

## IT'S A WOMAN'S WORLD

February 22, 1935

Description: Eleanor Roosevelt describes the lives of George and Marsha Washington leading up to and during his time as president.

Participants: Eleanor Roosevelt

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This being George Washington's Birthday, our minds turn from the year 1935 to the year 1789, when Charles Thompson, the Secretary of Congress, rode to Mount Vernon with the official certification which brought to Washington the news that he had been practically unanimously elected first President of these United States.

One might think that this was a welcome honor, but we are told that to both George and Martha Washington it was a heavy cross for they have to leave their beloved country home and take up again for eight long years the public life which neither of them really cared for.

Martha Washington greeted her old friend, the Secretary of Congress, with her usual cordial hospitality, but he had to wait to deliver his message until the master of Mt. Vernon came in at dinner time, for he was riding the rounds of his farms, which he did daily. On receiving the news, George Washington prepared at once to journey back with the messenger, but first he rode to Fredericksburg to take leave of his mother. If any of my hearers know her little cottage there and her favorite point of vantage where she went in the afternoons and took her sewing to enjoy the view, they can picture the woman who could say to her son, "You will see me no more . . . George. Fulfill the high destiny which the Heavens appear to assign you, go my son, and may that Heaven and your mother's blessing be with you always."

He rode back the following day to Mount Vernon and on the following day he started on the ride to New York City. Mrs. Washington did not go with her husband, so she did not see his inauguration.

The news of the inauguration took weeks and even months to reach certain remote country districts and even she knew little about it for weeks. Today the radio permits almost any interested individuals to participate in any great public happening, no matter in what part of the country it may be. My husband received the news of his nomination by telephone and we flew to Chicago, and his inauguration speech could be heard by radio around the world.

Martha Washington did not start with her two grandchildren for New York until a month after her husband, and one can well imagine what busy days she spent, for we read that Washington wore at his inauguration a brown cloth suit which was woven in this country, doubtless on his own place, for there is still the spinning cottage where the hand looms are on exhibition at Mt. Vernon. Being the mistress of a large plantation meant being the head of a number of industries in those days, and aside from the ordering of all these things for her absence, she packed and shipped by water, pictures and vases and knick knacks which had been given her husband by foreign dignitaries, and which she felt would add to the beauty and homelikeness of the house which had been chosen to serve as the President's residence in New York City.

Her journey to New York was made in a coach drawn by four horses and she was on the New Jersey shore by a barge just as her husband had been and at every point along the route gentlemen and ladies came to meet her and do her honor, and the old soldiers who turned out were frequently heard to say, "God bless Lady Washington", for they had experienced her many kindnesses during the war. How different are my frequent and, comparatively speaking, monotonous journeys by train or air or automobile!

When Mrs. Washington reached New York the gaities began in earnest. The day after her arrival she and the President gave an informal dinner for a number of gentlemen and the President stood at the head of the table and asked a blessing in a few words. In these informal parties everything was simple,

only one glass of wine being served after the dessert and the guests taking their leave as they desired. Dinners were, as a rule, at four o'clock.

On Friday evenings, however, when Mrs. Washington held her "drawing rooms" or levees from eight to nine o'clock she exacted a more formal demeanor and full dress was required of all. The President usually stood by the right side of his wife and they received their visitors together, then George Washington moved among them, talking to all, like any genial host, and as the ladies were all seated, he stopped and paid compliments to each. But Mrs. Washington was careful not to let these ceremonies interfere with their life long habits and at nine o'clock she would say, "The General always retires at nine o'clock and I usually precede him", and in a few minutes their drawing room would be closed.

Today we dine at 7:45 or 8 o'clock and it is often one o'clock before the night's work is done.

President Washington held his levees for gentlemen only from three to four o'clock on Tuesdays, and though at first he wore the suit of brown cloth before alluded to, later, when the seat of Government moved to Philadelphia, we hear that he was dressed in black velvet with black silk stockings with knee and shoe buckles of silver and hair powdered and bound in a silk bag or queue behind. He wore yellow gloves and held a cocked hat in his hand with a cockade in it and adorned with black feathers about an inch deep. He also wore an elegant dress sword, the scabbard of which was of white polished leather. What fun Mrs. Washington must have had over his clothes! I often wish the clothes men wear today were as picturesque!

During the sessions of Congress there was a Congressional dinner at the Presidential Mansion every Thursday, and on New Year's Day the President followed the custom which was in vogue in New York City then and received formal visitors between the hours of one and three, even Mrs. Washington also had a reception for about three hours. The weather must have been very unusual on this first New Year's Day, because one authority tells us that the ladies appeared in summer dresses at Mrs. Washington's reception. The guests were served with tea and coffee and plum cake. Ice-cream was then unknown. Our menus are very similar, however, today.

One can easily see in these entertainments the beginnings of the customs of today. The parties were attended by the foreigners already here as representatives of their governments in this youthful country of ours, and by officials of the Government as well as by merchants and men of importance in other walks of life. The forms have changed a little and crystallized as the years have gone by, but the same hospitality is extended by the Chief Executive of this country and with much the same dignified simplicity. The President shakes hands today, whereas he bowed to the gentlemen at least at those first receptions, and the ladies doubtless curtsied, almost a forgotten art!

Where one sees the greatest contrast, however, is in the hours of work for the head of the Government today and the numbers of people received and entertained. Even Washington complained that until he established the one hour a week to receive visitors he found it difficult to accomplish much work, because people dropped in upon him at all times, but the President today has appointments to see and confer with people which cover most of his ordinary working hours, and therefore much of his work on mail and speeches must be done during the evening and early morning hours, so the Presidents of today have little time to enjoy the simple family life which was possible for Washington.

Every evening except Fridays the Washingtons spent alone with their children and Mr. and Mrs. Lear, who formed a part of the family. Mr. Lear, or Washington himself, would read aloud at nine o'clock Mrs. Washington would retire. The President would go to his library and an hour later would also go to his chamber. He always rose at dawn and busied himself in his library until the breakfast hour. On Sunday mornings everyone went to church and no visitors were received except veteran soldiers who were always received with the greatest kindness. Frequently Martha Washington and the children went to afternoon services and in the evening Washington read a sermon or some devotional work aloud to the family and closed the day by reading a portion of the Scripture to Mrs. Washington in her own apartment.

One thing Mrs. Washington insisted upon, she would have no political intrigue in her domain and she never permitted political discussions among her guests. She never expressed an opinion on public questions, except in private amongst her most intimate friends. It is believed that an address published in the Philadelphia papers in 1780 while she was in that city entitled, "The Sentiments of an American

Woman”, was written by her, but if this is so this was the only political writing she ever did. Her husband’s letters to her, however, were frequently filled with references to public questions and her own ideas were clear, and expressed with absolute honesty her responses, s<sup>2</sup>howing her eager interest in all that concerned the affairs of the nation at that time.

Mrs. Washington had a steward, who supervised the household, went to market and engaged servants, much the same duties as those performed by the White House housekeeper today. It is recorded that the President tried to make the steward careful of his expenditures and that Mrs. Washington gave careful supervision to her table. In a day when meals were too bountiful, the Washingtons seem to have lived with simplicity, but I imagine the three course dinner or family meal served today in the White House would not have seemed sufficient in those days. Mrs. Washington concealed her distaste for official life, but it is plain from her letters to some of her friends at home, that she was not really happy during the first part of her time in New York and that she had a distaste for the restraint of her life and for her many duties as official hostess. She performed them with dignity and sweet courtesy, thus setting an example to all the women who were to follow in her footsteps. The restraints are, of course, far less today. The fact that transportation is so easy makes it possible for women to move about with greater freedom and our modern clothes make it possible for us to do many things which were out of the question on Martha Washington’s day.

News travels so much faster and newspapers have to have news and for that reason there is far less individual privacy today than existed in the time of our first President. Women’s position has changed considerably and she has certain responsibilities as an individual citizen; therefore, she must make up her mind on questions of public interest, but Martha Washington’s good taste in expressing in public no opinions that differed with her husband still holds good, for the responsibility to the electorate is his and the leadership should therefore remain in his hands.

Of course, George Washington never lived in the White House, but he chose the site for the city and passed on the plans so that we can thank him for the pride which we have in a city which is growing year by year more beautiful and we can thank Martha Washington for her example of tact and kindness and cordial hospitality combined with simplicity and love of quiet, dignified living. She was a pioneer and maker of precedents, and we can be grateful that she took an interest in public affairs and did her duty in the way that she considered compatible with the standards and customs of the day.

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Transcribed by Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project staff

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Transcribed from a script held in the Eleanor Roosevelt Papers at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.

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<sup>2</sup> The letter “s” is a handwritten interlineation.