and its potential for advancing agriculture. [He ordered a Rotheram patent plow from England 6 Mar. 1765](#), instructing the firm of Crosbys & Trafford that it ought to be made extremely light, "as our Lands are not so stiff as yours nor our Horses so strong" (George Washington Papers, Library of Congress). The Rotheram, dating from 1730, was a swing plow of compact design, lighter of frame and with a better moldboard than earlier designs. Made in Rotheram, Yorkshire, it had a coulter and plowshare of iron and a breast covered with iron plate. Farmers in England and Scotland liked its light draft and low cost of manufacture.

Years later, at Washington's request, Arthur Young sent two plows with extra shares and coulters, capable of a nine-inch furrow from four to eight inches deep--depending upon the friability of the soil. Young thought it should be drawn by two stout oxen or horses (Young to GW, 2 Feb. 1787, George Washington Papers, Library of Congress). By 1788 Washington had found another model he liked so well that [he told Thomas Snowden 3 Oct.](#), "I mean to get into the use of them *generally*" (George Washington Papers, Library of Congress). In the end, however, it was the old reliable Rotheram which pleased him most. He told Benjamin Latrobe in 1796 that he preferred it over all other plows but had found replacement parts impossible to get (Benjamin Henry Latrobe, *The Journal of Latrobe* [New York, 1905], 60-61).

Livestock was another vital interest of Washington's, though it is not as apparent--either in the diaries or the letters--as his preoccupation with crops. He was fully aware of the breeding required to prosper with

livestock and equally aware of the shortcomings of American farmers in that regard. "The fact is," [he wrote Arthur Young 18 June 1792](#), "we have, in a manner, everything to learn that respects neat & profitable husbandry" (George Washington Papers, Library of Congress). And [to Sir John Sinclair he said 20 Oct. 1792](#), "we have been so little in the habit of attending either to the breed or improvement of our Stock" (British Museum: Add. Ms. 5757; Letterbook Copy, George Washington Papers, Library of Congress)

His own self-confessed failures in husbandry were due more to his long absences from home than to a lack of good intentions; his letters to his farm managers are filled with exhortations about the care, culling, and breeding of his stock--especially sheep and swine. "At Shearing time . . . let there be a thorough culling out, of all the old, and indifferent sheep from the flocks, that they may be disposed of, & thereby save me the mortification of hearing every week of their death!" he wrote William Pearce 6 April 1794 (Long Island Historical Society, Brooklyn, New York).

Washington customarily culled his flock of unthrifty lambs, wethers, and ewes and took care to withhold from market the ram lambs with the best conformation and most wool. [He wrote Sir John Sinclair 15 Mar. 1793](#) that he normally raised from 600 to 1,000 head of sheep and that if he could always be at home to attend to their management he could produce five pounds of wool from each animal and from eighteen to twenty-two pounds of mutton per quarter. He attributed this success in part to the choice of good rams from English stock which he occasionally could obtain, "notwithstanding your prohibitory Laws, or customs" (George Washington Papers, Library of Congress). The best wool he produced was, he thought, equal to the finest Kentish wool.

Cattle were raised both to serve as oxen and to provide meat. At a time when most Virginians kept cattle in open pens the year around, Washington housed his in sheds from November until May, instructing his managers that they were to be well fed and carefully watered, the ice being regularly broken in cold weather to give them access to clean water. When 300 head of cattle brought him only 30 calves, he decided that "old and debilitated bulls" must be to blame. Despite the rarity of imported stock, some did find its way to America. Washington [told manager James Anderson 8 Jan. 1797](#) to see if he could buy a bull from Henry Gough of Baltimore, even if the price was high. "I should not stand so much upon the price, provided the breed is to be depended upon" (George Washington Papers, Library of Congress).

Of milk and butter production we learn little from his papers, although he expressed to Pearce 2 Nov. 1794 a desire to get into the dairy business--thinking it might be profitable because of his proximity to Alexandria, Georgetown, and the Federal City (Long Island Historical Society, Brooklyn, New York). He sometimes supplemented his own butter production by purchases.

His swine ran loose in fenced woodlands until it was time to select the best for fattening in pens. They rooted and shoved their way through his hedges and eluded any attempt to count them. In listing his livestock on the various farms he could only say, in effect, "plus an uncertain number of hogs." He once directed his manager to put a dozen young shoats in a sty and keep an exact account of the cost of raising them for a year. Later he brought up the possibility of raising hogs in pens from birth, at least experimentally. But, as most of his swine must always run at large, he insisted that none be brought from the woodlands to be fattened until they reached sufficient size and age. "I had rather have a little good, than much bad, Porke," [he told Anthony Whitting 4 Nov. 1792](#) (George Washington Papers, Library of Congress).



[Washington's own copy of Thomas Hale's Compleat Body of Husbandry, London, 1758, \(Boston Athenaeum\).](#)

The records speak little about poultry. The weekly reports from Washington's manager faithfully record the number of chickens, ducks, and geese on each farm, but the flocks were not large. At a time when wildfowl was abundant, no extensive work with domestic fowls was necessary.

A few days before his death in Dec. 1799, Washington was hard at work on a plan for his future farming operations. He drew up a scheme for each of the farms at Mount Vernon, setting forth in minute detail such matters as crop rotation, the handling of pasture lands and meadows, and use of manures (including the systematic penning of cattle and sheep on regularly shifted temporary enclosures to fertilize the land). His [instructions for the River Farm, written 10 Dec. 1799](#), closed with a characteristic statement: "There is one thing however I cannot forbear to add, and in strong terms; it is, that whenever I order a thing to be done, it must be done; or a reason given at the *time*, or as soon as the impracticability is discovered, why it cannot; which will produce a countermand, or change." Any other course of action was disagreeable to him, he said, "having been accustomed all my life to more regularity, and punctuality, and *know* that nothing but system and method is required to accomplish all reasonable requests" (George Washington Papers, Library of Congress).

Four days later he was dead, and system and method began to disappear from the farms of Mount Vernon. It would be more than fifty years before the mansion house, eventually bereft of most outlying farmland, was restored to beauty and order. Meanwhile, time and neglect diminished much of what Washington had longed to improve and preserve.

In 1834 a writer from Fairfax County, signing himself "F," wrote a letter to the editor of the *Farmers' Register*. He had recently ridden across the farms. "Any, curious to mark the operation of time upon human affairs, would find much for contemplation by riding through the extensive domains of the late General Washington. A more widespread and perfect agricultural ruin could not be imagined; yet the monuments of the great mind that once ruled, are seen throughout. The ruins of capacious barns, and long extended hedges, seem proudly to boast that their master looked to the future" (*The Diaries of George Washington*, 1:552).

The Weather Watch

Washington's preoccupation with the weather was clearly an extension of his needs and interests as a farmer. He was not a scientific observer, as was Jefferson, and his weather records are irregular in scope and content. In editing the diaries for the 1925 edition, Fitzpatrick abandoned the weather record midway in his first volume except when it could not be sorted from other matters recorded, calling the weather entries "unessential" (John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Diaries of George Washington, 1748-1799* [4 vols.; Boston and New York, 1925], 1:288n). Our view is that because we cannot and should not attempt to predict the use which readers will be making of the diaries, the weather material should remain. Records for the study of eighteenth-century meteorology are not so plentiful that Washington's may be ignored.

It is difficult to separate him from the weather because so much Washington lore is weather-connected. Seasick days during a stormy voyage to Barbados; the cruel winters at Valley Forge and Morristown; the dust and mud of carriage roads during a lifetime of travel; and, at least in the minds of his family and friends, the probability that an ill-advised horseback ride in a December storm contributed to his death.

His instruments for recording the weather were few, but one in particular is notable. His prized weather vane has survived the changing winds and still serves atop the cupola at Mount Vernon. The vane is in the shape of a dove of peace, the copper body bound with iron strips and the bill with olive branch

fashioned from a piece of iron. The bird is forty inches long, and the wing from tip to tip measures thirty-five inches. The vane was made in Philadelphia, by Joseph Rakestraw, in July or Aug. 1787, and was sent immediately to Mount Vernon. Washington wrote his nephew [George Augustine Washington, 12 Aug. 1787](#), that the bill of the dove was to be painted black and the olive branch green. This color scheme is no longer maintained today, the vane having been covered with gold leaf to deter corrosion of the copper body.

Washington made no attempt to measure barometric pressure (though he mentions "falling weather" now and then), and his references to humidity are subjective assessments, not readings from an instrument. Aside from the weather vane, his only known weather instrument was the thermometer. Writing to farm manager William Pearce, from Philadelphia 22 Dec. 1793, he said, "And as it is not only satisfactory, but may be of real utility to know the state of the weather as to heat & cold, but drought or moisture, prefix, as usual, at the head of every weeks report a meteorological account of these. The Thermomiter which is at Mount Vernon will enable you to do the first" (Long Island Historical Society, Brooklyn, New York).



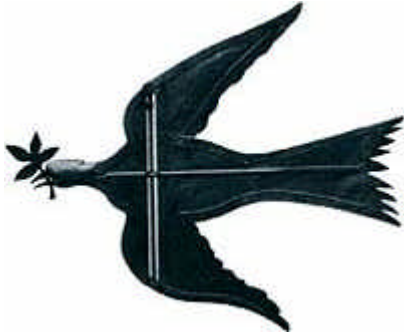
[This recording thermometer now at Mount Vernon is similar to those used by Washington.](#)

Two barometer-thermometers now at Mount Vernon, one in Washington's study and the other in the central hall of the mansion, are connected with Washington by family tradition only. A third instrument is probably one mentioned in an inventory of his effects not long after his death. While the inventory accords it a place in the Washingtons' bedroom, where it hangs today in restored form, it may have been located originally in the east hall outside the study. It is a registering thermometer designed to record high and low temperatures for the day, and bears the name of Joseph Gatty, a New York instrument maker.

One of Washington's comments about temperature leads to the speculation that at least some of his readings were made inside the mansion house. "Thermometer at 52 in the Morning & 59 at Noon," he writes in the diary on 7 Dec. 1785, "but removing it afterwards out of the room where the fire was, into the East Entry leading in to my Study, this circumstance with the encrease of the cold fell the Mercury to 42." Meteorologists might charge that Washington was ill advised if not actually foolish for recording indoor readings, and certainly such readings would be of little use today in studying eighteenth-century weather. And ill advised he may have been, by Dr. James Jurin, secretary of the Royal Society of London. Publishing a set of recommendations for keeping a meteorological register, Jurin advocated placing the thermometer "in a room which faces the north, where there is very seldom if ever any fire in the fireplace" (Royal Society, *Philosophical Transactions*, 32 [1723], 425).

In Europe, Jurin's fellow scientists objected to this recommendation, but in English-speaking countries the practice continued through the end of the century. New York and Philadelphia scientists carried on a debate about the practice of thermometer location, and at least one Philadelphia record carries one column for indoor and another for outdoor readings. Jefferson, however, was not a disciple of Jurin. When he discovered that his thermometer in the northeast portico was being affected by an unknown source of heat, perhaps a mound of earth, he changed its location and rejected eighteen months of readings in his weather record (weather diary, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston; transcript, University of Virginia, Charlottesville). For a brief discussion of early views on the correct location of the thermometer, see W. E. Knowles Middleton, *A History of the Thermometer and Its Use in Meteorology* (Baltimore, 1966), 208-13.

Washington's temperature records begin Jan. 1785. It may never be possible to determine which readings were made indoors and which outdoors, although there are hints in the records themselves. In 1785, during a period when he was recording three readings daily--morning, noon, and sunset--there is very little variation in the day's temperature from reading to reading. For example, on 19 Jan. he records a reading of 48° Fahrenheit in the morning, 48° at noon, and 48° at sunset. On occasion there seems to be a discrepancy between his temperatures and what he says the weather is doing. He wrote on 26 May that the weather was warm until about 5:00 P. M. when clouds and high wind brought about a marked change in the temperature of the air. Yet his three readings for the day are 65°, 68°, and 67°.



[Dove of peace weathervane atop the cupola at Mount Vernon.](#)

Some of his extremely cold readings may indicate that the thermometer was outdoors. He wrote on 5 Feb. 1788 of weather so cold that the mercury did not rise out of the bulb of the thermometer all day. But he was writing about one of the coldest days of the century, when near Philadelphia the temperature registered--17° F.

If he was not scientifically accurate, he was at least persistent. See his entry for 30 April 1785 when, unable to record the weather personally because of a trip to Richmond, he had put Mrs. Washington in charge of the thermometer. "Mercury (by Mrs. W's acct.) in the Morning at 68--at Noon 69 and at Night 62." Even on great occasions in his life, the weather was on his mind. On 9 Mar. 1797 he left Philadelphia for the last time, after a lifetime of public service in which he longed always to return to Mount Vernon. "Wind changed to No. Wt. blew very hard & turned very cold," he wrote in his diary. "Mer. at 28. Left Phila. on my return to Mt. Vernon--dined at Chester & lodged at Wilmington."

History of the Diary Manuscripts

Except for special occasions, such as his mission to the French commandant and his voyage to Barbados, Washington apparently kept no daily record until 1760. Even then, his dairy-keeping was erratic until 1768, when he settled down to a program that he was to continue faithfully until he became commander in chief in 1775.

Washington kept no diary during most of the Revolution. The rigor of his activities would have made it difficult to do so, and the full record of the period which accumulated in his official letterbooks and general orders rendered the custom less necessary. He tried to resume his old habit in 1781, but it was not until he had resigned his command and returned home that he became a confirmed diarist again.

It seems likely that diaries were kept for the presidential years 1789-97, and the fact that so few have survived is particularly vexing to historians. "[The Journal of the Proceedings of the President \(1793-97\)](#)," a daily account of Washington's official activities and correspondence, written in the first person but kept by his secretaries, will be published later. An entry for 16 April 1789, recounting his departure from Mount Vernon to assume office, appears only in Jared Sparks, ed., *The Writings of George Washington* (12 vols.; Boston, 1833-37), 1:441-42. The entry for 23 April 1789, remarking on the enthusiasm with which the public received him, is from Washington Irving, *Life of George Washington* (5 vols.; New York, 1857-59), 4:511. So at least we know that Jared Sparks and Washington Irving had access to material indicating that Washington began his presidency with a determination to continue the record. Diaries are extant for the period covering his tours of the northern and southern states and a brief one kept during the Whisky Rebellion of 1794. Apart from an unrewarding record for 1795, all else is lost for the presidential years.

The earliest diaries were kept in notebooks of various sizes and shapes, but when Washington began in earnest to make daily entries he chose to make them in interleaved [copies of the *Virginia Almanack*](#), a Williamsburg publication. By the end of the Revolution he had grown accustomed to the blank memorandum books used in the army, and he adopted a similar notebook for his civilian record. By 1795 he had gone back to his interleaved almanacs.

As Fitzpatrick observes, ruled paper was not available to Washington, and he obtained regularly spaced lines by using a ruled guide-sheet beneath his writing paper. "This practice gives us evidence of his failing vision, as the diaries, after the Presidency, show frequent examples of his pen running off the outer edge of the small diary page, and whole words, written on the ruled guide-sheet beneath, escaped notice of not being on the diary page itself" (John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Diaries of George Washington, 1748-1799* [4 vols.; Boston and New York, 1925], 1:x).

Upon Washington's death in 1799, most of his papers still in his hands became the property of his nephew Bushrod Washington, an associate justice of the U. S. Supreme Court. We shall have more to say about the fate of these invaluable documents in the Introduction to Volume I of [The Papers of George Washington](#).

Destruction and dispersal of the papers began very early when Mrs. Washington reportedly burned all the correspondence she had exchanged with Washington during his lifetime--overlooking only two letters, we believe. There followed long years of careless handling by Bushrod, biographer John Marshall, and editor Jared Sparks. Indeed, what is most important in the story of Washington's papers is not such natural processes as fire, flood, mildew, and the tendency of paper to fall into dust. Rather, there has been an overabundance of stewardship by misguided caretakers, persons who thought they knew what was important and what was trivial, what should be saved and what given away to friends and autograph collectors.

The editor who laments the disappearance of so many Washington diaries can only sink into despondency upon learning that Bushrod gave many away. To diplomat Christopher Hughes, in 1825, he gave the 1797 diary and a sheaf of Washington's notes on agriculture; Hughes dispersed these among his friends in the United States and Europe. Two years later, Bushrod gave the diaries for 1795 and 1798 to Margaret and Robert Adams, of Philadelphia. Then he presented the 1767 diary to Dr. James W. Wallace, of Warrenton. These and certain other diaries once in private hands have been preserved; others apparently have not.

Jared Sparks's turn to mishandle the papers came in 1827, when he persuaded Bushrod to let him take large quantities to Boston, where he was to prepare his twelve-volume edition, *The Writings of George Washington* (Boston, 1837). Sparks decided that carefully excising a Washington signature from a document, and sending it to a friend, did not really damage the manuscript as a piece of history; that a page torn from a Washington diary, or an entire Washington letter, could safely be given away if he, Sparks, judged it to be of no historical value. It was Sparks who cut Washington's draft of his first inaugural address into small pieces and so thoroughly disseminated this document of more than sixty pages that the efforts of several collectors have failed to reassemble more than a third of it. Even after he had supposedly returned all the papers to the Washington family, Sparks retained a supply to distribute. He was still mailing out snippets in 1861.



[Editor Jared Sparks gave away this page from a Washington diary in 1832. \(Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Dreer Collection\).](#)

The pillage stopped in 1834 when the Washington family sold the basic collection to the U. S. government. This corpus, together with a later, smaller sale, forms the basis of the principal Washington archive at the Library of Congress. Other acquisitions have been made throughout the years. [In the following list . . .](#)



"Introduction" to *The Diaries of George Washington*

In the following list . . .



. . . the present location of all known diaries and diary fragments is shown. The Regents' Numbers are numbers assigned by Fitzpatrick in the 1920s and used since as a cataloguing device. The diaries without Regents' Numbers were not published by Fitzpatrick, nor were several to which he assigned numbers but could not locate. His number 54, which he believed to have been kept but did not locate, is partially represented by the next diary in the series.

Date	Regents' Number	Location
11 Mar. 1747 - 13 April 1748	1	Library of Congress
28 Sept. 1751 - 4 Feb. 1752	2	Library of Congress
31 Oct. 1753 - 11 Jan. 1754	3	Public Record Office, London
31 Mar. - 27 June 1754	4	Printed version [see p. 167]
1 Jan. - 11 April 1760	5	Library of Congress
1 Jan. - 22 May 1760	6	Library of Congress
24 May - 22 Oct. 1761	7	Library of Congress
1 Jan. - 31 Dec. 1762		Library of Congress (on deposit)
2 Mar. - 18 Nov. 1763	8	Library of Congress
29 Mar. - 18 Oct. 1764	9	Library of Congress
1 Jan. - 13 Nov. 1765	10	Library of Congress
12 - 31 May 1765		Hist. Soc. of Pa.
14 Jan. - 29 Oct. 1766	11	Library of Congress
1 Feb. - 20 Nov. 1767	12	Library of Congress
21 Nov. - 31 Dec. 1767	13	Missing or not kept
1 Jan. - 31 Dec. 1768	14	Library of Congress
1 Jan. - 31 Dec. 1769	15	Library of Congress
1 Jan. - 31 Dec. 1770	16	Library of Congress
1 Jan. - 31 Dec. 1771	17	Library of Congress
1 Jan. - 31 Dec. 1772	18	Library of Congress

1 Jan. - 31 Dec. 1773	19	Library of Congress
1 Jan. - 31 Dec. 1774	20	Library of Congress
1 Jan. - 19 June 1775	21	Library of Congress
1 Jan. - 4 June 1780		Library of Congress
1 May - 5 Nov. 1781	22 & 23	Library of Congress
1 Sept. - 4 Oct. 1784	24	Library of Congress
12 Oct. - 31 Dec. 1784	25	Missing or not kept
1 Jan. - 16 May 1785	26	Library of Congress
17 May - 26 Sept. 1785	27	Library of Congress
27 Sept. 1785 - 16 Jan. 1786	28	Library of Congress
17 Jan. - 30 April 1786	29	Library of Congress
1 May - 26 July 1786	30	Library of Congress
v27 July - 18 Oct. 1786	31	Library of Congress
19 Oct. 1786 - 30 Mar. 1787	32	Library of Congress
30 Mar. - 27 Oct. 1787	33	Library of Congress
11 May - 15 Nov. 1787	34	Library of Congress
28 Oct. 1787 - 17 April 1788	35	Library of Congress
17 April - 31 July 1788	36	Library of Congress
1 Aug. 1788 - 2 Feb. 1789	37	Library of Congress
3 Feb. - 30 Sept. 1789	38	Missing or not kept (but see p. xli)
v16 April 1789		Printed fragment, SPARKS
23 April 1789		Printed fragment, IRVING
1 Oct. 1789 - 11 Mar. 1790	39	Detroit Public Library
12 Mar. 1790 - 1 June 1791	40 - 43	Virginia Historical Society
2 June - 4 July 1791	44	Library of Congress
5 July - 31 Dec. 1791	45	Missing or not kept
1792, 1793, 1 Jan. - 29 Sept. 1794	46 - 48	Missing or not kept
30 Sept. - 20 Oct. 1794	49	Library of Congress
21 Oct. - 31 Dec. 1794	50	Missing or not kept
1 Jan. - 13 April 1795	51	Missing or not kept
14 Apr. - 24 Dec. 1795	52	Columbia University
22 - 31 Dec. 1795	53	Missing or not kept
1796	54	Missing
1 Jan. - 21 June 1796		Historical Society of Pennsylvania

1 Jan. - 31 Dec. 1797	55	Mount Vernon
1 Jan. - 31 Dec. 1798	56	Columbia University
1 Jan. - 21 Jan. 1799		Historical Society of Pennsylvania
22 Jan. - 9 Feb. 1799		Historical Society of Pennsylvania
10 Feb. - 13 Dec. 1799	57	Library of Congress
13 - 23 Oct. 1799		Historical Society of Pennsylvania

[_____](#)