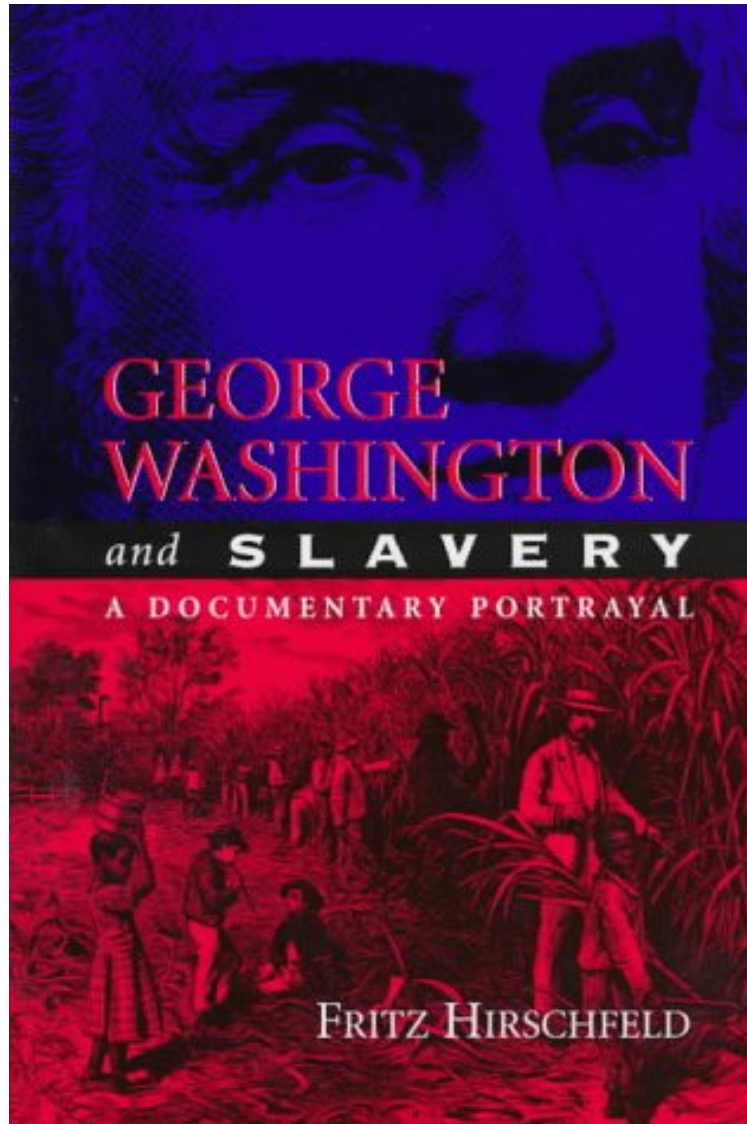


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George Washington and Slavery: A Documentary Portrayal

Fritz Hirschfeld

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Fritz Hirschfeld : George Washington and Slavery: A Documentary Portrayal before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised George Washington and Slavery: A Documentary Portrayal:

3 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Slavery and its impact on the Founder of our NationBy Sheila TillmanThis was an excellent text, rivaling the great "Founding Brothers - The Revolutionary Generation" by Joseph J. Ellis. It addresses the fundamental question I have always had; how could slavery continue (thrive) in a "free" nation?

I have been reading a lot about the Founding Fathers with the central purpose of answering this very question. This book "George Washington Slavery" includes many quotes and letters from the general that specifically addresses the slavery issue. It uses Washington and his contemporaries own letters to paint a story of our most famous founding father and his viewpoint on Blacks and slavery. It begins by discussing how Washington obtained his large slave population through his marriage with Martha. It tells us that Washington was your typical (although meticulous) plantation owner. The Mount Vernon Estate was the most envied in the land. This was due to not only Washington's management but also slave labor. You get a strong sense of how important slavery was to the every day needs of our most esteemed founding father. However, Washington changed his views about Blacks during the Revolutionary War when he initiated enlisting Blacks into the Army (in the North not the South). Unfortunately, this was only done as a last resort after British Lord Cornwallis had announced that Black slaves could seek freedom if they took up arms with the British. It was then that Washington, faced with a mounting slave force with weapons, decided it was a smart strategy to allow Blacks to serve for the colonies. What was most disappointing about Washington is that he was well aware of several Blacks with courage, intelligence and character. This book tells us about the Black poetess Phyllis Wheatley who was highly regarded for her literature (Washington once wrote her and he did address her with respect). There were several slaves that fought valiantly in the Revolutionary War and won recognition from Washington and other generals. He was always known to be fair on the battlefield with both his White and Black soldiers. There are several notably slaves such as his own Billy Lee that stood side by side with Washington through even his military battles. Frenchman Marquis de Lafayette often wrote Washington about the abolition of slavery? In fact, Lafayette wrote Washington about the large-scale emancipation of slaves in the French colony of Cayenne, the capital city of what is now known as Guiana. Therefore, Washington not only had first hand knowledge that Blacks were capable individuals, but also that slavery could and had been abolished in another part of the world. Washington still was willing to sit idle while hundreds of thousands were destined to a life of bondage. At one time the Washington estate housed over 400 slaves (including children). They catered to the every needs of the Washingtons. Martha Washington had personally eleven slaves to perform her cooking, cleaning, sewing, etc. This book was full of letters by the Washingtons regarding their slaves. It indicated that the Washingtons were fair and reasonable with their slave labor. In fact, the only time George revolted punitively was in regard to runaways. The last will and testament of George Washington was to free his slaves. This is good, but in my opinion is not enough to remove the stain of slavery in his life. Even though he was fair to his slaves, he could have set in motion (or at least continued the existing momentum) emancipation in this country. The original impression I had before was that Whites during our revolutionary time lived in an environment where slavery was an unchallenged institution. This book and others indicate that there was a growing abolition movement in this country that began at the nations' founding. I get the impression from Washington and the other Founding Fathers that they realized slavery was wrong. Of course it would have been hard to move towards abolition. It is always difficult to give up status and an economic advantage. Power and privilege are always difficult to give up. And even if Washington could give up the Presidency of the United States he could not find himself to give up the comforts of slavery while he was living. This was a question about power and the need to feel superior to others. Emancipation would have been challenged by his fellow southern plantation owners. Of course it would have been challenged and certainly unpopular, but many ideas are challenged. The Founders including Washington could have provided freedom for slaves after they reach an appropriate age. This was a strategy employed by the northern states. He could have been more outspoken and introduced a plan to gradually rid the country of this egregious sin. The question is whether this is worth fighting for. There are many examples where Washington put his life on the line for ideas he felt were worth the fight. Was the fight worth it? Fighting a war against the world's largest Army was hard and many thought suicidal. But you fight for things that you believe in and ideas that are worth it. That was one of the themes of the revolution. In Washington's opinion (and most other key leaders of our nation at that time), the plight, hopes, dreams, viewpoints, feelings and freedom of Blacks were not worth the fight. 3 of 9 people found the following review helpful. Very riveting version of history not found in usual classes. By Walt Randle (mxvb19a@prodigy.com) This was a very well researched historical view of George Washington that is not presented in normal history classes. While it is known that he owned slaves, this book provides a gateway to allow the reader to step back through time to get a true sense of what it was like to be "owned" by General Washington. The photocopies of actual hand written letters about recapturing his runaway slaves shows him to be a vindictive person who had no conflict over being a staunch freedom fighter while owning slaves at the same time. Duh! While some apologists for him say that he was a benevolent owner, the fact remains that his "employees" worked over 12 hours each day, seven days a week with neither a salary nor a 401k. The book also points out a very clever concealment of the "fugitive slave law" in the constitution. (Section 2 article 4) that George spearheaded. After reading this work one can see that his slave plantation was every bit as horrific as anything to be found in Treblinka, Bergen-Belsen or Dauchau. 7 of 11 people found the following review helpful. Hindsight is indeed 20/20. By Dennis Phillips Mr. Hirschfeld has put a lot of time and research into this work and has turned out a good look at Washington the slave owner. He like the writers of recent attacks on T. Jefferson however forget to tell the whole story. Early in the 21st century it is easy to look back and see what an evil slavery was. The fact that we weren't raised being told that

slavery was not only acceptable but a positive good makes our viewpoint much easier. Washington like Jefferson was raised by people who told him slavery was indeed a good thing. The society he grew up in and probably even his ministers told him the same thing. Hirschfeld's work is lacking in that he doesn't point out that by ever beginning to see the wrongs of the slave system Washington had shown a great deal of moral growth. Otherwise this is a fine book that examines an area of Washington's life that does deserve attention.

"I never mean (unless some particular circumstance should compel me to it) to possess another slave by purchase; it being among my first wishes to see some plan adopted, by which slavery in this country may be abolished by slow, sure and imperceptible degrees." George Washington, September 9, 1786

No history of racism in America can be considered complete without taking into account the role that George Washington, the principal founding father, played in helping to mold the racist cast of the new nation. Because General Washington, the universally acknowledged hero of the Revolutionary War in the postwar period uniquely combined the moral authority, personal prestige, and political power to influence significantly the course and the outcome of the slavery debate, his opinions on the subject of slaves and slavery are of crucial importance to understanding how racism succeeded in becoming an integral and official part of the national fabric during its formative stages. The successful end of the War for Independence in 1783 brought George Washington face-to-face with a fundamental dilemma: how to reconcile the proclaimed ideals of the revolution with the established institution of slavery. So long as black human beings in America could legally be considered the chattel property of whites, the rhetoric of equality and individual freedom was hollow. Progressive voices urged immediate emancipation as the only way to resolve the contradiction; the Southern slave owners, of course, stood firm for the status quo. Washington was caught squarely in the middle. As a Virginia plantation proprietor and a lifelong slaveholder, Washington had a substantial private stake in the economic slave system of the South. However, in his role as the acknowledged political leader of the country, his overriding concern was the preservation of the Union. If Washington publicly supported emancipation, he would almost certainly have to set an example and take steps to dispose of his Mount Vernon slaves. If he spoke out on the side of slavery, how could he legitimately and conscientiously expect to uphold and defend the humanistic goals and moral imperatives of the new nation as expressed in the Declaration of Independence and embodied in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights? His was a balancing act that became more and more difficult to sustain with the passing years. Relying primarily on Washington's own words—his correspondence, diaries, and other written records—supplemented by letters, comments, and eyewitness reports of family members, friends, employees, aides, correspondents, colleagues, and visitors to Mount Vernon, together with contemporary newspaper clippings and official documents pertaining to Washington's relationships with African Americans, Fritz Hirschfeld traces Washington's transition from a conventional slaveholder to a lukewarm abolitionist. *George Washington and Slavery* will be an essential addition to the historiography of eighteenth-century America and of Washington himself.

From Library Journal Washington led the fight for American independence? for whites only. The fact that the revolution did not free the slaves who worked his plantations at Mount Vernon was not lost on his abolitionist contemporaries. Evidence suggests that Washington went from being a firm believer in the slave system before the revolution to becoming a mild abolitionist after the Treaty of Paris. His final act was to free his slaves after his death. Hirschfeld, editor of the John Hancock papers, explores Washington's life as a slaveholder and his views on slavery in detail, concluding that Washington refused to deal with the slavery question publicly because he thought the new nation could not withstand such a divisive issue. If Washington, Hirschfeld maintains, had actively supported abolition in his lifetime, there may not have been a Civil War. Despite such a conclusion, which stretches conjecture to the breaking point, Hirschfeld has written a thoroughly researched book on a topic not often dealt with in detail. For all libraries.

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From Kirkus s Recently several writers (e.g., Conor Cruise O'Brien in *The Long Affair*) have critically examined the racial hypocrisy of Thomas Jefferson, who preached equality but practiced slavery. Now fellow Virginia slaveholder George Washington receives like treatment. Hirschfeld, the editor of the John Hancock Papers, shows that in the pre-Revolutionary era Washington ran a successful plantation with slave labor and participated in the most brutal aspects of the slave system: He purchased and sold slaves, pursued runaways with vigor, and subjected wayward slaves to harsh punishments. The Revolutionary War and its Enlightenment ideology changed that: both because of concerns about his reputation and rapidly developing moral doubts about the justice of slavery. Mostly drawing on Washington's own correspondence and diaries and those of contemporaries, Hirschfeld shows how Washington's attitudes toward slavery evolved during his life. Prewar plantation records show that he assembled a large slave population, apparently without moral qualms, as his landholdings expanded, but in 1775 he reversed an earlier decision to bar African-Americans from military service. By 1779 he was expressing a distaste for the slave trade, and in 1786 he even wrote, "I never mean . . . to possess another slave by purchase; it being among my first wishes to see some plan adopted, by the legislature by which slavery in this Country may be abolished by slow, sure, imperceptible degrees." He refrained from breaking up slave families, even though this practice made his plantation

unprofitable, and finally in his will he freed his slaves. Hirschfeld shows that Washington's private dislike of slavery didn't lead him as president to exercise his moral leadership to end the institution. Hirschfeld speculates that Washington understandably didn't want to jeopardize the new nation's unity. Describing his final attitude as "lukewarm abolitionism," the author concludes that Washington's was a mixed legacy. A thoughtful and well-documented work that does not diminish Washington's greatness, but shows the iconic Gilbert Stuart figure at his most morally vulnerable. (20 illustrations) -- Copyright 1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved. "Hirschfeld offers the most substantial and sensible argument yet about Washington's entanglement with slavery." *Georgia Historical Quarterly*