

The Founding Fathers: Virginia

En Español

John Blair, Virginia



Scion of a prominent Virginia family, Blair was born at Williamsburg in 1732. He was the son of John Blair, a colonial official and nephew of James Blair, founder and first president of the College of William and Mary. Signer Blair graduated from that institution and studied law at London's Middle Temple. Thereafter, he practiced at Williamsburg. In the years 1766-70 he sat in the Virginia House of Burgesses as the representative of William and Mary. From 1770 to 1775 he held the position of clerk of the colony's council.

An active patriot, Blair signed the Virginia Association of June 22, 1770, which pledged to abandon importation of British goods until the Townshend Duties were repealed. He also underwrote the Association of May 27, 1774, calling for a meeting of the colonies in a Continental Congress and supporting the Bostonians. He took part in the Virginia constitutional convention (1776), at which he sat on the committee that framed a declaration of rights as well as the plan for a new government. He next served on the Privy Council (1776-78). In the latter year, the legislature elected him as a judge of the General Court, and he soon took over the chief justiceship. In 1780 he won election to Virginia's high chancery court, where his colleague was George Wythe.

Blair attended the Constitutional Convention religiously but never spoke or served on a committee. He usually sided with the position of the Virginia delegation. And, in the commonwealth ratifying convention, Blair helped win backing for the new framework of government.

In 1789 Washington named Blair as an associate justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, where he helped decide many important cases. Resigning that post in 1796, he spent his remaining years in Williamsburg. A widower, his wife (born Jean Balfour) having died in 1792, he lived quietly until he succumbed in 1800. He was 68 years old. His tomb is in the graveyard of Bruton Parish Church.

James Madison, Virginia



The oldest of 10 children and a scion of the planter aristocracy, Madison was born in 1751 at Port Conway, King George County, VA, while his mother was visiting her parents. In a few weeks she journeyed back with her newborn son to Montpelier estate, in Orange County, which became his lifelong home. He received his early education from his mother, from tutors, and at a private school. An excellent scholar though frail and sickly in his youth, in 1771 he graduated from the College of New Jersey (later Princeton), where he demonstrated special interest in government and the law. But, considering the ministry for a career, he stayed on for a year of postgraduate study in theology.

Back at Montpelier, still undecided on a profession, Madison soon embraced the patriot cause, and state and local politics absorbed much of his time. In 1775 he served on the Orange County committee of safety; the next year at the Virginia convention, which, besides advocating various Revolutionary steps, framed the Virginia constitution; in 1776-77 in the House of Delegates; and in 1778-80 in the Council of State. His ill health precluded any military service.

In 1780 Madison was chosen to represent Virginia in the Continental Congress (1780-83 and 1786-88). Although originally the youngest delegate, he played a major role in the deliberations of that body. Meantime, in the years 1784-86, he had again sat in the Virginia House of Delegates. He was a guiding force behind the Mount Vernon Conference (1785), attended the Annapolis Convention (1786), and was otherwise highly instrumental in the convening of the Constitutional Convention in 1787. He had also written extensively about deficiencies in the Articles of Confederation.

Madison was clearly the preeminent figure at the convention. Some of the delegates favored an authoritarian central government; others, retention of state sovereignty; and most occupied positions in the middle of the two extremes. Madison, who was rarely absent and whose Virginia Plan was in large part the basis of the Constitution, tirelessly advocated a strong government, though many of his proposals were rejected. Despite his poor speaking capabilities, he took the floor more than 150 times, third only after Gouverneur Morris and James Wilson. Madison was also a member of numerous committees, the most important of which were those on postponed matters and style. His journal of the convention is the best single record of the event. He also played a key part in guiding the Constitution through the Continental Congress.

Playing a lead in the ratification process in Virginia, too, Madison defended the document against such powerful opponents as Patrick Henry, George Mason, and Richard Henry Lee. In New York, where Madison was serving in the Continental Congress, he collaborated with Alexander Hamilton and John Jay in a series of essays that in 1787-88 appeared in the newspapers and were soon published in book form as *The Federalist* (1788). This set of essays is a classic of political theory and a lucid exposition of the republican principles that dominated the framing of the Constitution.

In the U.S. House of Representatives (1789-97), Madison helped frame and ensure passage of the Bill of Rights. He also assisted in organizing the executive department and creating a system of federal taxation. As leaders of the opposition to Hamilton's policies, he and Jefferson founded the Democratic-Republican Party.

In 1794 Madison married a vivacious widow who was 16 years his junior, Dolley Payne Todd, who had a son; they were to raise no children of their own. Madison spent the period 1797-1801 in semiretirement, but in 1798 he wrote the Virginia Resolutions, which attacked the Alien and Sedition Acts. While he served as Secretary of State (1801-9), his wife often served as President Jefferson's hostess.

In 1809 Madison succeeded Jefferson. Like the first three Presidents, Madison was enmeshed in the ramifications of European wars. Diplomacy had failed to prevent the seizure of U.S. ships, goods, and men on the high seas, and a depression wracked the country. Madison continued to apply diplomatic techniques and economic sanctions, eventually effective to some degree against France. But continued British interference with shipping, as well as other grievances, led to the War of 1812.

The war, for which the young nation was ill prepared, ended in stalemate in December 1814 when the inconclusive Treaty of Ghent which nearly restored prewar conditions, was signed. But, thanks mainly to Andrew Jackson's spectacular victory at the Battle of New Orleans (Chalmette) in January 1815, most Americans believed they had won. Twice tested, independence had survived, and an ebullient nationalism marked Madison's last years in office, during which period the Democratic-Republicans held virtually uncontested sway.

In retirement after his second term, Madison managed Montpelier but continued to be active in public affairs. He devoted long hours to editing his journal of the Constitutional Convention, which the government was to publish 4 years after his death. He served as co-chairman of the Virginia constitutional convention of 1829-30 and as rector of the University of Virginia during the period 1826-36. Writing newspaper articles defending the administration of Monroe, he also acted as his foreign policy adviser.

Madison spoke out, too, against the emerging sectional controversy that threatened the existence of the Union. Although a slaveholder all his life, he was active during his later years in the American Colonization Society, whose mission was the resettlement of slaves in Africa.

Madison died at the age of 85 in 1836, survived by his wife and stepson.

Image: Courtesy of the Collection of Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa

George Mason, Virginia



In 1725 George Mason was born to George and Ann Thomson Mason. When the boy was 10 years old his father died, and young George's upbringing was left in the care of his uncle, John Mercer. The future jurist's education was profoundly shaped by the contents of his uncle's 1500-volume library, one-third of which concerned the law.

Mason established himself as an important figure in his community. As owner of Gunston Hall he was one of the richest planters in Virginia. In 1750 he married Anne Eilbeck, and in 23 years of marriage they had five sons and four daughters. In 1752 he acquired an interest in the Ohio Company, an organization that speculated in western lands. When the crown revoked the company's rights in 1773, Mason, the company's treasurer, wrote his first major state paper, *Extracts from the Virginia Charters, with Some Remarks upon Them*.

During these years Mason also pursued his political interests. He was a justice of the Fairfax County court, and between 1754 and 1779 Mason was a trustee of the city of Alexandria. In 1759 he was elected to the Virginia House of Burgesses. When the Stamp Act of 1765 aroused outrage in the colonies, George Mason wrote an open letter explaining the colonists' position to a committee of London merchants to enlist their support.

In 1774 Mason again was in the forefront of political events when he assisted in drawing up the Fairfax Resolves, a document that outlined the colonists' constitutional grounds for their objections to the Boston Port Act. Virginia's Declaration of Rights, framed by Mason in 1776, was widely copied in other colonies, served as a model for Jefferson in the first part of the Declaration of Independence, and was the basis for the federal Constitution's Bill of Rights.

The years between 1776 and 1780 were filled with great legislative activity. The establishment of a government independent of Great Britain required the abilities of persons such as George Mason. He supported the disestablishment of the church and was active in the organization of military affairs, especially in the West. The influence of his early work, *Extracts from the Virginia*

Charters, is seen in the 1783 peace treaty with Great Britain, which fixed the Anglo-American boundary at the Great Lakes instead of the Ohio River. After independence, Mason drew up the plan for Virginia's cession of its western lands to the United States.

By the early 1780s, however, Mason grew disgusted with the conduct of public affairs and retired. He married his second wife, Sarah Brent, in 1780. In 1785 he attended the Mount Vernon meeting that was a prelude to the Annapolis convention of 1786, but, though appointed, he did not go to Annapolis.

At Philadelphia in 1787 Mason was one of the five most frequent speakers at the Constitutional Convention. He exerted great influence, but during the last 2 weeks of the convention he decided not to sign the document.

Mason's refusal prompts some surprise, especially since his name is so closely linked with constitutionalism. He explained his reasons at length, citing the absence of a declaration of rights as his primary concern. He then discussed the provisions of the Constitution point by point, beginning with the House of Representatives. The House he criticized as not truly representative of the nation, the Senate as too powerful. He also claimed that the power of the federal judiciary would destroy the state judiciaries, render justice unattainable, and enable the rich to oppress and ruin the poor. These fears led Mason to conclude that the new government was destined to either become a monarchy or fall into the hands of a corrupt, oppressive aristocracy.

Two of Mason's greatest concerns were incorporated into the Constitution. The Bill of Rights answered his primary objection, and the 11th amendment addressed his call for strictures on the judiciary.

Throughout his career Mason was guided by his belief in the rule of reason and in the centrality of the natural rights of man. He approached problems coolly, rationally, and impersonally. In recognition of his accomplishments and dedication to the principles of the Age of Reason, Mason has been called the American manifestation of the Enlightenment. Mason died on October 7, 1792, and was buried on the grounds of Gunston Hall.

Image: Courtesy of National Archives, Records of Exposition, Anniversary, and Memorial Commissions (148-CP-121)

James McClurg, Virginia

James McClurg was born near Hampton, VA, in 1746. He attended the College of William and Mary and graduated in 1762. McClurg then studied medicine at the University of Edinburgh and received his degree in 1770. He pursued postgraduate medical studies in Paris and London and

published *Experiments upon the Human Bile and Reflections on the Biliary Secretions* (1772) in London. His work and writings were well-received and respected by the medical community, and his article was translated into several languages. In 1773 McClurg returned to Virginia and served as a surgeon in the state militia during the Revolution.

Before the end of the war the College of William and Mary appointed McClurg its professor of anatomy and medicine. The same year, 1779, he married Elizabeth Seldon. James McClurg's reputation continued to grow, and he was regarded as one of the most eminent physicians in Virginia. In 1820 and 1821 he was president of the state medical society.

In addition to his medical practice, McClurg pursued politics. In 1782 James Madison advocated McClurg's appointment as secretary of foreign affairs for the United States but was unsuccessful. When Richard Henry Lee and Patrick Henry declined to serve as representatives to the Constitutional Convention in 1787, McClurg was asked to join Virginia's delegation. In Philadelphia McClurg advocated a life tenure for the President and argued for the ability of the federal government to override state laws. Even as some at the convention expressed apprehension of the powers allotted to the presidency, McClurg championed greater independence of the executive from the legislative branch. He left the convention in early August, however, and did not sign the Constitution.

James McClurg's political service did not end with the convention. During George Washington's administration McClurg served on Virginia's executive council. He died in Richmond, VA, on July 9, 1823.

Edmund Randolph, Virginia



On August 10, 1753, Edmund Randolph was born in Tazewell Hall, Williamsburg, VA. His parents were Ariana Jenings and John Randolph. Edmund attended the College of William and Mary and continued his education by studying the law under his father's tutelage.

When the Revolution broke out, father and son followed different paths. John Randolph, a Loyalist, followed the royal governor, Lord Dunmore, to England, in 1775. Edmund then lived with his uncle Peyton Randolph, a prominent figure in Virginia politics. During the war Edmund served as an aide-de-camp to General Washington and also attended the convention that adopted Virginia's first state constitution in 1776. He was the convention's youngest member at age 23. Randolph married Elizabeth Nicholas in 1776.

Randolph continued to advance in the political world. He became mayor of Williamsburg and Virginia's attorney-general. In 1779 he was elected to the Continental Congress, and in November 1786 Randolph became Governor of Virginia. In 1786 he was a delegate to the

Annapolis Convention.

Four days after the opening of the federal convention in Philadelphia, on May 29, 1787, Edmund Randolph presented the Virginia Plan for creating a new government. This plan proposed a strong central government composed of three branches, legislative, executive, and judicial, and enabled the legislative to veto state laws and use force against states that failed to fulfill their duties. After many debates and revisions, including striking the section permitting force against a state, the Virginia Plan became in large part the basis of the Constitution.

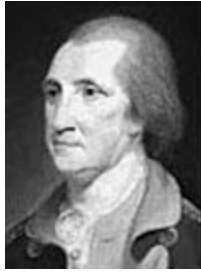
Though Randolph introduced the highly centralized Virginia Plan, he fluctuated between the Federalist and Antifederalist points of view. He sat on the Committee of Detail that prepared a draft of the Constitution, but by the time the document was adopted, Randolph declined to sign. He felt it was not sufficiently republican, and he was especially wary of creating a one-man executive. He preferred a three-man council since he regarded "a unity in the Executive" to be the "foetus of monarchy." In a Letter . . . on the Federal Constitution, dated October 10, 1787, Randolph explained at length his objections to the Constitution. The old Articles of Confederation were inadequate, he agreed, but the proposed new plan of union contained too many flaws. Randolph was a strong advocate of the process of amendment. He feared that if the Constitution were submitted for ratification without leaving the states the opportunity to amend it, the document might be rejected and thus close off any hope of another plan of union. However, he hoped that amendments would be permitted and second convention called to incorporate the changes.

By the time of the Virginia convention for ratification, Randolph supported the Constitution and worked to win his state's approval of it. He stated his reason for his switch: "The accession of eight states reduced our deliberations to the single question of Union or no Union."

Under President Washington, Edmund Randolph became Attorney General of the United States. After Thomas Jefferson resigned as Secretary of State, Randolph assumed that post for the years 1794-95. During the Jefferson-Hamilton conflict he tried to remain unaligned. After retiring from politics in 1795, Randolph resumed his law practice and was regarded as a leading figure in the legal community. During his retirement he wrote a history of Virginia. When Aaron Burr went on trial for treason in 1807, Edmund Randolph acted as his senior counsel. In 1813, at age 60 and suffering from paralysis, Randolph died while visiting Nathaniel Burwell at Carter Hall. His body is buried in the graveyard of the nearby chapel.

Image: Courtesy of National Archives, Records of Exposition, Anniversary, and Memorial Commissions (148-CCD-40)

George Washington, Virginia



The eldest of six children from his father's second marriage, George Washington was born into the landed gentry in 1732 at Wakefield Plantation, VA. Until reaching 16 years of age, he lived there and at other plantations along the Potomac and Rappahannock Rivers, including the one that later became known as Mount Vernon. His education was rudimentary, probably being obtained from tutors but possibly also from private schools, and he learned surveying. After he lost his father when he was 11 years old, his half-brother Lawrence, who had served in the Royal Navy, acted as his mentor. As a result, the youth acquired an interest in pursuing a naval career, but his mother discouraged him from doing so.

At the age of 16, in 1748, Washington joined a surveying party sent out to the Shenandoah Valley by Lord Fairfax, a land baron. For the next few years, Washington conducted surveys in Virginia and present West Virginia and gained a lifetime interest in the West. In 1751-52 he also accompanied Lawrence on a visit he made to Barbados, West Indies, for health reasons just before his death.

The next year, Washington began his military career when the royal governor appointed him to an adjutantship in the militia, as a major. That same year, as a gubernatorial emissary, accompanied by a guide, he traveled to Fort Le Boeuf, PA, in the Ohio River Valley, and delivered to French authorities an ultimatum to cease fortification and settlement in English territory. During the trip, he tried to better British relations with various Indian tribes.

In 1754, winning the rank of lieutenant colonel and then colonel in the militia, Washington led a force that sought to challenge French control of the Ohio River Valley, but met defeat at Fort Necessity, PA - an event that helped trigger the French and Indian War (1754-63). Late in 1754, irked by the dilution of his rank because of the pending arrival of British regulars, he resigned his commission. That same year, he leased Mount Vernon, which he was to inherit in 1761.

In 1755 Washington reentered military service with the courtesy title of colonel, as an aide to Gen. Edward Braddock, and barely escaped death when the French defeated the general's forces in the Battle of the Monongahela, PA. As a reward for his bravery, Washington won his colonelcy and command of the Virginia militia forces, charged with defending the colony's frontier. Because of the shortage of men and equipment, he found the assignment challenging. Late in 1758 or early in 1759, disillusioned over governmental neglect of the militia and irritated at not rising in rank, he resigned and headed back to Mount Vernon.

Washington then wed Martha Dandridge Custis, a wealthy widow and mother of two children. The marriage produced no offspring, but Washington reared those of his wife as his own. During the period 1759-74, he managed his plantations and sat in the Virginia House of Burgesses. He

supported the initial protests against British policies; took an active part in the nonimportation movement in Virginia; and, in time, particularly because of his military experience, became a Whig leader.

By the 1770s, relations of the colony with the mother country had become strained. Measured in his behavior but strongly sympathetic to the Whig position and resentful of British restrictions and commercial exploitation, Washington represented Virginia at the First and Second Continental Congresses. In 1775, after the bloodshed at Lexington and Concord, Congress appointed him as commander in chief of the Continental Army. Overcoming severe obstacles, especially in supply, he eventually fashioned a well-trained and disciplined fighting force.

The strategy Washington evolved consisted of continual harassment of British forces while avoiding general actions. Although his troops yielded much ground and lost a number of battles, they persevered even during the dark winters at Valley Forge, PA, and Morristown, NJ. Finally, with the aid of the French fleet and army, he won a climactic victory at the Battle of Yorktown, VA, in 1781.

During the next 2 years, while still commanding the agitated Continental Army, which was underpaid and poorly supplied, Washington denounced proposals that the military take over the government, including one that planned to appoint him as king, but supported army petitions to the Continental Congress for proper compensation. Once the Treaty of Paris (1783) was signed, he resigned his commission and returned once again to Mount Vernon. His wartime financial sacrifices and long absence, as well as generous loans to friends, had severely impaired his extensive fortune, which consisted mainly of his plantations, slaves, and landholdings in the West. At this point, however, he was to have little time to repair his finances, for his retirement was brief.

Dissatisfied with national progress under the Articles of Confederation, Washington advocated a stronger central government. He hosted the Mount Vernon Conference (1785) at his estate after its initial meetings in Alexandria, though he apparently did not directly participate in the discussions. Despite his sympathy with the goals of the Annapolis Convention (1786), he did not attend. But, the following year, encouraged by many of his friends, he presided over the Constitutional Convention, whose success was immeasurably influenced by his presence and dignity. Following ratification of the new instrument of government in 1788, the electoral college unanimously chose him as the first President.

The next year, after a triumphal journey from Mount Vernon to New York City, Washington took the oath of office at Federal Hall. During his two precedent-setting terms, he governed with dignity as well as restraint. He also provided the stability and authority the emergent nation so sorely needed, gave substance to the Constitution, and reconciled competing factions and divergent policies within the government and his administration. Although not averse to

exercising presidential power, he respected the role of Congress and did not infringe upon its prerogatives. He also tried to maintain harmony between his Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson and Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton, whose differences typified evolving party divisions from which Washington kept aloof.

Yet, usually leaning upon Hamilton for advice, Washington supported his plan for the assumption of state debts, concurred in the constitutionality of the bill establishing the Bank of the United States, and favored enactment of tariffs by Congress to provide federal revenue and protect domestic manufacturers.

Washington took various other steps to strengthen governmental authority, including suppression of the Whisky Rebellion (1794). To unify the country, he toured the Northeast in 1789 and the South in 1791. During his tenure, the government moved from New York to Philadelphia in 1790, he superintended planning for relocation to the District of Columbia, and he laid the cornerstone of the Capitol (1793).

In foreign affairs, despite opposition from the Senate, Washington exerted dominance. He fostered United States interests on the North American continent by treaties with Britain and Spain. Yet, until the nation was stronger, he insisted on the maintenance of neutrality. For example, when the French Revolution created war between France and Britain, he ignored the remonstrances of pro-French Jefferson and pro-English Hamilton.

Although many people encouraged Washington to seek a third term, he was weary of politics and refused to do so. In his "Farewell Address" (1796), he urged his countrymen to forswear party spirit and sectional differences and to avoid entanglement in the wars and domestic policies of other nations.

Washington enjoyed only a few years of retirement at Mount Vernon. Even then, demonstrating his continued willingness to make sacrifices for his country in 1798 when the nation was on the verge of war with France he agreed to command the army, though his services were not ultimately required. He died at the age of 67 in 1799. In his will, he emancipated his slaves.

Image: Courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

George Wythe, Virginia

George Wythe, the second of Thomas and Margaret Wythe's three children, was born in 1726 on his family's plantation on the Back River in Elizabeth City County, VA. Both parents died when Wythe was young, and he grew up under the guardianship of his older brother, Thomas.



Though Wythe was to become an eminent jurist and teacher, he received very little formal education. He learned Latin and Greek from his well-educated mother, and he probably attended for a time a grammar school operated by the College of William and Mary.

Wythe's brother later sent him to Prince George County to read law under an uncle. In 1746, at age 20, he joined the bar, moved to Spotsylvania County, and became associated with a lawyer there. In 1747 he married his partner's sister, Ann Lewis, but she died the next year. In 1754 Lt. Gov. Robert Dinwiddie appointed him as acting colonial attorney general, a position that he held for only a few months. The next year, Wythe's brother died and he inherited the family estate. He chose, however, to live in Williamsburg in the house that his new father-in-law, an architect, designed and built for him and his wife, Elizabeth Taliaferro. They married in 1755, and their only child died in infancy.

At Williamsburg, Wythe immersed himself in further study of the classics and the law and achieved accreditation by the colonial supreme court. He served in the House of Burgesses from the mid-1750s until 1775, first as delegate and after 1769 as clerk. In 1768 he became mayor of Williamsburg, and the next year he sat on the board of visitors of the College of William and Mary. During these years he also directed the legal studies of young scholars, notably Thomas Jefferson. Wythe and Jefferson maintained a lifelong friendship, first as mentor and pupil and later as political allies.

Wythe first exhibited revolutionary leanings in 1764 when Parliament hinted to the colonies that it might impose a stamp tax. By then an experienced legislator, he drafted for the House of Burgesses a remonstrance to Parliament so strident that his fellow delegates modified it before adoption. Wythe was one of the first to express the concept of separate nationhood for the colonies within the British empire.

When war broke out, Wythe volunteered for the army but was sent to the Continental Congress. Although present from 1775 through 1776, Wythe exerted little influence and signed the Declaration of Independence after the formal signing in August 1776. That same year, Wythe, Jefferson, and Edmund Pendleton undertook a 3-year project to revise Virginia's legal code. In 1777 Wythe also presided as speaker of the Virginia House of Delegates.

An appointment as one of the three judges of the newly created Virginia high court of chancery followed in 1778. For 28 years, during 13 of which he was the only chancellor, Wythe charted the course of Virginia jurisprudence. In addition, he was an ex officio member of the state superior court.

Wythe's real love was teaching. In 1779 Jefferson and other officials of the College of William and Mary created the first chair of law in a U.S. institution of higher learning and appointed Wythe to fill it. In that position, he educated America's earliest college-trained lawyers, among

them John Marshall and James Monroe. In 1787 he attended the Constitutional Convention but played an insignificant role. He left the proceedings early and did not sign the Constitution. The following year, however, he was one of the Federalist leaders at the Virginia ratifying convention. There he presided over the Committee of the Whole and offered the resolution for ratification.

In 1791, the year after Wythe resigned his professorship, his chancery duties caused him to move to Richmond, the state capital. He was reluctant to give up his teaching, however, and opened a private law school. One of his last and most promising pupils was young Henry Clay.

In 1806, in his eightieth year, Wythe died at Richmond under mysterious circumstances, probably of poison administered by his grandnephew and heir, George Wythe Sweeney. Reflecting a lifelong aversion to slavery, Wythe emancipated his slaves in his will. His grave is in the yard of St. John's Episcopal Church in Richmond.

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