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Excerpt from George Washington's hand-written Last Will and Testament, freeing his slaves.



Above: "The Washington Family" by Edward Savage, 1796. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art. Below: The March to Valley Forge, December, 1777, by William B.T. Trego. Courtesy of the Valley Forge Historical Society. "The Presidents' House Site" exhibit states, Washington's Mount Vernon helped make him one of the wealthier men in the United States. However, Washington laid down "his life, his fortune and his sacred honor," as here depicted.

### Accuracy vs. Revisionism

However, George Washington's Last Will and Testament, dated July 9, 1790 states to the contrary:

**"Item.** Upon the decease of my wife, it is my Will & desire that all the Slaves which I hold in my own right, shall receive their freedom. – To emancipate them during her life, would, tho' earnestly wished by me, be attended with such insuperable difficulties on account of their intermixture by Marriages with the Dower Negroes, as to excite the most painful sensations, if not disagreeable consequences from the latter, while both descriptions are in the occupancy of the same proprietor; it not being in my power, under the tenure by which the Dower Negroes are held, to manumit them. And whereas among those who will receive freedom according to this devise, there may be some, who from old age or bodily infirmities, and others who on account of their infancy, that will be unable to support themselves; it is my Will and desire that all who come under

the first & second description, shall be comfortably clothed & fed by my heirs while they live; and that such of the latter description, as have no parents living, or if living are unable to provide for them, shall be bound by the Court until they shall arrive at the age of twenty five years; and in cases where no record can be produced, whereby their ages can be ascertained, the judgment of the Court, upon its own view of the Subject shall be adequate and final. The Negroes thus bound, are (by their Masters or Mistresses) to be taught to read & write; and to be brought up to some useful occupation, agreeably to the Laws of the Commonwealth of Virginia, providing for the support of orphan and other poor Children. – and I do hereby expressly forbid the sale, or transportation out of said Commonwealth, of any Slave I may die possessed of, under any pretence whatsoever. – and I do moreover – most pointedly, and most solemnly enjoin it upon my Executors hereafter named, or the Survivors of them, to see that this clause respecting Slaves, and every part thereof be religiously fulfilled at the epoch at which it is directed to take place; without evasion, neglect or delay, after the crops which may then be on the ground are harvested, particularly as it respects the aged and infirm; seeing that a regular and permanent fund be established for their support so long as there are subjects requiring it; not trusting to the uncertain provision to be made by individuals. – And to my Mulatto man William (calling himself William Lee) I give immediate freedom; or if he should prefer it (on account of the accidents which have befallen him, and which have rendered him incapable of walking or of any active employment) to remain in the situation he now is, it shall be optional in him to do so: In either case however, I allow him an annuity of thirty dollars during his natural life, which shall be independent of the victuals & cloaths he has been accustomed to receive, if he chuses the last alternative; but in full with his freedom, if he prefers the first; and this I give him as a testimony of my sense of his attachment to me, and for his faithful services during the Revolutionary War.

**Item.** To the Trustees (Governors, or by whatsoever other name they may be designated) of the Academy in the Town of Alexandria, I give and bequeath, in Trust, four thousand dollars, or in other words twenty of the shares which I hold in the Bank of Alexandria, towards the support of a Free school established at, and annexed to the said Academy; for the purpose of educating such orphan children, or the children of such other poor and indigent persons as are unable to

accomplish it with their own means; and who, in the judgment of the Trustees of the said Seminary, are best entitled to the benefit of this donation...”<sup>1</sup>