

## George Washington's Legacy in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century

The vast mural that covers the interior of the U.S. Capitol dome celebrates America, from her historical figures to her historic accomplishments. Central to all of these compositional elements is our nation's founding father, George Washington. Seated amongst the heavens, Washington sits enthroned in the clouds. He is surrounded by allegories of the thirteen original colonies, further solidifying his contribution to the founding of the nation. This mural was painted sixty-six years after Washington's death. Why was Washington chosen to be at the center of the composition? How did Washington's legacy resonate with contemporary viewers in the 1860s approximately seventy-seven years after the end of the Revolutionary War?

In Washington's lifetime his moral disposition and character were celebrated by his countrymen who defined his greatness by his inner virtue, a trait exhibited by his lack of interest in political ambition or personal gain. One powerful action that made Washington such an admired figure was that, although he was handed absolute power, he relinquished it once his duty as commander-in-chief of the Continental Army had been fulfilled. The resignation of

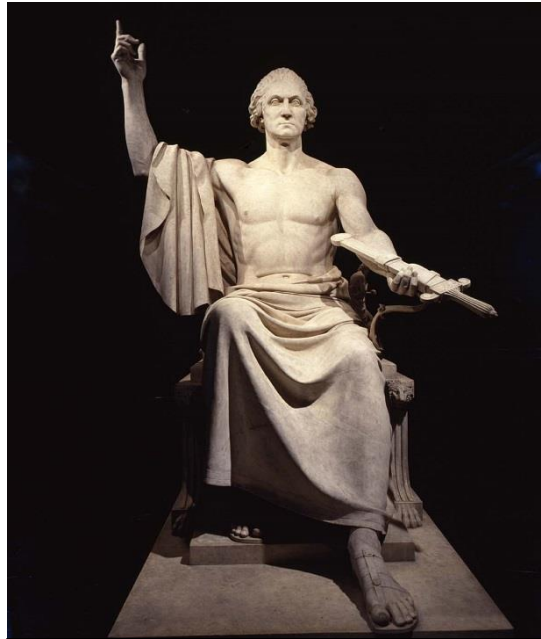


[U.S. Capitol Crypt](#); George Washington would have been interned directly below the circle of columns. Photo courtesy of the Architect of the Capitol

his military commission, his relinquishment of power, conformed to the revered model of **Cincinnatus**, the ancient Roman farmer who when called to action by his country, set aside his farmer's plow to take up arms in a time of great necessity, only to renounce absolute military power once the region entered a time of stability. John Adams once declared, "I glory in the character of Washington because I know him to be an exemplification of the American character."

Upon Washington's death, a Congressional committee was formed to prepare funeral and memorial arrangements for the much-beloved president. The original plan the committee formed was to intern Washington's remains in a marble tomb beneath the dome of the United States Capitol Building, in a crypt below. Martha Washington consented to the plan for her husband's remains, but she died before the tomb could be completed. Plans changed and Washington's final resting place was relocated to Mount Vernon where, according to his will, Washington wanted to be buried all along. To this day Washington's unused tomb remains in the Capitol.

That the plan to bury Washington beneath the Capitol dome fell through did not deter the Capitol's designers from wanting to commemorate the first president in that location. The first such commemoration was a monumental sculpture by renowned American sculptor **Horatio Greenough** for the center of the rotunda. The larger-than-life sculpture depicted a seated Washington clad in a toga, in a pose reminiscent of the Greek god Zeus. Unfortunately, Greenough's half-naked George Washington created quite a scandal at its time; an era characterized by decorum and modesty. The sculpture was promptly moved outside to the Capitol gardens. Brumidi adapted this pose for his fully-clothed version of Washington in the dome fresco painting.



[George Washington](#), 1840, Horatio Greenough, marble, Smithsonian American Art Museum

After his death Washington remained, as eloquently put by Continental Army cavalry officer **Henry Lee**, "first in the hearts of his countrymen." Celebrations to commemorate his birth were planned. As the years passed after his death, he came closer and closer to **deification**. Washington's name became synonymous with America, liberty, freedom and moral character. His popularity knew no bounds. Washington's image graced everything from plates and teacups to fireplace mantles. One European traveler was amazed to find that "[E]very American considers it his sacred duty to have a likeness of Washington in his home, just as we have the images of God's saints." Furthering the notion that the apotheosis is the deification of Washington is a statement written by Gustave de Beaumont, traveling companion of **Alexis de Tocqueville**. While visiting America in 1831, Beaumont reflected: "I know that [America] has its heroes; but nowhere have I seen their statues. To Washington alone there are busts, inscriptions, columns; this is because Washington, in America, is not a man but a God." Brumidi's fresco which is arguably the grandest memorial dedicated to Washington, elevates the founding father to god-like status and in doing so venerates him as the ideal American.

For audiences in the mid-nineteenth century and during the time of the Civil War, George Washington became a unifying figure, one whom both the North and the South could look to as a role model. The North viewed the first president as a symbol for unity, while the South revered him as a stalwart opponent to tyranny. In fact, Washington was so revered by both

sides that his home, Mount Vernon, was deemed neutral territory by both the Union and the Confederacy during the war.

Washington's commemoration on the dome of the Capitol building exemplifies the idea that this memorial, and others like it, had more to do with the time period in which it was created rather than the past events the memorial actually depicted. Historian Michael Kammen has remarked that, "Societies in fact reconstruct their pasts rather than faithfully record them, and they do so with the needs of contemporary culture clearly in mind – manipulating the past in order to mold the present." While not manipulating history, Brumidi presents us with a composition that speaks volumes to the power of the American spirit, depicting the triumph of our nation's ingenuity. Brumidi would complete the fresco painting on the dome in a single month, April 1865, which saw two significant events in American history; the surrender of Confederate General **Robert E. Lee** at Appomattox and President Abraham Lincoln's assassination. In the aftermath of the war, images of Washington helped soothe the nation's wounds, reminding Americans that their nation was once great and could be great again.

## **Glossary**

**Alexis de Tocqueville:** (1805-1859) French historian and political thinker, best known for his book, *Democracy in America*, a study of American society.

**Cincinnatus:** (519-430 B.C.) Ancient Roman statesman and aristocrat, regarded for his virtue and best known for his post-war resignation of complete power and authority.

**deification:** the act of elevating or glorifying to divine or god-like status.

**Henry Lee:** (1756-1818) cavalry officer in the Continental Army during the American Revolution; father of Confederate Civil War general Robert E. Lee.

**Horatio Greenough:** (1805-1852) American sculptor who worked almost exclusively for the United States government. He is best known for his controversial sculpture of a toga-clad George Washington, based on a statue of the Greek god Zeus by ancient Greek sculptor Phidias.

**Robert E. Lee:** (1807-1870) Confederate Civil War general