

Washington family tree



The Mural Monument

George Washington's family crest, and the basis for the US flag, originates in Garsdon. By Keith Lord.



That this remarkable politician, soldier and self-educated champion of the people was uniquely qualified to unite the states, is a matter of public record. Less well known, is the family history that links America's first - and arguably most famous - president, with a small village in Wiltshire

In the tiny parish church at Garsdon, three miles to the east of Malmesbury, a number of memorials can be found

The most striking is the mural monument, created in the 1680s to Sir Lawrence Washington, buried with his wife, Anne, in a vault beneath the chancel.

Still visible are the scars of damage done during renovation work in 1855, when the monument was taken down and used as a barrow plank by masons, who then dumped it unceremoniously in the garden of the rectory. Some years later, its remains were discovered, purchased and removed by a group of enterprising tourists, and were it not for the timely intervention at Southampton Docks of the incoming rector, a valuable piece of our heritage would have been lost to America.

Thankfully, the memorial has now been fully restored and replaced in its original position on the north wall of the Chancel. Most of the carved stonework has survived and, most notably, the repainted Washington coat of arms (surmounted by the family crest of an eagle rising) is once again resplendent in red, white and blue.

The inscription on black marble, though less well preserved, speaks of Sir Lawrence Washington, born April 5, 1579, at Great Hadham in Hertfordshire, and only son to Lawrence Washington (the younger) of Salgrave in Northamptonshire; registrar of the high court of chancery and member for Maidstone in the first parliament of King James I (1603).

A somewhat studious man, Lawrence's Oxford education served him well when, in 1619 upon the death of his father, he not only inherited all his 'lands, tenements, and hereditaments' but succeeded to his post as registrar. So successful was he, that in 1627 at Alderton, he was knighted by King Charles himself.



Detail of Mural Monument

Quite why Sir Lawrence then chose to move to Wiltshire is unknown: perhaps to join his many relatives already living in the area. But what is known, is that in 1631, he purchased Garsdon manor; a Jacobean retreat perched high on ground adjoining the church, and formerly an ancient possession of Malmesbury Abbey. Originally given by Matilda, queen of William the Conqueror, the property left the possession of the church when it was presented by the crown to Sir Henry Moody, in reward for assistance offered to a rather overweight Henry VIII, after he had fallen from his horse.

By all accounts a more benevolent lord of the manor than his 'moody' predecessor, Sir Lawrence remained at Garsdon until his death in the spring of 1643, from which day forward, he willed that 12 pence a week be distributed each Sunday, to buy bread for the poor. The monument subsequently erected in his name honours 'a loving husband, a tender father...and to those of this parish a perpetual benefactor'.

The good Sir Lawrence, "whom it pleased God to take unto his peace from the fury of ensuing wars" was spared the trauma and upheaval of what was to follow his death. For the Civil War of 1642-49 was to bring ruin to many with Royalist sympathies and create divisions that respected ties of neither blood nor friendship.

The Washingtons for their part, remained staunchly united in their allegiance to the crown. But such loyalties were to prove costly when the parliamentary forces triumphed over those of King Charles, and the subsequent loss of fortune inclined at least one branch of the family (derived from Lawrence's uncle Robert) to seek a new life in the new world.

It was, in fact, John Washington (cousin of the Garsdon Washingtons) who set sail in the summer of 1658 for Virginia, where through industry and sound judgement, he would acquire land and position. The family raised would eventually lead to the birth of his great grandson George on February 22 1732.



Garsdon Manor

Growing up on the Washington plantation, George excelled in horsemanship and the more robust sports, but received little in the way of a formal education - having to rely almost entirely upon his own reading. When his father died young, leaving a large family and inadequate means, he initially sought work as a surveyor. But at the age of 20, following the death of his elder half brother Lawrence, he inherited Mount Vernon estate and settled, for a while, into the life of a country gent.

Following his appointment in 1753 however, as district adjutant and major, George's military career gathered apace, matched only by his rise through the political ranks. In 1759, he was elected to the Virginia House of Burgesses, and subsequently chosen to represent the state at the Continental Congress of 1774/75, that concerned itself with the increasingly bitter disputes with the British.

As the colonies and their economic interests expanded, one crisis followed another, and what began as a scattering of skirmishes, soon deteriorated into open warfare. The emerging republic looked for leadership and turned to George Washington - by now a seasoned and high-ranking soldier - who took over as commander-in-chief of the American armies in the June of 1775.

Though Congress formally adopted the Declaration of Independence on July 4 of the following year, hostilities would continue until April 1783; at which time the British finally departed and General George Washington resigned his commission to return to the affairs of his estate.

Four years later however, with the framing of a constitution, George Washington, 'all-conquering hero', was elected first president of the United States. The man that had led his country to victory over the British, now set about stabilising its culture and politics, and well before his death on December 14, 1789, had become immortalised in the minds of the American people as a symbol of their new-fledged national identity, alongside the constitution and the 4th of July.

But immortalised too, was the Washington family coat of arms. Not only, and undeniably so, in the flag of his home state of Virginia can you see the influence of the family crest residing in Garsdon parish church, but in the stars and stripes of the national flag itself.

At its formal adoption in 1777, George Washington — a politician after all — spoke of the (original) 13 stripes, that represented the colonies of the first union: "We take the stars from Heaven," he proclaimed, "the red from our mother country, separating it by white stripes, thus showing that we have separated from her, and the white stripes shall go down to posterity representing liberty."

Separated perhaps, but as the monument at Garsdon bears witness, in the 'star spangled banner' of the greatest political and economic power in the world, there will forever be a little England.