

The Truth about George Washington's Presidential Inaugural Bible

by

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Many have been erroneously led to believe the following: "George Washington's Inaugural Bible was a Masonic one – proving he was a Mason."

How this bible came to be used by Washington is an unusual story. Shortly before the General's arrival at Federal Hall in New York City on Inauguration Day, April 30, 1789, members of the First Congress discovered that no Bible was on hand for the inaugural ceremony. They searched through the building in consternation, and without success. Many of them perhaps felt that without a Bible the oath could not be administered, nor Washington proclaimed America's first president.

New York State Chancellor, Robert R. Livingston, was visibly concerned until the Marshall of the inaugural parade, Joseph Morton, recalled that his Masonic Lodge's bible was only a few blocks away down Wall Street. A short time later this Bible was provided.

While Secretary Otis of the Senate held the Bible upon a red velvet cushion, Chancellor Livingston administered the oath of office to Washington, whose left hand rested upon the opening (Genesis 49-50); his right hand upraised. When the oath was completed, Washington added the phrase, "I swear, so help me God!" and bending down, kissed the open book.

While Chancellor Livingston loudly proclaimed Washington President, Joseph Morton stepped forward and carefully folded down a corner of the opened page, thus preserving a record of the random opening Washington had saluted, and returned it to his Lodge.

Not very long after this historic event, the members of St. John's Lodge, No. I, inserted a page into the Bible to commemorate the important part it played in the installation of President Washington. This page follows the frontispiece and precedes the engraved title. Written in the style of an engraver, is the following text, headed by an engraving of Washington after the Vaughan portrait by Gilbert Stuart:

"On This Sacred Volume

On the 30th day of April A.M. 5789

In the City of New York

Administered to

George Washington

THE FIRST PRESIDENT of the UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

THE Oath

To support the Constitution OF THE United States."

George Washington's personal, three-volume, hand-autographed Bible (unclassified) is *not* a Masonic one. It is housed in the Rare Book Collection of the Library of Congress. In the Library Archives at Mount Vernon are the following, belonging to, and constantly used by, George and Martha Washington and family:

The Washington family Bible (wherein is recorded the birth of George Washington)

The Book of Common Prayer (bearing Martha Washington's Signature)

A concordance to the Holy Scriptures (1760)

Martha Washington's personal autographed family Bible (containing the Lewis family genealogy).

It is further recorded that Martha Washington would shut herself up in her bed chamber each morning from 5 to 6 a.m. reading her Bible and meditating upon its contents, in order to begin each day on the right foot.

Washington owned two family pews, numbered 28 and 29 at Pohick Episcopal Church of Truro Parish in Lorton, Virginia. From October 25, 1762 to February 23, 1784, Washington served as vestryman of Truro Parish. One of the civil functions of the old vestries was to oversee the needs of the poor.

In the possession of Pohick Church is one of George Washington's original Bibles. The inside cover has the following inscription in the handwriting of the subscriber and donor, who was his adopted grandson,

Presented to Truro Parish for the use of Pohick Church, July 11, 1802. With the request that should said church cease to be appropriated to Divine worship which God forbid, and for the honor of Christianity, it is hoped will never take place. In such case I desire that the vestry will preserve this Bible as a testimony of regard from the subscriber after a residence of 19 years in the Parish. - George Washington Parke Custis.

Also housed in the Rare Book Collection of the Library of Congress is the original 1732-1785 *Vestry Book of Pohick Episcopal Church*. This *Vestry Book* contains a continuous record of every vestry from its founding in 1732 to January 23, 1785.

George Washington purchased a large, leather-bound Bible and Psalter, for use by Pohick Church. It also comprises the Book of Common Prayer. At the end of the book of Malachi, this inscription is found:

This Bible was used in Pohick Church, Fairfax County, Virginia, when in that ancient temple which is yet in use, the “father of this country” worshipped the God of his fathers.

In the Book of Common Prayer, prayers and petitions for the King of England are crossed out the replaced with prayers for the governor of the state and local magistrates.

When in Williamsburg, Virginia, Washington attended Bruton Parish Episcopal Church; when in Alexandria, Virginia, he worshipped at Christ Episcopal Church; when residing in Pennsylvania, he attended Christ Episcopal Church of Philadelphia, when in New York, he worshipped at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Wall Street, wherein is preserved his Inaugural pew; and when in Charleston, South Carolina, he worshipped at St. Michael’s Episcopal Church (pew 43). Each of Washington’s pews is designated by an historic marker.

Of further interest is a bequest in George Washington’s Last Will and Testament, which commences, “In the Name of God, Amen:”

“To the Reverend, now Bryan, Lord Fairfax, I give a Bible in three large folio volumes, with notes, presented to me by the Right Reverend Thomas Wilson, Bishop of Sodor and Man.”

George Washington died on December 14, 1799. His funeral, conducted by Reverend Thomas Davis, Jr. of Christ Episcopal Church, Alexandria, took place at Mount Vernon, where he is buried according to the dictates of his Last Will and Testament. Four Memorial Services at the *Old Presbyterian Meeting House* in Alexandria, Virginia, were conducted by Reverend James Muir, its pastor; Reverend Thomas Davis, Jr. of Christ Church, Alexandria; Reverend James Tolleson of the Methodist Church and Reverend William Maffit, headmaster of Alexandria Academy.

On the wall above Washington’s sarcophagus and that of his wife, Martha, is inscribed a poignant Scripture, from the *Episcopal Burial Service Prayer Book*, epitomizing his life:

I am the Resurrection, and the Life; sayeth the Lord.
He that believeth in Me, though he were dead, yet shall
he live. And whosoever liveth and believeth in Me shall never die.
(The Gospel according to John, Chapter XI, verses 25 and 26.)

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