

# What Would George Washington Do?

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This intriguing question was considered by MW Brother William J. Thomas, Grand Master, Grand Lodge of New York. Presented on the following pages is his article published in *The Short Talk Bulletin*, The Masonic Service Association of North America, June 2015.

What strikes one in reading the article is that it provides a little glimpse into colonial America in the year 1748. We picture a teenage George Washington struggling through a school exercise, possibly burning a little midnight oil and twiddling his quill pen. His words reflect the moral mindset of the time, which centered on respect and honor—so important in human interactions; and certainly a major factor in the role the young Washington was to play in the formation of the United States of America.

# What Would George Washington Do?

By William J. Thomas

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As a teenager, I grew fond of reading the histories of famous people, especially our country's founders and earliest leaders. DeWitt Clinton (U.S. Senator and sixth Governor of New York) was among them, and another was George Washington.

Even today I see the value of studying our past, as a guide for our future. We learn from past mistakes, and benefit from our past successes.

President and Brother George Washington was born on February 22, 1732. His home in Mt. Vernon, Virginia, is a testament to his leadership, in both our Country and in our personal lives.

When George was 16 years of age, he was given a writing exercise, and he wrote his 101 Rules of Civility. Here are a few, and I present them in the language and phraseology of that era:

- **Every action done in Company ought to be with Some Sign of Respect, to those that are Present.**
- **Let your Conversation be without Malice or Envy . . . , And in all Causes of Passion, admit Reason to Govern.**
- **Shew Nothing to your Friend that may affright him.**
- **Reprehend not the imperfections of others . . .**
- **Never express anything unbecoming . . .**
- **Associate yourself with Men of good Quality, ... for 'tis better to be alone than in bad Company.**

Today, many, if not all of these rules, sound a little fussy, if not downright silly. It would be easy to dismiss them as outdated, and appropriate to a time of powdered wigs and quills. But they reflect a focus that is increasingly difficult to find.

George's rules have in common a focus on other people, rather than the narrow focus of our own self-in-

terests, which we find so prevalent today.

Fussy or not, they represent more than just good manners. They are the small sacrifices that we should all be willing to make for the good of all, and for the sake of living together.

These rules proclaim our respect for others, and in turn give us the gift of self-respect and heightened self-esteem.

Richard Brookhiser, in his book on Washington, wrote that “all modern manners in the western world were originally aristocratic. Courtesy meant behavior appropriate to a court; chivalry comes from chevalier – a knight.”

Yet Washington was to dedicate himself to freeing America from a court’s control. Could manners survive?

Without realizing it, Washington was outlining and absorbing a system of courtesy appropriate for all mankind. When the company for whom the decent behavior was to be performed expanded to the nation, Washington was ready. Parson

Weems got it right, when he wrote about Washington that, “it was ‘no wonder everybody honored him, who honored everybody.’”

Civility in our daily lives is not just something that is nice to do. Civility is politeness and courtesies in our behavior and our speech.

Yet Civility seems to be something we remark upon by exception rather than by the rule. How often we see road rage! How frequently do we see rude behavior around us? We see people yelling and using profanity to resolve differences; along with careless and unkind characterizations behind their backs.

By civil behavior, we learn to disagree without being disagreeable. Civility is the hard work of staying pleasant, even with those with whom we have profound and deep-rooted disagreements.

Civility is the external fabric of humanity. It is how we interact with respect among our many stations in life.

As Masons, we obligate ourselves in our three degrees to good manners and fair dealings with our

Brother Masons in the Lodge. But these generous principles extend further, and are to be applied outside the Lodge as well.

Every human being has a claim upon your civility in your relationships. Do good unto all, and perhaps ... just perhaps ... it might inspire others to act likewise.

Live in peace, my friends; live in peace. And may the God of Love and Peace delight to dwell with and bless you.



## George Washington's Rules of Civility



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