George Washington’s Gay Mess: Was the ‘Father of Our Country’ a Queen?

BLATANT LIES, OPEN SECRETS

What you learned in grade school—that George Washington chopped down a cherry tree and then confessed, “Father, I cannot tell a lie”—is a lie. And what your teacher never told you—that “Washington loved handsome men”—is true.

Evidence of Washington’s love for men has been published before. Noel I. Garde in 1964 included a chapter on George Washington in Jonathan to Gide, The Homosexual in History. One of Garde’s sources was J. V. Nash, Homosexuality in the Lives of the Great, Little Blue Book No. 1564, [1930], Girard, Kansas. The Kansas press had been founded by populist socialists who published the mass circulation Appeal to Reason and then switched to the famous Blue Books. Publication of Homosexuality in the Lives of the Great, like the original Wizard of Oz, attacked the sacred standards of its time. In Kansas—somewhere over the rainbow—they were fighting against the heterosexual standard as well as the gold standard.

Jonathan Ned Katz’s Gay American History, Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A. (1976) followed a populist impulse. He described his book as “significantly not a product of academia; it does not play it safe; it is rough at the edges, radical at heart.” In the final section “Love: 1779–1932,” he examines the correspondence between Alexander Hamilton and John Laurens, aides-de-camp to Washington. The notes to their love letters include references to Washington’s drillmaster, Frederick Steuben and his Greek attachments. Katz, however, labels Garde as “unreliable” and of J. V. Nash, notes only that “The author and publisher of this pamphlet merit research.” While Katz sidesteps the question of Washington, I follow him in viewing “homosexuality” in the broadest possible terms. “A sharp, either/or distinction between erotic and nonerotic relations is another common polarity by which puritan morality has mystified intimate same-sex relations.”

Following these earlier hints of Washington’s attachment to men, I presented a version of this essay as part of a course at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. My lecture distressed some members of the class. One student asked, “If what you say is true, why haven’t we heard about it before?” Another objected that such a story would corrupt grade school (if not college) students. I then responded by surveying the class (about 70 students). Suppose my research is correct. And suppose that the cherry tree story is an out-and-out lie. Washington had a distant relationship with his father; the cherry tree myth surfaced only after Washington’s death. Mason Weems’s story is as fanciful as his claim that he was “parson” at Mount Vernon. Weems’s fabrication, however, has had such staying power because of its heterosexual symbolism (as in breaking a virgin’s “cherry”) and like so many religious creations rests on evidence of things unseen.

If evidence of Washington’s loving men is true and the cherry tree tale a simple lie, then should children be taught a lie about the cherry tree in order to teach them that
telling the truth is good? And should they also be lied to and told that Washington was a conventional heterosexual family man? Rather to my surprise one third of the class favored lying twice: teach the cherry tree story and teach the conventional heterosexual lie. One third favored dropping the cherry tree story and also not mentioning the evidence of Washington’s loving men (even though for the argument, they assumed it was true). And only one third favored truth all the way: drop the cherry lie and teach the fairy truth.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her Epistemology of the Closet (1990) examines some of the difficulties one has in opening closed doors: “In dealing with an open-secret structure, it’s only by being shameless about risking the obvious that we happen into the vicinity of the transformative.” Some academics have been embarrassed by brazen queers and shameful predecessors. They denounce anyone as psychopathic who would identify important figures who have been bisexual, gay or lesbian. Such debased queers would seek to uplift homosexuality and themselves by associating with the rich and famous. For instance during the fifties, thousands of men claimed to have had sex with Rock Hudson and/or Montgomery Clift. One flippant Christopher Street queen exclaimed recently: “You know how gays are always trying to make everyone and everything out to be gay!” The editors of Hidden from History, Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past try to separate themselves from the “bad” gays: “It has long been reassuring for gay people, raised in a society offering them no positive images of themselves, to claim gay heroes, ranging from Sappho, Julius Caesar, and Shakespeare to Willa Cather, Walt Whitman, and Gertrude Stein, and much of the earliest work by historians simply sought to establish in a more scholarly fashion the homosexuality attributed to certain respected historical figures.”

The epistemological difficulties of the “open-secret structure” are endless. Not only the question of what is sex? homosexuality? bisexuality? heterosexuality? But also, what is the United States? Nothing of that name “existed” in Washington’s youth and perhaps not even in his lifetime. And what is an “army”? In what ways have Alexander’s, Caesar’s, Cromwell’s, George III’s, Washington’s, Napoleon’s and Ho Chi Minh’s armies shared a structure? And in what ways does the word “army” hide un-speakable differences? Even today, can we compare the Swiss army with that of the United States?

In Discipline & Punishment, The Birth of the Prison (1975, trs., 1977), Michel Foucault explored the relationship between the uniformization of armies with the contemporaneous inventions of hospitals and schools: “the army, the school and the hospital” provided methods of studying obedience and of enforcing it upon “docile bodies.” His penetrating analysis of French prisons and of Jeremy Bentham’s proposed reforms, however, left many questions about how his analysis could apply to other times and other areas. Foucault explains that “Many disciplinary methods had long been in existence—in monasteries, armies, workshops. But in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the disciplines became general formulas of domination.” Foucault’s formulations can be applied to Washington and his army less easily than to fin de siecle literature. Nonetheless, the newly developed “domination” of the British army greatly alarmed the colonists in Massachusetts, Virginia and elsewhere. The American Revolutionaries opposed the growth so common in Europe “of professional standing armies led neither by a feudal warrior class nor by military contractors but officered by servants of the state.”
Academics have tried to appear judicious in traversing the shoals of so-called “responsible” research. Too seldom do they ask: “responsible” to whom? While academics have tried to become more responsible or at least more obscure, activists have pressed the issue of outing. Publications have taken names like Outweek, Outlook and simply Out. And much movement politics in the United States has come to revolve around closeted homosexuals inside structures of domination (like the military or the National Endowment for the Arts or even universities). Campaigns of exposure have been launched against closeted homosexuals who have used their disguise in order to eliminate other more open homosexuals.

Academia has become much safer for academics thanks to activists, who have risked everything to break their colleagues’ judicious closures. Because of organized resistance to homophobia, dominant powers in academia now hesitate to hire lesbian and gay men. But the battle is only half won because few of the people of power would ever hire an openly gay or bisexual candidate. And few universities have lesbian and gay courses built into their curriculum or into existing courses. While the academy offers many opportunities for homophobes and more for reform, the distance between activists and academics seems to have grown rather than abated.

Like my own previous works on Walt Whitman, this essay on Washington attempts to bridge the gap between the activist and the academic community. Doubtless some of the same issues raised against my earlier books will again trouble some readers. Critics have attacked Calamus Lovers, Walt Whitman’s Working Class Camarados (1987) and Drum Beats, Walt Whitman’s Civil War Boy Lovers (1989) because the “evidence” was insufficient. In the face of a multitude of letters from Whitman’s lovers which Gay Sunshine Press published for the first time, they complained that they had not heard any of this before. Understood in a heterosexual context, these letters, of course, are not evidence at all. In fact there can never be any actual “proof” of Whitman’s having had sex with men. All the best biographers had argued the contrary. Even those who might accept Whitman as gay can’t deal with male prostitution or boy love or drag. They would ignore Nicholas Palmer’s letter asking Whitman about male houses of prostitution and instead speak of Henry James, whose judicious indirection has been a model for some queers.

What constitutes “proof” positive? The judicial model of British common law lingers in the back of many minds. Same sex contact is assumed to be a crime and the “burden of proof” requires evidence beyond “a reasonable doubt.” And who decides? Straight white men constitute the judge and jury. I reject this model entirely. In the first place, if sex with males is a crime, then I celebrate the criminal. Second, I reject the idea that we have to prove something to straight people. Let them prove that they will not kill, maim or imprison us because of our love. I appeal not to juries who rejected the evidence of murder and mayhem in the Dan White or the Rodney King cases. Fuck their impartiality! I appeal to queers to judge the George Washington evidence. Assume everyone is homosexual until proven otherwise. Begin with our own experiences and use them to understand same sex love inside our society and its past.

Finally I reject the argument that examining male to male love in Washington’s life offers too narrow of a focus. Whoever condemned John C. Phillips for being too narrow in his study, George Washington Sportsman (1928)? There are a multitude of very narrow monographic studies, which seldom arouse any anxieties. But any examination of homosexuality, gayness, queerness, bisexuality or even erotophobia drives fear into
the heart of straightness. But those—homosexual, bisexual or heterosexual—who will not come out of their closets suffer immeasurably by their self-imposed dirty little secrets. Like Kafka’s seeker, they stop at the door without daring to enter. This essay asks you the reader not to follow but to join your own liberation. Make history not an act of closure but an act of opening, continuing revolution and revelation.

ARMIES OF LOVERS

The military establishment provides an important context for George Washington’s life. Today the United States armed forces are so militantly anti-gay that many can’t imagine that the man “first in war, first in peace, first in the hearts of his countrymen” loved other men. With all the ROTC cadets and officers now coming out, some have concluded that the presence of mufti same sex love is something new. The openness is new, but the same sex experiences have been more common in the services than out. At one time I had never met an airforce man whom I did not have sex with (the first exception was the brother of a lover, who forced me to remain asexual around his relatives). Wayne Dymes in his comprehensive *Homosexuality, A Research Guide* (1987) notes that, “In Europe, from the 18th century onwards, there are documented cases of homosexual generals and military officers. Wartime experiences seem to foster the emergence of homosexual patterns of behavior.”

Since armies began, the military has always included same sex love. The semi-mythical Amazons may have been the first armies of lovers. Gilbert Herdt has documented the way that Micronesian Sambians feed their youngsters a steady diet of semen so they can become men and then warriors. And in Greece, the Spartans kept their men separated from society. Spartan soldiers fought together as teams of lovers and later excited the young Alexander Hamilton to similar glory. Likewise the famous band of Thebes, the elite military group of that city formed as an army of lovers.

As a same-sex institution (like convents and monasteries), the military has long provided a refuge for those without interest in raising a family. Both women and men in service are seen as more powerful than their domestic brothers and sisters. And even now erotic commercials are run by Marine and Army recruiters emphasizing the sexual attractiveness of their limbs of service. And there has been such a continuous tradition of cocksucking and butt fucking aboard ships that boys entering the navy must be shocked that cruising in the Navy requires as much skill as among civilians. In a homophobic society, of course, all this must be vigorously denied.

In fiscal year 1987, the United States Armed Forces discharged 1,378 persons in “homosexuality separations” and currently they axe about 1,500 men and women a year. Those with special interests in uniforms and those wearing uniforms know that such a figure represents only a fraction of military activists. The services themselves know how inclined their recruits are since they publish lists of lesbian and gay bars which are labeled “off limits.” When the JFK nuclear airforce carrier recently landed in Boston, the sailors used their navy list to find their way around town. Winston Leyland has edited two volumes of *True Homosexual Military Stories: Enlisted Meat* (1991) and *Warriors and Lovers* (1992). Miss Hush (a famous Boston Queen) during the Vietnam War received benefits from her sergeant lover who was a career officer. The sergeant kept a picture of Miss Hush (in drag) in his wallet to show the boys how straight he was. The Pentagon never checked Miss Hush’s cock, which she also sold to other johns in
her butch drag while hubby was away fighting to save the empire.


**WASHINGTON’S MODELS**

Before Washington, a multitude of the great generals were same sex lovers. In 1759 Washington ordered busts of six figures to adorn Mount Vernon: Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Charles XII of Sweden, Frederick the Great, Prince Eugène of Savoy and the Duke of Marlborough. Major General Frank M. Richardson includes all these generals in his study *Mars Without Venus, A Study of Some Homosexual Generals* (1981). Contemporary sophisticates might argue that the word “homosexual” cannot be applied to men from such different times and societies. Nonetheless even in their own times and cultures their sexual impulses and their lives were queer. Washington chose these men as his heroes and their biographies provide a context for his own biography.

Alexander (356–323 BC), according to Athenaeus, was subject to unbridled passion for beautiful boys. A gay bar in Athens now carries his name. Lesbian and gay authors through the centuries have been moved by the story of his life. Roger Peyrefitte, Mary Renault and others have celebrated his lavender streak. The Hellenistic world, of course, differed from today’s gay bars. Alexander, nonetheless, shares with today’s queers a sense of being alienated from his father, from his contemporaries and from his society. His military campaigns carried him far beyond the limits of the Greek imagination. He marched as far as India and died in Babylon with little desire to return to his Macedonian birthplace.

Contemporaries and subsequent historians have debated his intentions. Certainly Alexander was no ordinary Greek. A Macedonian, he did not share the narrow Greek ethnocentrism but took a Persian eunuch Bagoas for his lover; and in the flesh pots of Egypt he allowed himself to be taken as divine. He’s reported to have kept a book of poems under his pillow and to have wept that he had no Homer to record his glories. His campaigns were recorded by rather pedestrian historians, but Washington himself studied these accounts in search of Alexandrine secrets. Alexander’s military genius (which any queen could imitate today) was demonstrated by his triumph in Phrygia. Here Gordius had tied so ingenious a knot that no one could untie it. Alexander cut the knot with his sword. Is this not an early illustration of the famed gay sensibility?

Julius Caesar (100–44 BC) fucked his way to the top. Warren Johansson writes in the *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality* (1990): “Exploiting his youthful good looks, together with the boundless charm for which he continued to be noted, he threw himself with
relish into a scandalous liaison with king Nicomedes IV of Bithynia.” According to a Roman witticism, Caesar was “husband to every woman and wife to every man.” Whether military genius or not, he was a great publicist. Caesar’s Gallic Wars recount the Roman conquest of present-day France and Belgium. (This text has provided a beginning text not only for Latin students but also for military cadets.) After conquering Gaul, Caesar crossed the Rubicon River, conquered Italy, overthrew the Roman Republic and was assassinated on March 15, 44 BC. Supposedly his dying words to his friend (and assassin) were, “Et tu Brute.”

Alexander Hamilton, Washington’s aide-de-camp, took the pen name “Caesar” for articles he wrote supporting ratification of the U.S. Constitution. Hamilton told Jefferson that “The greatest man that ever lived was Julius Caesar.” Washington more often sided with Caesar’s opponent Cato. Even so, his Fairfax patron wrote in 1756 that Washington was fortunate to have read Caesar and the life of Alexander so that he had “therein read of greater Fatigues, Murmurings, Mutinys and Defections than will probably come to your Share.”

Alexander and Caesar would be on any short list of military conquerors, but Washington’s choice of Sweden’s Charles XII (1682–1718) demonstrates an admiration for queerness as well as cleverness. While a mere boy of fifteen, Charles began a largely successful defense of Sweden against Saxony, Prussia, Denmark, Poland and Russia. He made allies with Cossacks, fought in Turkey and died in a battle against Norway in 1718. Charles defeated or neutralized mighty enemies and provided a model of military strategy triumphing even with limited resources. His private life was less known to Washington’s contemporaries and in parts remains obscure even today; nonetheless, everyone knew that he never married nor fooled with women. Charles lived with his soldiers; his immediate staff were not allowed to be married. Washington followed these policies and like Charles often slept with a chosen staff member. Voltaire called Charles XII “the only person in history who was free from all weakness.”

Whether Washington knew the details of Charles XII’s camp life is uncertain, but he received first hand information about Prussia’s Frederick the Great (1712–1786) and his younger brother Prince Henry. Frederick Steuben served with both of these men-loving Germans and was part of their intimate households before he joined Washington at Valley Forge (see below). Lafayette, another Washington aide, later visited both Prince Henry and Frederick. Of the Prince he wrote, “I have scarcely finished breakfast when he comes to see me; we go for a walk by ourselves until dinner; we are close in the same way at supper as well . . . we are always together.” He was likewise charmed with Frederick at Potsdam. He wrote Washington how surprised he was at the “softness of the most beautiful eyes I ever saw, which give as charming an expression to his physiognomy.”

Historian, military strategists, German nationalists and hero worshipers alike unite in calling Frederick “great.” While they say little about his love for men, the evidence of his dalliances is indisputable. An artistic child, Frederick fell in love with an older boy. Caught by his cruel father, the lover was executed before his eyes. A flood of protests came from other European monarchs against the advisability of executing Frederick, the heir to the Prussian throne. At the last minute the father commuted the boy’s death sentence but sent him into semi-imprisonment. There Frederick developed a relationship (which lasted until his death) with a private named Frederdsdorf. The youth was “tall, handsome, clever, silent and polite; and was a talented flautist.” They played duets
together; in his will, Fredersdorf was named as one of the few the king loved. Upon his father's death, Frederick went to take charge while he was in the arms of Francesco Algarotti, an Italian beauty whom he had snatched from Lord Baltimore (proprietor of Maryland lands whose family name also graces the Chesapeake Bay city). Frederick had his pick of international beauties and studs, whom the faithful Fredersdorf carefully guided in and out of the King's chambers, gardens and dining hall. "For company and jokes," Nancy Mitford writes of his final years, "Frederick had a jolly young Italian, the Marchese Lucchesini, an excellent acquisition. Someone said to the King that Lucchesini was clever enough to be used as an ambassador—Frederick agreed and said that was why he kept him in his household."

Prince Eugène of Savoy and the Duke of Marlborough (Winston Churchill's ancestor) were not lovers but they complemented each other on the battlefield. Beefy Marlborough needed the sauce of Eugène, whose preference for men was common knowledge. Known as "Mme l'Ancienne," Prince Eugène, "belonged to a small effeminate set that included such unabashed perverts as the young Abbé de Choisy, who was invariably dressed as a girl, except when he wore the lavish earrings and make-up of a mature woman." But the Duke of Marlborough got his position through his wife's liaison with Queen Anne. Anne herself appointed governor in New York a drag queen, Edward Hyde Lord Cornbury (1702–8) who claimed he dressed in women's clothing in order to honor his queen.

The busts of Alexander, Caesar, Charles XII, Frederick, Marlborough and Eugène which Washington had ordered never reached Mount Vernon. The London merchant tried to pawn off poems on an unwilling colonial customer. Washington's admiration for such a queer cast of generals, nonetheless, offers two important contexts in understanding his own same sex love sensibilities. First the figures provided reference points which suggest possibilities for his own behavior. While not well read, Washington had studied the lives of Alexander and Caesar and he knew people who had firsthand stories from the Swedish, Prussian and French courts. And he took his own training inside the eighteenth century British army. Secondly, these models provided him guides in forming what he called his "family"—the aides who helped him through the War for Independence against England.

**BOY GEORGE**

Washington's youth exemplifies the distant father/dominating mother pattern, which has often identified homosexuals. This paradigm describes some who are now called homosexuals much as the paradigm of rapist describes some heterosexual men. Without granting too much credence to such ideas, one can find clear evidence of father rejection and mother incorporation in Washington's life.

Among the more recent biographers, John E. Ferling, writes in *The First of Men, A Life of George Washington* (1988) that, "In all the millions of words that he ultimately penned, George Washington never mentioned his father." Augustine (Gus) Washington (1694–1743) was a predatory planter, land speculator, slave owner and iron maker. He bred his first wife into her grave and, after pocketing a handsome dowry, soon wed Mary Ball, George's mother. Born in 1732, George was Mary's oldest child; others followed in 1733, 1734, 1735, 1738 and 1739. (In 1736, Gus had visited England and left his son without a father in his tender Oedipal period.) By contrast George himself sired
absolutely zero children. His father’s compulsive heterosexuality was celebrated as part of the imperial campaign to drive the native peoples from their lands and was by no means unusual in eighteenth century Virginia. George’s indifference or incapacity to be a stud was more remarkable. Gus died suddenly in 1743. On his deathbed he was reported as saying that he was glad he’d never hit anybody. “I am sure that from my remarkable muscular powers I should have killed my antagonist and then his blood at this awful moment would have lain heavily on my soul.”

Mary Ball Washington (1708/9–1789) was even tougher than her husband. After bearing and raising so many children, she lived to see George elected President; however, she remained indifferent to her son’s honors and considered them less worthy than hers as a mother. In notable ways, George incorporated Mary’s commanding demeanor. A childhood friend recalled visiting the Washington plantation and being terrified by the mother. He “was ten times more afraid [of her] than I ever was of my own parents.” In Mary’s presence the noisy children became “as mute as mice.” He compared boy George with Mother Washington: “Whoever has seen that awe-inspiring air and manner so characteristic in the Father of his Country, will remember the matron as she appeared when the presiding genius of her well-ordered household, commanding and being obeyed.”

Washington came to incorporate so much of his mother within himself that his relation to her mirrored hers to him: “in childhood he was withdrawn; in youth, resistant; in maturity, resigned.” He did not delete Mary Bell from his life like he did his father but, insofar as possible, he shelved her: “His correspondence with (and about) his mother reveals no emotion except exasperation (and perhaps a saddened tolerance); his visits to her after childhood were infrequent, reluctant, unrewarding, and short.”

Throughout his life George Washington turned to men for love; his relations with women were friendly, even flirtatious, but always asexual. His relations with men were deeper, closer, more physical and perhaps even sexual. In Love’s Coming of Age, Edward Carpenter argues that the differences between men and women have been vastly overemphasized—“that they rather represent the two poles of one group—which is the human race.” So likewise with the differences between friend and fuck buddy: “as people are beginning to see that the sexes form in a certain sense a continuous group, so they are beginning to see that Love and Friendship—which have been so often set apart from each other as things distinct—are in reality closely related and shade imperceptibly into each other.” Washington certainly never shied away from or repudiated homosexual love either in the Platonic or in the criminal sense.

Queers have been traumatized by centuries of persecution by church and state for putting a cock or tongue into another mouth, ass or cunt. Sodomy remained a capital offense in Christian countries until the French revolutionaries decriminalized the act. The Napoleonic code—now adopted in most of Europe and Latin America—retained the reform. In Virginia sodomy was a capital crime and remained so into the nineteenth century. Jefferson proposed castration instead but his “humane” reform was not adopted. Whatever the law, millions have taken great risks in order to enjoy such physical contact, and great numbers have twisted their minds and bodies in order to save themselves from such pleasures.

Even so, the criminalized and hereticized contacts have much less significance than friendships. In the right situations (“I was drunk; asleep; under the influence of drugs; etc.”) anyone might (and multitudes have) tasted the pleasures of male-male or female-
female love. But we need to go beyond the clerics, judges and psychiatrists who have concentrated with such venom on the cock and cunt so that we can understand what kinds of love move a person's imagination. In this area, people fall along a scale of homosexual, bisexual and heterosexual. In Washington's time, people's behavior fell along these ranges even though such words had yet to be invented. And in those ranges, Washington's sexual interests in women were zero compared with his interests in men.

His love of men went through two distinct periods. As a young man, he searched for older men to love. He also sought them as escape hatches to break away from his own mother. While fleeing his mother, at the same time he related to his male lovers as she had related to him. Objects of his desire included his half brother Lawrence Washington, Thomas and William Fairfax (his neighbors and in-laws), Christopher Gist, an early Kentucky explorer and companion, and General Edward Braddock, under whom he served in the French and Indian War. Later as he became a commander, Washington became a mother to a long line of confused men to whom he provided love, direction and attention. George Mercer during the French and Indian War provided a transition; he became Washington's aide-de-camp after Braddock's death. About the same age as Washington, Mercer offered an imperfect model for later aides who were many years younger than the general. During the Revolutionary War, Alexander Hamilton, John Laurens, Gilbert Lafayette, and others were broken in to love and to war by their beloved companion/commander.

**LAWRENCE WASHINGTON**

Washington didn't meet his half brother until Lawrence was twenty years old. Taking Mary Ball as his second wife in 1731, Gus had quickly sent the boys from his first marriage off to England for school. Returning from his English boarding school, Lawrence quickly became inseparable from young George. Biographer Douglas Freeman explains: "As a result of his long and careful schooling in England, the young gentleman had grace, bearing and manners that captivated George. The lad quickly made a hero of Lawrence and began to emulate him." Washington Irving paints the relationship even more romantically: "There was a difference of fourteen years in their ages, which may have been one cause of the strong attachment which took place between them. Lawrence looked down with a protecting eye upon the boy ... while George looked up to his manly and cultivated brother as a model in mind and manners."

Lawrence tried to wean George away from his mother Mary Ball Washington. The household underwent strain; Lawrence was sent off to run another plantation; Mary stopped having babies in 1739. The War of Austrian Succession or King George's War 1740-1748 stirred Lawrence's imagination. He received a commission and raised troops from Virginia who were picked up by the British Royal Navy, where they served under Admiral Vernon in an attack on what is now called Colombia and Panama. Lawrence returned home in time for his father's death and with his inheritance quickly married Anne Fairfax, whose family owned a great percentage of Virginia. They named their plantation Mount Vernon after Lawrence's beloved admiral.

Marriage quickly bored Lawrence; he displayed symptoms of tuberculosis. The older brother convinced George to accompany him to the Barbados for the 1751-52 winter so that they could escape family life. George contracted smallpox in the Barbados and recovered; Lawrence's tuberculosis, however, got worse. George returned to Mount
Vernon in January 1752; Lawrence tried Bermuda for a while, but in April he urged his wife and young brother to join him. Before arrangements could be made, Lawrence returned to Virginia for the Appalachian springtime and died July 16, 1752.

Lawrence Washington married well, had children and set up Mount Vernon, but he also had close contact with male to male sexuality. He spent about seven years in an English boarding school. He served two years under Admiral Vernon in the British Royal Navy, long known for its sodomy. R. R. Burg, Sodomy and the Perception of Evil: English Sea Rovers in the Seventeenth-Century Caribbean (1973) confirms the popular notion that men at sea tie knots with more than rope. There are no cum stained sheets or court records of George’s ties with his brother, but in 1746 Lawrence did work out a plot to get George himself into the Navy. While not every boy joins the navy because of its reputation for sodomy, every boy must have been aware of the notorious reputation of sailors. In the generation before George, Cotton Mather's son joined the navy for just this reason and scandalized his Puritan father when he returned home wearing a leather jacket. And in a subsequent generation, Herman Melville went to sea just to find exotic male meat. In White Jacket (1850), Melville writes, “The sins for which the cities of the plain were overthrown still linger in some of these wooden-walled Gomorrhas of the deep.”

In 1746 Lawrence sent George a letter from a Royal Navy recruiter whose ship was then docked in Virginia. Another letter in more general terms went to Mary Ball Washington asking for her permission (George was only fourteen). While George quickly packed and was ready to go, his Mother used stalling tactics and after a year of delay finally refused permission. She based her decision on a letter from her own brother claiming that “a common sailor before the mast has by no means the common liberty of the Subject; for they will press him from a ship where he has 50 shillings a month and make him take three and twenty; and cut him and staple him and use him like a Negro, or rather, like a dog.” George's Uncle urged him to look for a wife and make his money from raising tobacco, slaves and children. George found the sailor’s cutting and stapling not unattractive; but, if he ran away from home, he would have endangered his rights of inheritance which he would receive in 1753 when he turned twenty-one. He stayed in Virginia but his dreams of Gomorrah were not broken.

THOMAS FAIRFAX

While George had to give up dreams of sailing, his brother soon hooked him up with a wealthy friend. Thomas (1693–1781), 6th Baron Fairfax, attended Oxford and became an odd gentleman indeed. Fairfax mysteriously left his grand Leeds castle in County Kent England and permanently moved to Virginia in 1747. Since Thomas Fairfax never returned to England, he may have had reason to remain in exile; certainly backcountry Virginia was a long way from Oxford or Leeds. The Baron's estate in England was sizeable and his vast proprietary lands in Virginia included all of the land between the Potomac and Rappahannock rivers and west through the Shenandoah Valley—over five million acres.

Lawrence Washington had made his fortune by marrying a cousin of Thomas. To do this he had to butter up the men in the family and he in turn introduced Washington to this trade. Lawrence Washington and his father-in-law William Fairfax (1691–1757) used George as bait for the Baron. The elder men instructed the boy in winning
the older man's attentions. William Fairfax (a cousin of the Baron) had himself come “to love George Washington like a son” and his advice on getting ahead was “to follow the methods he had himself pursued: an assiduous courting of the great.” Cousin William had acted as the Virginia agent for Thomas, 6th Baron Fairfax, and had built Belvoir in 1741 within sight of Mount Vernon. George represented the best hope of retaining Thomas’s favor. Thomas lived at Belvoir between 1747 and 1749; he then built a refuge sixty miles beyond the Blue Ridge, “Greenway Court” where he lived until his death in 1781.

The bait worked for a time: “Fairfax at once took a fancy to the boy. The old bachelor of fifty-seven was literary, philosophical, shrewd, and could hardly fail to be interested in this studious lad of fourteen.” Between 1747 and 1749, George lived most of the time at the Fairfax Belvoir mansion. And when the Baron moved west, George often “made Greenway Court a second home.” The Baron regaled the boy with stories of his own life in the navy and in the army. The family library contained a translation of Suetonius, History of the Twelve Caesars, which contains full accounts of the men loving men Roman emperors. George “enjoyed unrestricted access to the Proprietor’s quite respectable library, and he derived ‘incalculable benefits’ from his association with the urbane, cultured Baron, both in the field hunting fox and deer, and in pipe-smoking, after-hours conversations.”

Preferring only the company of men, Thomas Fairfax hated women intensely and avoided their company; supposedly he had once been jilted and never recovered. The old man took George into his intimate company and “was kind to the boy, who had such a way with horses.” George early mastered the art of riding horses and was reputed to be most stunning when mounted. Lord Fairfax enjoyed the company of men, dogs and horses. George Washington interbred his dogs with the Lord’s; in his diary, he recorded for August 28, 1769: “The young Hound Bitch Chauter was lined [fucked] by Lord Fairfax’s Rockwood (who appears to have the Mange) twice this day.”

The Baron disdained fine clothing and dressed only for the outdoors; he took his pleasure in fox hunting. Even after twenty years, George would go alone with Fairfax as he recorded in his diary (November 19, 1768): “Went a Hunt[ink]g with Lord Fairfax & catchd a Fox.” Oscar Wilde described the English foxhunt as the unspeakable in pursuit of the inedible. Thomas Fairfax gave a queer twist to the sport. To horrify the ladies at Mount Vernon, he once took “to their doorstep his hounds and a fox in a bag so that, without effort, they could watch the kill.”

In 1748 through the Fairfax influence, William and Mary College commissioned the sixteen year old George as official surveyor for Culpeper County. Between 1749 and 1752, Washington completed more than 190 surveys of landholdings in Virginia; through Fairfax’s help the lad himself acquired vast landholdings. George received two thousand acres in the Shenandoah Valley alone; elsewhere he had picked up another four thousand acres through Fairfax’s help. And with the Lord’s help, George was elected to the House of Burgesses along with another favorite, Thomas Bryan Martin.

Although George Washington always retained the good favor of Thomas Fairfax, his relationship became less intimate after 1752. Thomas Bryan Martin (1731–1798) then took up residence in the Baron’s secluded Shenandoah hideaway. Martin became Fairfax’s land agent, always appeared with the Baron in public and never left his Lord’s side. Although George Washington often visited, exchanged dogs and hunted with the couple, he no longer enjoyed the Baron’s exclusive attentions. The great Proprietor cul-
tivated the boys as he did his hunting dogs. Bryan Fairfax, a prodigal son of the family, gravitated to Greenway. A recent biographer writes that “despite the age discrepancy, he and Lord Fairfax got along famously. They exchanged visits, they hunted foxes together—in one letter, the Proprietor mentions leaving a ‘tann’d’ hound at Leesburg for Bryan . . . ” The Proprietor encouraged the boy in his wildness and when he ended up in jail George Washington rushed to bail him out. Bryan married, saw less of the Baron and named his first born after the old man. George Washington himself often went hunting with young Bryan.

While most of the Fairfaxes became open Tories and fled revolutionary Virginia, the old Baron stayed on with the dogs, horses and companions that he loved so well. Moncure Conway in his “A Lord and a Lad,” wrote “There is a tradition that when the first gun of the American revolution was reported at the house of Lord Fairfax, Greenway Court, George Washington was dining there.” Washington later sent the Baron a get-well letter from Valley Forge. The old man died in 1781; by then a celebrated general, Washington took time to send his condolences: “altho’ the good old Lord had lived to an advanced age,” he wrote, “I feel a concern at his death.”

BAREASS BACKWOODS

From “the good old Lord” George himself learned the joys of living in the woods. First as a surveyor under the Fairfaxes he was broken in. The young kid was very green at first. In his diary, George describes the first night in the field: 15 March 1748 near present-day Berryville, Virginia, at Isaac Pennington’s house: “we got our Suppers & was Lighted in to a Room & I not being so good a Woodsman as the rest of my Company striped my self very orderly & went into the Bed as they call’d it.” Presumably he removed his pants, shirt and coat. Underpants hadn’t yet been invented so he may have had a long undershirt or may have been completely nude. The boy soon discovered that his blanket and straw were filled with lice, fleas and other “Vermin. . . . I was glad to get up (as soon as the Light was carried from us) & put on my Cloths & Lay as my Companions.” After that he remained dressed at night and chose “to sleep in the open Air before a fire.”

Sleeping as George had in his shirt tail sometimes provided a signal for companions. In 1726, another Southerner had written to a friend: “I feel some inclination to learn whether you yet sleep in your Shirt-tail, and whether you yet have the extravagant delight of poking and punching a writhing bedfellow with your long fleshen pole—the exquisite touches of which I have often had the honor of feeling?” Washington had carefully studied Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation which taught boys not “to spit seeds” or “to scratch their private parts in public,” but hadn’t warned of the consequences of “stripping.” Nathaniel Hawthorne (who Melville adored so fondly) once wrote: “Did anybody ever see Washington nude?” And he revealed more about himself than about Washington, when he answered, “He had no nakedness, but I imagine was born with his clothes on, and his hair powdered, and made a stately bow on his first appearance in the world.”

CHRISTOPHER GIST

Logically, George Washington should have taken a wife, since he had accumulated much land and showed great promise. Instead the good Baron obtained for the youth (as he
approached his twenty-first birthday) a commission as Major in the Virginia army. Here he met Christopher Gist (1705–59), who initiated the young man into further mysteries of the wilderness. Gist, like Washington, came from the planter class but he, like Thomas Fairfax, also liked to go beyond refinements and walk on the wild side. Since people like Fairfax had grabbed the best lands in Virginia, the more adventurous and greedy looked further west, where they hoped to emulate the greed of their predecessors. In 1747 a group organized the Ohio Company, which soon hired Gist to explore the lands in what are now Ohio, Kentucky and Indiana. In 1751, he reached the Kentucky River and looked “as far as the eye could reach, over a vast woodland country . . . Kentucky lay spread out before him in all its wild magnificence; long before it was beheld by Daniel Boone.” Of course, indigenous peoples possessed these lands which were also claimed by the French after LaSalle’s trip from Montreal to New Orleans in 1682. The French claimed the whole Mississippi watershed for the King of France and named the land Louisiana. The Ohio Company represented the English entry into this imperial sweepstakes.

Leslie Fiedler brought attention to the underlying homosexual attraction in the stories of the west and western conquest: Natty Bumpo, Davey Crockett, Daniel Boone, Huck Finn, Buffalo Bill, Billy the Kid and all those lonely cowboys playing with and at being Indians. Christopher Gist was such a hero, but because he lived in the lingering world of eighteenth century nobility, his kind of backwoods, back-to-nature message was as little heard or understood as that of Thomas Fairfax. Christopher Gist, nonetheless, initiated Washington into the tough guy world. His and George’s adventures parallel the Song of the Loon fantasy. In both the novel and the film two males go into the woods alone and make love there. George and Christopher romanticize each other and celebrate their being beyond all those sissies and women. And they even pick up an Indian on the trail.

Both men kept journals of their trip together in the winter of 1753–54. Sent by the governor of Virginia to warn the French to get out of Ohio, they travelled to Fort Le Boeuf (near Lake Erie) to present their message. The French replied that they owned Ohio. Gist, Washington and their company then started back to Virginia with news. The Virginians proceeded on horseback, but on the day after Christmas, Gist wrote that George “desired me to set out on foot, and leave our company. . . . I was unwilling he should undertake such a travel, who had never been used to walking.” But after “he insisted,” they then stripped down “like Indians.” Then the adventures began. First they picked up a strange Indian who offered help. George was tired; the Indian offered to carry his backpack. When he offered to carry George’s gun, the Virginians got suspicious and the Indian became sullen at their distrust. When his chance came, the Indian tried to murder the two Virginians. They overpowered the native and Gist wanted to kill him. But he wrote in his diary that George “would not suffer me to kill him.” They let the Indian go but fearing others they split up and made two trails and rejoined after dark. “We encamped,” Gist wrote, “and thought ourselves safe enough to sleep.”

The next adventure was on the Allegheny River. Leslie Fiedler could have added this one to his “Come Back to the Raft Ag’in, Huck, Honey.” On September 29, 1753, trying to cross the Allegheny River, they made a raft but had trouble with the chunks of ice rushing downstream. Washington wrote in his diary: “we expected every Moment our Raft wou’d sink, & we Perish; I put out my setting Pole, to try to stop
the Raft, that the Ice might pass by, when the Rapidity of the Stream thr[ew] it with so much Violence against the Pole, that it Jirk'd me into to Feet Water, but I fortunately saved my Self by catching hold of one of the Raft Logs.” Christopher adds in his own journal that Washington “having fallen in from off the raft, and my fingers frost-bitten, and the sun down, and very cold, we contented ourselves to encamp upon that island.” After wading ashore in the frigid water to the island’s safety, they were happy to awaken to find the whole river frozen over. They crossed easily over to the other shore.

Thomas Fairfax had taught George to love the wild west and Christopher Gist taught him to survive there. Their ideal of tough manhood—men alone against mother nature—prepared the way for the great imperial wars between France and England. The secret for winning the war in North America rested in the hands of the indigenous populations. Joseph François Lafitau, an eighteenth century Jesuit missionary in Canada, had written about some of the Indians that Gist and Washington encountered. Lafitau describes friendships between two men “maintained by mutual tokens of benevolence; they become Companions in hunting, in war, and in fortune; they have a right to food and lodging in each other’s cabin.”

The friendship between Gist and Washington resembled that of Indian warriors (or so they fancied). The couple also served together in the French and Indian War. In 1757, to promote Gist, Washington wrote: “He has had extensive dealings with the Indians, is in great esteem among them; well acquainted with their manners and customs—is indefatigable and patient. . . . for his capacity, honesty and Zeal, I dare venture to engage.” Gist had been meeting with Indians associated with the Choctaws, of whom Jean Bernard Bossu had written, “most of them are addicted to sodomy. These corrupt men, who have long hair and wear short skirts like women. . . .”

Washington returned to the strategic juncture where the Monongahela and Allegheny rivers form the great Ohio. The French built Fort Duquesne there and under the English the site became Pittsburgh. With Gist’s help Washington successfully attacked the French site, but, when the French counterattacked, the Virginians were forced to surrender. This incident launched the French and Indian War (1754–63) (called the Seven Years War in Europe). As one biographer notes, “Washington had, indeed, shed the first blood in the . . . conflict which, according to Frederick of Prussia, cost the lives of about 853,000 soldiers plus civilians by the hundreds of thousands.” Both Gist and Washington fought during the war. In the course of scouting and negotiating with the native Americans, Gist himself contracted smallpox and died in 1759. Under General Amherst, the British had given smallpox-contaminated blankets to the Indians in order to kill them. Having immunity to the disease, Washington survived the war and emerged as the head of Virginia’s forces. Washington never forgot his friend and later befriended his son Mordecai Gist who was reported to resemble his father.

**SOLDIER BOY**

Edward Braddock (1695–1755) provided Washington an example of command more powerful than anyone except his mother. Braddock’s personality closely resembled Mary Washington’s—irascible, narrow, obdurate and demanding. The mother tried her best to keep her son from going off to war but he quietly ignored her and chased after the older man. Washington’s relationship to the general evolved inside a circle of men loving men in which the young Virginian fit like a glove. Braddock saw in the youth an un-
finished country boy, a handsome and promising soldier. In Braddock and his circle Washington found a means to polish himself and advance his own career. The example of Braddock’s “family”—the name he used to describe his circle of handsome young men—later provided the model for Washington’s own circle during the Revolutionary War.

To fight the French, King George II had appointed Edward Braddock commander-in-chief of North America. The General arrived in February, 1755, at Alexandria, Virginia, with 1,400 British regulars. Through Fairfax and other connections, Washington met with Braddock right away. The older man liked the youth and allowed him very good terms for his service. To his brother, Washington wrote that he had found “familiar complaisance . . . from the General; who I hope to please without difficulty . . . [which] requires less ceremony than you can well conceive.” “In Braddock’s campaign the young surveyor and frontier soldier had been thrown,” according to biographer Henry Cabot Lodge, “among a party of dashing, handsomely equipped officers fresh from London, and their appearance had engaged his careful attention.”

Braddock’s aides-de-camp, his “Family” of handsome young men embraced Washington, “and a cordial intimacy commenced between them that continued throughout the campaign.” Like Braddock none of the aides were married, and only Morris, with whom Washington had the poorest rapport, showed great interest in women. George was closest to Robert Orme, described as “attractive and suave, a man of society, reared in the army.” Another intimate of Washington, the young William Shirley wrote “I have a very great love for my Friend Orme.” Some of the other officers disliked this circle. Even before they left Alexandria, there had been grumbling about the “young men” having too much influence with the General and one unhappy colonel vowed were he in command “he would dismiss the General’s favorite [Orme] the very next day.”

Many all male groups like the Boy Scouts or Armed Forces put on an exterior front opposed to sensuousness and intimacy. Yet inside these groups special friendships are cherished and the most elaborate ritual and finery flourish. Braddock’s circle observed elaborate rituals. The General travelled in a chariot which was flanked by a body guard “of light horse galloping on each side of his chariot, and his staff accompanying him; the drums beating the Grenadier’s march as he passed.” He arrived at Fort Cumberland “amid a thundering salute of seventeen guns. When they had encamped, the General observed the strictest protocol among his men; every rank had to maintain their insignia and uniforms in tip top condition. Parades and reviews kept the men sharp looking and beautiful. Braddock’s own circle retired to a convivial table which he maintained for Washington, Orme, Shirley and the boys. Braddock had the reputation of being a fine host who had with him “two good cooks, who could make an excellent ragout out of a pair of boots, had they but materials to toss them up with.”

Braddock disliked women, colonials and Indians—more or less in that order. These three hatreds clouded his judgments and led to his downfall.

Braddock’s objections to the women were primarily sexual, since they could seduce his men. His own troops had brought a large supply of “washerwomen” from England, who served both as nurses and sexual partners for the troops. Braddock bristled when these women demanded higher wages and “ordered that all those who would not work for 6d. a day and provisions should be excluded from camp.” The skimping on mollies (as they were sometimes called) annoyed the men, but another measure taken against
the Indian women alienated both the men and the Indian allies. Bright-Lightning and a group of Indian maidens entertained the troops in exchange for drink, beads and other gifts before Braddock ordered them out of camp. The Indians interpreted the General's anger and the attack on Bright-Lightning and her group as a rejection of their race and way of life. Washington through Gist had made friends with Bright-Lightning's father, White Thunder, who could have offered the English considerable assistance. "Most of the savages were offended by the severity of the camp regulations," and according to biographer Douglas Freeman, "the troops, in turn, were demoralized by the presence of native women." By "demoralized," he means they were "debauched," not that they disliked their company.

Braddock considered the indigenous people savages and the colonials little better. Washington, who had been brought into his charmed circle of love and affection, was exempted from the general's prejudice, but the elder did not take the boy's advice seriously. He considered the local settlers' unwillingness to supply food, wagons and horses as criminal. Their advice about the difficulties of travel along the wilderness road only showed faintheartedness or worse. When Indians friendly to the French attacked him, he offered a bounty of £5 for the scalp of any Indian. He distrusted Indians as scouts or as allies. Braddock didn't regret losing those Indians who had supported the English allies.

Washington fought with Braddock in the ill-fated expedition against Fort Duquesne (July, 1755), in which nearly two thirds of the troops were killed or wounded along with 63 of the 89 officers. (The battlefield on the Monongahela now forms present-day Braddock, Pennsylvania.) Recriminations flew back and forth after the defeat, but few noted that a French force half the size of the British had been successful because of their Indian allies. Since Braddock had alienated the allies that Gist and Washington has so carefully cultivated, he had no wilderness eyes to guard against his enemies. The French and Indians hid behind trees and mowed down the British as they advanced; officers in their fine uniforms were particularly good targets. Braddock and his beloved Orme were wounded on the field. Although suffering from dysentery, Washington rushed them from the field and helped rally what few troops remained. Braddock died and Washington buried him in the middle of the road so that the Indians couldn't find his scalp.

Had Braddock loved Washington's judgment as much as the youth's body, perhaps Queen Elizabeth would still reign over the United States. Washington like many other colonials saw that the British lion lacked claws. Consequently, the colonists could defend their own lives, liberties and properties. If the British objected, they too like Braddock could be defeated. The strategy used so successfully by the French and Indians later provided a blueprint for the colonial victory at Saratoga.

Handsome Robert Orme survived his wounds and in November, 1755, returned to England. He wrote Washington of their friendship: "Your amiable Character made me desirous of your Acquaintance and your Acquaintance confirmed the Regard and Opinion your Character had imprinted in my Mind." He assured his fellow companion: "my dear George Distance Absence nor change of Circumstances shall never alter the sincere Friendship and Affection which I have ever had for you." Looking back over his service with Braddock, he concluded, "I saw myself a Slave . . . serving of my Friends and the Man I loved."

Robert Orme loved Braddock but he was also a sexual adventurer like many of the
young officers in the European armies who charmed both the generals and the women of the aristocracy. Orme was married but in 1756 he eloped with the wealthy daughter of Viscount Townsend. Orme’s English wife reportedly went mad, while the couple fled to the continent with a maid, jewelry and a considerable fortune. The young woman became pregnant and according to one report “besides all her other infamy ... [was] deeply in debt to all sorts of trades-people.” They lived quietly abroad until she died in 1781 and “beautiful Orme” returned to Hertford, England, where he died in 1790.

GEORGE MERCER

George Mercer (1733–1784) resembled Orme in his sexual dalliance but his relationship to Washington was quite different. With Orme Washington had been a handsome colonial underling; with Mercer he became the commander. After Braddock’s debacle, the governor of Virginia put Washington in charge of the state’s troops. Mercer served as Washington’s aide-de-camp from September 1755 until May 1757. In 1756 Mercer accompanied Washington to Boston where they negotiated the relationship of Virginia’s troops to the British in fighting the French and Indians. Mercer went to South Carolina in 1757. After the war, he sat in the Virginia House of Burgesses (1761–65) and also acted as the London agent for the Ohio Company (1763–70). Briefly and disastrously, he served as Virginia’s stamp officer during the Stamp Act Crisis (1765). Mercer then returned to London where in 1776 he eloped with a wealthy heiress. The couple lived from some time on the continent before Mercer’s death in 1784.

Washington and Mercer undertook their junket to Boston during February and March, 1756. Governor Shirley of Massachusetts had become commander-in-chief of the British North American troops upon Braddock’s death. Washington had a conflict with the head of the Maryland army about who should outrank whom at Fort Cumberland, built by the British, manned by Virginia but in Maryland territory. Washington had been a close friend of Governor Shirley’s son, the personal secretary in Braddock’s family. William Shirley, Jr., had died with his general in the battle. The elder Shirley did all he could for Washington and provided a letter giving him precedence over the Maryland commander at Fort Cumberland.

For this expedition, Washington spent lavishly for himself and his traveling companions, George Mercer and Robert Stewart. The latter elusive figure was “a favorite” of Washington, of Baron Fairfax and of the governor of Virginia; after the French and Indian War, he took up a “civil office in Jamaica.” Stewart certainly knew how to butter up his superiors and had a grand time with Mercer and Washington. The trio gambled, drank, partied, went to entertainments, shopped and shopped some more in Philadelphia, New York City and Boston—all cities new, vast and marvelous to the Virginians. They traveled in royal style with three slaves and three horses in livery costume and themselves in splendid uniforms. Washington Irving wrote that “their sojourn in every city was a continual fête.”

Meanwhile back in Virginia, the Indians launched Appalachian springtime and summer raids. Some puritanical white men were scandalized by Washington’s carrying on. The Virginia Gazette (September 3, 1756) claimed that the commander and his officers “give their Men an example of all Manner of Debauchery, Vice and Idleness.” The columnist accused Washington of promoting his boyfriends as “raw novices and rakes, spendthrifts and bankrupts, who have never been used to command, or have been found
insufficient for the management of their own affairs.” (Sounds like Mercer and Stewart.) Under such leadership, the army had supposedly loll’d in lusts snuggled within their forts and had hidden from the indigenous warriors. “Men of Virtue and true Courage can have no Heart to enlist, and mingle in such a Crowd.” And the few that may be of good character are “damped and mortified at the Sight of such Scenes of Vice, Extravagance and Oppression.”

Among the examples of great armies debauched by vice, the newspaper lists Alexander the Great who was done in by the dark skinned people of the East. Himself debauched by a Persian boy, Alexander “suffered the army to debauch themselves in the same manner.” The “effeminate” people of Tarentum likewise fell to the Romans because of weaknesses similar to Alexander’s. (In 1795, a town near Pittsburgh in which Mercer and Washington had an interest took the name Tarentum.) Washington was being compared to homosexual rulers whose luxury, effeminacy, cruelty and sensuality had “unmanned many an army and enslaved or ruined many flourishing cities and kingdoms.” The link of cruelty and effeminacy was common among eighteenth century critics. Such a link is less often made now. Nonetheless, occasional critics of Bondage and Discipline or Sadism and Masochism have linked homosexuality and cruelty in their analysis of the Nazis.

The work “debauchery” and “effeminate” as used by the Virginia Gazette would include both male and female (terms used then and now) and heterosexual, bisexual and homosexual (terms later invented). George Washington had a secretary inquire if friends thought the article referred to him. They all replied that that would be impossible. A friend wrote Washington: “Show your contempt of the scribbler by your silence, your watchfulness and care, and thereby disappoint him.” Washington and most of his biographers have maintained their silence. All copies of the Virginia Gazette (but one) have been destroyed and that copy survived in the papers of a hostile British general.

The promiscuous and randy George Mercer does fit the model of a debauched favorite. He had written Washington August 17, 1757 that “The many Favors my dear Colonel that I have received at your Hands wou’d make Me blush at begging an Addition to Them, did I not know your Goodness in excusing such freedoms.” In 1754 although “George Mercer was young and not burdened with domestic cares,” Washington did not chose him to be one of the officers given to the French as hostages. Washington chose Mercer as his aide-de-camp and then took him as his companion for the trip to Boston. If Mercer had any military skills, they have been lost to history; he won favor not from his fieldwork but from his randy smile and his worship of his commander.

Sometime around 1759 Mercer wrote a remarkable physical description of Washington as “straight as an Indian.” Six foot two; 175 pounds; light brown hair; grey blue eyes. “His frame is padded with well developed muscles, indicating great strength. His bones and joints are large as are his hands and feet.” The man “is neat waisted, but is broad across the hips, and has rather long legs and arms.” His mouth, lips and other “features are regular and placid with all the muscles of his face under perfect control, tho flexible and expressive of deep feeling when moved by emotions.” A hunk in repose; in motion a god: “His movements and gestures are graceful, his walk majestic, and he is a splendid horseman.” Mercer’s description reads like a sex ad in one of today’s gay papers. Both Douglas Freeman as well as the current editors of Washington’s papers print the text but the original has not survived and this passionate
description was once part of a longer document whose provenance is not known.

Mercer lollled in debauchery and sensuality, a condition common to the eighteenth century military men and Virginian planters. Such indulgence crossed the gender line without much thought. Thus Mercer could write Washington about his attraction to women to demonstrate his randiness and to displace his sexual warmth with Washington and other military men. From South Carolina, he wrote (17 August, 1757) about the women there: “A great Imperfection here too is the bad Shape of the Ladies, many of Them are crooked & have a very bad Air & not those enticing heaving throbbing alluring Letch exciting plump Breasts common with our Northen Belles.” In the same letter he alerts Washington to “a Set of very genteel pretty Officers here” of the Royal British Army. Whether “pretty” is a slip of the pen for “petty” or was intentional cannot be determined, although Mercer generally spells well. At any rate, the “pretty” officers gave the Virginians “a polite Invitation to spend the Evening, & after to agree to keep Us Company.” Nevertheless, Mercer remained “much on the Reserve as in any Place I ever was, occasioned by the Multiplicity of Scandal which prevails here.”

One of the pretty officers Mercer mentions was perhaps James Grant (1720–1806) who had fought at Fort Duquesne as a major in the Highland Regiment. He had been captured there by Indians and held at Montreal until he was exchanged in 1759; he blamed his capture on Washington’s aide Stewart; he returned to service in South Carolina, where as one of the “pretty officers” he renewed his friendship with George Mercer. Washington wrote on July 27, 1761, “The perfidious conduct of our neighbors, the Cherokees, have occasioned the sending of Major Grant with a detachment of his Majesty’s troops and what forces the Carolineans could muster into their country on that side, while Colonel Byrd with the Virginian Regiment is ordered to penetrate it on this.” Grant later became governor in East Florida where he invited the teenage Jack Laurens to elope with him to England, but Jack’s father firmly but politely canceled that trip. Grant later fought against Hamilton and Washington at Brandywine in the Revolution and returned to England where he served in Parliament. His clear solicitation of Laurens as well as Mercer’s attachment to him suggests something of the circulation of male bodies in the eighteenth century armies.

Mercer’s subsequent career developed his lechery. His Don Juan character demonstrates a thinly disguised displacement of his attraction to men. Mercer’s debauchery extended across genders (and generals) and across continents. Fleeing the wrath of the anti-Stamp Act colonials in 1765, he landed in England where he found a wealthy woman with whom he eloped. Mercer’s startled father wrote that he thought “you were taken in,” but a letter from the lady mollified the father.

In the prodigal’s absence, George Washington and the father tended to the business affairs of the son. George Mercer neither returned to Virginia nor realized the great funds expected. George Washington had power of attorney for a Mrs. Savage who had “but a bad Time of it” in Ireland. Mercer wrote him in 1770 that the seventy year old lady was “denied the Use of Pen Ink Paper and Romances, and a frequent Use of the Strap is substituted in the Place of those Amusements.” (Colonial Series, VII, 504). Here is not the place to trace all of Mercer’s unflattering affairs. Douglas Freeman euphemistically concludes that his adventures “are precisely such as might have been written by Samuel Richardson.” Richardson’s Pamela or Virtue Rewarded (1740) might be less appropriate for comparison than Henry Fielding’s The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling (1749). Tom Jones (both in the novel and the film) portrays something of the life of
the English gentry in the eighteenth century. That fictional portrayal was remorselessly heterosexual but there were plenty of queers among the peers.

If George Mercer broke George Washington’s heart, no record of the sorrow remains. But Washington’s indulgence of him suggests more tolerance than he paid to any other man excepting possibly Alexander Hamilton. And Washington was known as a strict disciplinarian. Deserters were hanged; incompetents sacked.

Mercer not only broke a string of women’s hearts, but he was also a totally incompetent soldier. In Virginia’s last engagement at Fort Duquesne in 1758, he had his column of men shooting at Washington’s. Fortunately the French were retreating, but this battle led one critic later to say that Washington’s distinction in his first field command was to shoot down his own men.

The French abandonment of Fort Duquesne (now renamed Pittsburgh) ended Virginia’s engagement in the French and Indian War. Washington retired to Mount Vernon and took a wife in 1759.

**SISSY MAN**

Washington was never a sexual adventurer like Orme but he did share with him the loose conviviality common among eighteenth century military men if not the whole society. Efforts to portray him as a lady’s man, however, only demonstrate the eagerness of researchers to create (for them) a more comfortable heterosexual façade. An intense effort to heterosexualize Washington accompanied the United States emergence as an imperial power in the late nineteenth century. One of the founders of the Immigration Restriction League, Republican Henry Cabot Lodge waxed eloquent in his 1889 biography: “One loves to picture that gallant, generous, youthful figure, brilliant in color and manly in form, riding gayly on from one little colonial town to another, feasting, dancing, courting, and making merry.” Democratic Woodrow Wilson tells more about himself than about Washington in his 1903 biography: “No young Virginian could live twenty-six years amidst fair women in that hale and sociable colony without being touched again and again by the quick passions; and this man had the blood of a lover beyond his fellows.” Discounting the backwoods adventures, Wilson concluded that Washington, “had relished the company of lively women from the first, meeting their gay sallies sometimes with a look from his frank blue eyes that revealed more than he knew.”

While an active sexual life with women does not preclude an equally active gay life, Washington’s letters and journals reveal little interest in women. The letters between him and Lafayette are much more flirtatious than his letters with any lady. Women seldom were the object of Washington’s desire. For instance, in the diary kept during the Barbados trip with his brother, he barely mentions females and then in odd contexts. For Guy Fawkes Day (November 5, 1751), the Washington brothers had “an invitation from Mrs Clarke & Miss Roberts to come & see the serpents fired.” Serpent were fireworks; but the juxtaposition of women with serpents is suggestive as the entry a few days later: “Dined at the Fort with some Lady. Its pretty strongly fortified and mounts about 36 Guns within the fortification.” Here “some Lady” suggests some barrier in his feelings which are restrained by the fortifications. There were thirty-six guns inside, but another fifty-one mounted outside. The Bridgetown serpents and fortifications aroused his imagination much more than the women there. (When
Washington became commander in the American Revolution, he prohibited celebration of Guy Fawkes Day.)

Washington’s tastes in women generally ran to mothers and women attached to other men. His first amorous mention of a woman occurs in a letter to his boyfriend “Robin.” Washington writes jokingly that Robin’s “Low Land Beauty” had once aroused a “troublesome Passion,” which he now wants to bury “in the grave of oblivion.” Much has been made of his subsequent affection for Sally Fairfax. She like the unidentified “Low Land Beauty” was not available. George also remained a close friend to Sally’s husband, the younger William Fairfax, a relation of his patron, Thomas Fairfax. Some of the letters to her are mildly flirtatious and hers to him are at best friendly. But closer examination of the relationship (if it should be called such) suggests that George was more interested in her than in her body. She taught him about plays, art, current music and gossip. Like many gay men George turned to womanly culture but that made him neither a woman nor a sexual partner of women.

With Sally Fairfax, Washington developed his love of theater, a pleasure he continued throughout his life. In camp his aides performed plays; and in the large cities he attended every play on the boards. At the Fairfax Belvoir mansion, he played a part in Addison’s Cato. (Incidentally, Thomas Fairfax, who hated women but loved George for awhile, donated money for the publication of Addison’s Spectator.) Whether Washington was a spectacular or only barely adequate dancer is a matter of historical debate. But he did dance and Belvoir provided him a place to perfect his steps. Being interested in the theater and being able to dance, however, are not commonly indications of burning heterosexual passion.

Martha Custis provided George Washington a perfect consort/cover. A very wealthy widow with two children from her first marriage, she was eight months his elder when they married in 1759. Both needed a ceremonial consort and both played the role remarkably well; their fortunes together made them perhaps the richest couple in what became the United States. (Ripley’s Believe It or Not claims Washington as the country’s first millionaire.) Washington once described his relationship with Martha as “more fraught with expressions of friendship than of enamoured love.” And he advised a relative that a happy marriage “results from a combination of causes: none of which are of greater importance than that the partner should have good sense, a good disposition, a good reputation, and financial means.”

There is some evidence that Martha at first chafed in the marriage, but the records of their relationship have been largely destroyed. Most of George’s letters were carefully preserved with sometimes as many as two or more sets of copyediting by Washington himself. Since at least 1776, all of his letters have been collector’s items of ever increasing value. After George’s death, however, Martha carefully burnt all of their correspondence. Only two letters survive and they show little hint of passion or even closeness. After Congress appointed him to command the revolutionary army, George left Philadelphia for Boston. To Martha he wrote: (June 23, 1775) “I go... in full confidence of a happy meeting with you some time in the future. I have not time to add more, as I am surrounded with Company to take leave of me.” Undertaking treason, risking his and her life, fortune and sacred honor, the commander is at best reticent.

Martha’s and George’s time together seems timeless. He was always the great public figure and she the faithful partner. Mount Vernon might sprout new additions; the number of house servants and slaves might increase; Martha might gain more weight; George
might receive higher honors. But the household from 1759 to the present has remained a ceremonial pavilion. Between 1768 and 1775, they entertained some 2,000 guests. During the Revolutionary War winters, Martha entertained the troops (even at Valley Forge) and as the first First Lady she tried to set a high standard of entertainment. Some democrats thought she was too extravagant; both she and George loved beautiful clothing and furnishings; they continuously entertained. After retiring from the presidency, Washington wrote somewhat nervously, “Unless some one pops in, unexpectedly—Mrs. Washington and myself will do what I believe has not been done within the last twenty years by us,—that is to set down to dinner by ourselves.”

The couple never had any children. George’s mother had had a child almost every year during her marriage. That was not Martha’s and George’s model; they took the opposite path. Posterity has grappled with this fact of no children from the father of our country. An obvious possibility that he was not sexually attracted to women has seldom been entertained. One author claims he had mumps as a child and was rendered sterile but on what evidence is unclear. Impotence either acquired or congenital has had few advocates. On slender evidence adulterous liaisons have been suggested but no children of slave or free women have come forward to claim paternity. Natural children were less disgrace in the eighteenth century than now; Benjamin Franklin’s illegitimate son became governor of New Jersey, and the governor’s illegitimate son became Franklin’s secretary during the Revolution. (Lafayette tried to pick him up as an aide). In 1786, Washington firmly said that even if Martha Washington should die soon, “there is a moral certainty of my dying without issue, and . . . whilst I retain the reasoning faculties I shall never marry a girl and it is not probable that I should have children by a woman of an age suitable to my own should I be disposed to enter into a second marriage.” Like some gay men today he was attracted to women for other things than reproduction and sexual relations.

George Washington’s heterosexuality resembles his religious feelings. He believed in Providence but little more. He disliked religion and had no clerical friends whatsoever. But he did not want to make an issue with such powerful and nasty people as clerics. Mason Weems, nonetheless, invented scenes of his praying; painters dutifully imagined them; and even today the religious claim him as one of the rocks of the republic. Weems even claimed to be a parson for a mythical Mount Vernon parish.

Washington was willing to conform socially up to a point. He was a vestryman and occasionally attended Church of England and later Anglican church services in his parish. But he did this only for social show. He approached religious people like military obstacles. When his aide Alexander Hamilton got in a fight with a loathsome Congregationalist, Washington soothed the minister’s feelings and ignored him. When Lafayette returned to France after the war, he wrote Washington in 1785 for advice on trying to convince King Louis XVI to reinstate tolerance for Protestants. Lafayette supported Protestants because he hated the Catholic church not because he loved Protestants. The Edict of Nantes had established tolerance in 1598 but Louis XIV had revoked it in 1685. Washington responded cautiously: he wrote, “remember my dear friend it is a part of the military art to reconnoiter & feel your way, before you engage too deeply. More is oftentimes effected by regular approaches, than by an open assault; from the first too, you may make a good retreat—from the latter (in case of repulse) it rarely happens.”

Washington disguised his true feelings and beliefs. And when he did rebel, he often
did it quietly. He attended church (much as he had taken a wife and become head of a family) in order not to offend society; to fit in, to conform. Even after he had become the great hero, ex-president and simple farmer at Mount Vernon, he opposed the church passively. He resigned as a vestryman and never took communion. "After the minister, annoyed that when Martha took communion the President waited in his pew, preached a sermon in Washington's presence concerning the duty of great men to set a good example, Washington never attended church again."

So with his love of men he never made an issue of his desires like the Marquis de Sade, who shouted from the Bastille that they were torturing him. The people of Paris arose July 14, 1789, and tore the mammoth prison down, stone by stone. Washington would not have really understood either de Sade's glorious documentation of the many varieties of sexuality in his time or the Parisian attack on the Bastille. Lafayette sent him the key to the prison. But his use of religion and of flirting with boys was more subtle. When he was behind in his correspondence with Lafayette, Washington wrote, July 25, 1785: "I stand before you as a culprit; but to repent & be forgiven are the precepts of Heaven: I do the former—do you practise the latter, & it will be participating of a divine attribute." I read this as Washington's making his lovers divine; someone else might read it as an example of his belief in original sin and the need for redemption.

SENSEUALITY OF 18TH CENTURY

Randolph Trumbach argues that "Europe was switching from adult male libertines who had sex with boys and with women to a world divided between a majority of men and women who desired only the opposite gender, and a minority of men and women who desired only the same gender." Trumbach's generalization so far rests largely on research in London and might be tested in Naples, New York, Vienna, Athens, Potsdam, Paris, Madrid, Boston or Williamsburg, Virginia. For Washington's time three key figures might be Thomas Fairfax who initiated the boy (Fairfax could never be called a "fop," a "rake," or an "effeminate"; his influence on the young Washington has been discussed above); William Byrd II; and James Wilson (1742-1798), a close contemporary of Washington, whose diary shows that William Byrd II's behavior may not be so atypical as some have claimed.

Martha Washington was related to William Byrd II (1674-1744) and William Byrd III (1728-1777) remained a close friend of the Washington family. Martha and George were still teenagers when the elder Byrd died, but their relations were quite intertwined. They may even have had access to William Byrd II's writings. The elder Byrd did not typify Virginia planters because he could write so remarkably well. But he may have typified the Virginia Tobacco aristocracy in his sexual mores. Byrd recorded his lusty adventures in his Secret Diary, letters and other writings some of which still await publication. Using the pseudonym Inamorato, he described himself: "Never did the sun shine upon a swain who had more combustible matter in his constitution than the unfortunate Inamorato. Love broke out upon him before his beard ..." His entry for October 4, 1718, suggests an active appetite: "I went to visit Mrs. A-l-n and committed uncleanness with the maid because the mistress was not at home. However when the mistress came I roggered her and about 12 o'clock went home and ate a plum cake for supper." In St. James park in London he took a woman into the bushes and
fucked her.

Byrd read Petronius’s *Satyricon* and translated one of the stories into English. In 1694, a translation appeared in London: *The Satyr of Titus Petronius Arbiter, A Roman Knight, with Its Fragments Recovered at Belgrade, 1688, Made English by Mr. Burnaby of the Middle Temple, and Another Hand*. “Another Hand” may have been Byrd; he was a friend of William Burnaby, a London playwright and translator. Washington could have read this translation or more likely knew another by his favorite author Joseph Addison. Through Lord Fairfax (Washington’s patron) he may have been aware of the notorious “A Declaration against the Inconstancy of Women” included in the *Satyricon*.

The view of sexual intercourse portrayed in the *Satyricon* and exemplified in Byrd’s life contains a remarkable acceptance of fate, the way things happen and are. Fellini’s movie based on the book captures some of the acceptance of all forms of sexual love and lust. The only “problem” in the *Satyricon* is in not being able to become sexually aroused. Byrd himself addressed detumescence in his discussion of ginseng, which he raised on his lands. The herb’s virtue gives “an uncommon warmth and vigor to the blood and frisks the spirits beyond any other cordial.” However, he found it “of little use in the feasts of love.”

The *Satyricon* view of the world closely resembles that of both Martha and George in their acceptance of their sexuality, their position in society and the limitations of their compatriots. Theirs was never a romantic or Faustian affair; they always remained slightly detached. Martha’s first marriage to a cousin of the Byrds could not be called a happy one but she demonstrated a willingness to go along. In contrast with her first husband, Washington was a vast improvement. Far preferable to cousin William Byrd III who provided an example of the limitations of the Virginian planter: “He eventually dissipated his inherited fortune by indulging his passions for thoroughbred horse racing, gambling for high stakes, personal luxuries, and fine houses.”

In *About Time, Exploring the Gay Past* (Expanded edition, 1991) Martin Duberman has published a diary from 1773 attributed to James Wilson (1742–1798). Whether the diary belonged to the great Pennsylvanian writer, politician and Supreme Court justice has been questioned; but the authenticity of the dates, the narrative and the locale seem genuine. They demonstrate the diarist’s very promiscuous and active sexual adventures. On January 7, 1773, he met a young woman: “Danced with her and aroused all of my passion. She resisted much, holding her limbs together, but my blood being up I thrust her vigorously and she opened with a scream.” By April he reported “One testicle much swollen. Lucreta squeezed of it last night. I called to her to desist but she obeyed not.” In May he met another woman “near the road and in some bushes. All over in ten minutes.”

In the eighteenth century loose sexual morals were legendary. In Concord, Massachusetts, for instance, there was a remarkable change in the number of pregnant brides between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. At the time of the American Revolution a large percentage of the women who were married bore a child before nine months after their wedding; by the time of Emerson and Thoreau in the 1830s, most brides bore their first child only after nine months. The spread of Methodism and other religions combined with the developing cult of true womanhood which emphasized piety, purity and domesticity—all worked to reorganize the libertinism of the eighteenth century. Washington never lived into the Victorian world but his image and memory became transformed then into a religious, heterosexual cherry tree hatchet man.
While these changes swept the northern European community, their effects on men in the military services have not been explored.

REvolutionary War

George Washington and his compatriots grew up and acted within a world of eighteenth century values. Those values led them to resist George III's attempt to expand his empire. The Americans were alarmed to watch the growth of royal power; "between 1680 and 1780 the British army and navy trebled in size." As the monarch tried to force the colonies to pay for their subjugation, some believed they could live cheaper and freer without a monarchy. They launched a new republic. John Adams (first vice-president and second president of the United States) estimated that one third of the people supported the American Revolution; one third supported the king; and one third were waiting to see who won. With victory, the most rabid Tories fled, the fence sitters became the loud patriots, and the soldiers who fought the war returned home.

George Washington never wavered in his support of the new United States. As a young man he had hoped for advancement within the British army and had at first done well with General Braddock. After the general's death, Washington wrote to his successor in January 1757, that had Braddock lived, "I should have met with preferment agreeable to my wishes." The new commander Loudoun at first thought Washington was a French spy, and he had only contempt for the colonials. Washington's other great grievance was with the royal handling of the Ohio Company's land grants. George III in the 1763 Royal Proclamation had closed all land west of the Appalachian Mountains to European settlement. Good news for the native Americans was bad news for the Virginia land speculators.

In 1775 George Washington, ready to fight, attended the Continental Congress in full dress uniform. John Adams nominated him commander of the armed resisters who had fought the British in Lexington and Concord (April 19, 1775) and then on Bunker (and Breed's) Hill (June 17, 1775). Washington took command of the continental troops at the Cambridge Common, July 3, 1775; the rebel army in Charlestown, Cambridge and Dorchester kept the British bottled up inside Boston. After cannons captured from Fort Ticonderoga were placed on Dorchester Heights, the British evacuated Boston on March 17, 1776.

The American Revolutionary War was both long and bloody. Washington held his commission as commander from July, 1775 until December 1783, almost eight and a half years. Among United States troops a higher percentage were killed than in any other war excepting the Civil War. The British had overwhelming land and sea power but they were never able to focus their might at any one point against the revolutionary army. Whether from luck or strategy or both, Washington managed to keep himself out of the hands of the British. They occupied New York throughout most of the war (1776-1783) and with effort they could conquer any port town; however, they failed to take any ground inland. Even Philadelphia which the British held for awhile had to be abandoned as indefensible.

Washington had only to persevere to win. The British, however, could not just survive; they had to triumph. The Redcoats suffered their first great defeat in 1777 at Saratoga. Dashing General Johnny Burgoyne had attempted to sever the United States by an invasion from Montreal to New York City. United States backwoodsmen, regu-
lars and Native American allies trapped him in upstate New York. They forced Burgoyne to surrender with 5,700 troops after he had been surrounded. Had Burgoyne’s indigenous allies remained with him, he might have survived. Had his native allies stayed with him and the United States allies deserted, the results of the battle and of the war itself would have been reversed.

After the Saratoga victory the French signed an alliance with the United States and soon provided massive financial, military and naval assistance to the revolution. Even so, French support did not bring automatic victory. In 1779 the United States army under General Lincoln surrendered 5,000 troops to the British at Charleston, S.C. The British subsequently attempted to make inroads in the South, which they believed was filled with royalists. In 1781, however, Washington and Lafayette bottled Cornwallis up at Yorktown as the French fleet gained control of the Chesapeake Bay. Cornwallis surrendered with 8,000 troops on October 19, 1781. Scattered fighting continued until the peace treaty was signed in Paris in 1783 and the British evacuated their remaining troops. George Washington then retired from the army in December, 1783.

As a commander, Washington had used a relatively simple strategy: that of not getting caught. He escaped the British first in New York and then in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. When he had to abandon the nation’s capitol (then in Philadelphia) for the winter of 1778, a Frenchman said to Benjamin Franklin (U.S. ambassador in Paris) that the British had captured Philadelphia. Franklin answered, “No, Philadelphia has captured the British.” While many died, the United States avoided any grand defeats like Saratoga or Yorktown. In 1783 Washington correctly assessed his army in relation to the British: the Americans had “numbers infinitely less, composed of men oftentimes half starved, always in rags, without pay, and experiencing, at times, every species of distress which human nature is capable of undergoing.”

One might ask whether Washington’s military genius derived from some gay sensibility. The ordinary masculine thrust pushes forward and attacks, always asserting itself. The one rebel outward attack, that into Canada, was a total disaster. Washington proved a genius in avoiding direct combat with the great British army. He spun webs like a spider and from time to time captured the British. When they pursued him, more often than not, he disappeared. His greatest military maneuvers were his retreats: getting out of New York in 1776 with his army intact; and then in moving across New Jersey, where on December 26, 1776, he defeated the British mercenaries who were hung over from holiday celebrations.

Washington never played the role of angry and vengeful father, the role inevitable for the British and George III. Instead he played the part of the protective mother, gathering his children together, cuddling them here, spanning them there, but holding the army together. In *The American Revolution* (1983), Edward Countryman explains that “simply keeping the army intact was as important as winning battles. This, in face of enormous adversity, was George Washington’s great achievement.” His relations with the Congress likewise represent a careful exercise in indirect and passive accommodation.

Of course, Washington was not the only officer. There were many generals all vying for favors. Washington’s relationship with the so-called Conway Cabal provides a model of the jealous queen outraged at some rival. True, Thomas Conway was an adventurer; true, he and some others criticized the commander. But Washington’s notion that they were plotting to get his position rests more in his own fantasies than in their actions.
He fought for prominence and honor against a number of rivals such as Light Horse Harry Lee or Horatio Gates. In his battle with Conway and any other officer who might challenge his position, Washington emerged no less successful than he did over the British.

Washington worked closely with the Continental Congress (until 1789 there was no executive or judiciary). For instance, between December 23, 1778 and February 3, 1779, he lived with the President of the Congress, Henry Laurens along with his son John Laurens. They devoted many hours handling army patronage. Speculators made fortunes with army contracts. And a flood of applicants wanted commissions as officers in the army. Soldiers of fortune not unlike Steuben and Lafayette flooded into the United States hoping to sell their services. And Americans envied every appointment given a foreigner. Spunky John Adams snorted that they “Quarrell like Cats and Dogs. . . . military officers, high and low.” And mixing metaphors a bit: “They worry one another like Mastiffs, Scrambling for Rank and Pay like Apes for Nuts.” Washington steered through these political seas admirably. His favorite evening entertainment was cracking and eating nuts by the fireside with his boys.

UNIFORM FUN

Cross-dressing in the eighteenth century may have been less a problem than in later centuries as gender identification became stricter and stricter. In the eighteenth century
cross dressing between genders was probably less scandalous than between classes. Thus if a commoner tried to dress like either a duke or duchess, crossing the class barrier would be a more frightful indiscretion than crossing the gender barrier. Nobles had then (and perhaps even now) wide berth for their desires. The famous Charles-Geneviève, Chevalier d’Eon (1728–1810), a contemporary of Washington, was celebrated and decorated in the court of Louis XV for work as an international spy, the James Bond of that time. D’Eon during most of his life dressed only in women’s clothing.

Men taking women’s roles may be less rare than the sparse record would indicate. “Mollies” served in Washington’s armies; these were often classified as washerwomen. Braddock was unhappy in his 1755 campaign at Monongahela that so many washerwomen went with the army. No one seems to have checked whether these were indeed gender females. And the men themselves on occasion took the roles of women in dancing and in plays. Thus at Fort Cumberland (then under Washington’s command) the 1755 Christmas festivities, of course, included a banquet and plenty of alcohol. They began dinner at three in the afternoon; ate, offered toasts, and “pass’d an hour in Singing and taking a Cheerful glass.” But then they amused themselves “with acting part of a Play, and spending the Night in mirth, Jollity and Dancing.” They parted “very affectionately” at midnight “remembering all Absent Friends.”

Too seldom have the joy in wearing or making women’s clothing been considered with the joy of wearing or worshiping figures in uniform. Washington and most of his fellow officers had a deep attachment to their uniforms. Those without or with incomplete uniforms or clothing were again and again referred to as “naked.” While portrait painting at Mount Vernon in 1772, Charles Willson Peale was throwing the javelin with the boys (including the naughty Bryan Fairfax and Washington) and describes the group as “all stripped to the buff,” when they only had their coats off “with shirt sleeves rolled up.” Washington significantly did not strip “to the buff” for his throw. And at the end of the Revolutionary War, Washington wrote Congress that the troops had “patiently endured hunger, nakedness and cold.” To be without a proper uniform was nakedness itself.

Washington spent hours fussing over his uniform, his hairdo, his sword and other military paraphernalia. One of his most stunning displays came in his trip from Virginia to Boston in February and March 1756. He spent four days in Philadelphia having all his clothes fitted just right. George himself designed the Virginia army uniform: “the coat to be faced and cuffed with scarlet and trimmed with silver; a scarlet waistcoat with silver lace; blue breeches; and a silver laced hat.” Swords were festooned in gold and scarlet knots. In a letter, September 23, 1756, to Sarah Fairfax (taken by some to be evidence of a romance), Washington seemed most interested in fitting his shirts properly: “I have sent a piece of Irish Linnen, a piece of Cambrick, and a Shirt to measure by. The Shirt Fits tolerably well, yet, I would have the others made with somewhat narrower Wrist bands: Ruffles deeper by half an Inch: and the Collars by three quarters of an Inch, which is in other respects of proper bigness.”

One of Washington’s favorite aides, John Laurens, followed the general’s lead in attending to uniform details. He wrote his father from Washington’s Valley Forge headquarters during the harsh winter of 1778 requesting scarlet cloth, “hair powder and pomatum,” a comb, “blue and buff cloth, lining, twist, yellow flat double gilt buttons” along with “corded dimity for waistcoats and breeches.” Laurens also needed “A pair of gold epaulettes and a saddle cloth may be added, if not too expensive.”
There is an odd conceit that only nudity is sexual. Clothing and costume, however, mean as much or more than the unmarked body. Likewise there is a conceit that clothing insofar as it is sexual is designed to attract the opposite sex. But in fact clothing is one of the ultimate forms of masturbation, a taking of joy in one’s own self ornamentation. And after pleasing the self, most clothing is designed for one’s own gender. Women dress to impress women and men to tickle men. Particularly in the armed forces, the men dress up for each other; they parade for their generals and sergeants. And the uniforms (not without attraction to the opposite gender, of course) primarily attract members of the same gender. The marine, army, navy ads mean to attract boys.

The use of the word “naked” differed markedly then from our own time. Generally “naked” now means displaying cocks, breasts, asses and balls. In Washington’s time, “naked” meant not displaying one’s proper rank. Today, we might say, I wasn’t “dressed” for a funeral, graduation, swim-suit contest, or party. At Valley Forge in 1778, when they talked about the “nakedness” of the men, they didn’t mean that their balls were hanging out. They meant they lacked proper uniforms so that you could distinguish ranks by a glance. When Horatio Greenough’s statue of Washington was unveiled in the Capitol, public scandal erupted because he had given Washington a Michelangelean body draped only with a toga.

WASHINGTON’S GAY MESS

Like General Braddock, Washington assembled a group of very young men as his aides-de-camp. The “boys” lived, worked and slept together with their man who watched over them as closely as a mother hen. While he led a revolution, his “family” lived in a very eighteenth century way. During the French and Indian War, the Virginia Gazette in 1756 had uncovered “vice and debauchery” in Washington’s headquarters. Before the American and French Revolutions, the aristocracy monopolized the officer corps who fostered loose habits. Although Washington maintained a Baron and a Marquis in his camp, there were few nobles in the American Revolutionary army. All were adventurers in that they had staked their lives against King George, but they were by no means ready to abolish all rank and privilege.

To various degrees Washington and his companions had mastered the ideology both of independence and of living without a king. Alexander Hamilton had written against the Tories. John Laurens had studied in Switzerland and absorbed the revolutionary teachings of Geneva’s Jean Jacques Rousseau. In Prussia Frederick Steuben had lost his position at the end of the French and Indian War because his family was not noble enough and he had not been discreet enough with his boys. Thomas Paine’s Common Sense had rung a cord in January 1776 both among the soldiers and throughout the country. Paine had denounced monarchy and called King George an ass. He called kingship “the most preposterous invention the Devil ever set on foot for the promotion of idolatry.” The July 4, 1776, Declaration of Independence sealed the rebels’ commitment to “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness” to which they had mutually pledged to “each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.”

Love for each other drives soldiers as forcefully as their ideology. In his history of the war (The Glorious Cause), Robert Middlekauff observes that “The eighteenth-century battlefield was, compared with the twentieth an intimate theater, especially intimate
in the engagements of the Revolution which were usually small even by the standards of the day.” On the battlefield, soldiers need to know who will stand by their side; running was considered disgraceful; and to have come through a battle while all your beloved friends died leaves every soldier changed. To enter Washington’s mess group you needed to be handsome (perhaps well hung like Alexander Hamilton). But you also needed to have proven yourself in battle. Washington had done that early and he gained fifteen minutes of fame in London for his 1754 letter, in which he wrote, “I heard the bullets whistle, and, believe me, there is something charming in the sound.” Steuben, Lafayette, Hamilton, Laurens and all his intimates had stood up to fire.

Washington’s group not only fought on the battlefield but also on the dueling fields. Washington himself avoided duels, which were commonplace in Virginia. But his aides all became embroiled in such affairs of honor. Lafayette and Laurens at different times challenged detractors of Washington to duels. Hamilton acted as second to Laurens in his duel with Charles Lee in December, 1778. Laurens challenged Lee’s “grossest and most opprobrious terms of personal abuse, which He Col Laurens thought him bound to resent, as well on account of the relation he bore to General Washington as from motives of personal friendship.” Laurens was slightly wounded and Lee seriously, but the latter was so moved by the youth’s “bearing” that he exclaimed “he could have hugged the boy.” Love has many different faces. Hamilton himself died in a duel in 1804.

Washington’s mess group shared many experiences of comradeship common among soldiers. They differed, however, from other mess groups in being at command central which issued orders for the whole army. And they differed from American soldiers in later wars because they (excepting Steuben) had taken an oath of allegiance to the King of England. They now repudiated that oath, but many old habits lingered. Washington’s “family” and “boys” called themselves “family” and “boys” as the circle around Braddock had done in Washington’s youth. They had not yet adopted the nineteenth century masculinization, an odd and charming habit of men trying to prove they are not queer. When not issuing orders to the troops, the atmosphere in Washington’s headquarters resembled something of a private boy’s school. They vied in showing their love of each other and for demonstrating their love of art, music and literature. This milieu created a space and a freedom to be queer even within the obvious constraints of the battlefield.

While they broke their oaths to the King, many of the officers retained their view of class superiority. In many ways Washington and his boys continued to live the lives of those they were fighting against. The officers retained a class division between themselves and the common soldiers. Washington’s boys might be primping with their hair and worrying about the stains on their uniforms while the common soldier lived less elegantly. These privates might not be to every queer’s taste: “Soldiers throughout the war apparently disdained use of the vaults, as latrine pits were called, preferring to void wherever taken by the urge.” And they had yet to master the nineteenth century gospel of cleanliness: “They also scattered food, scraps, carrion, and garbage throughout camps. They had to be forced to change the straw that served as bedding. And some had to be ordered to bathe.”

In this context we need to read the court marshal of Lieutenant Frederick Gotthold in March, 1778. The Lieutenant was found guilty of “attempting to commit sodomy, with John Monhort, a soldier.” In crossing a class line as well as committing a code violation, Gotthold had to be punished. Benjamin Holcomb had also been court
martialed for crossing the lines. This Connecticut Lieutenant had displayed the rank
of captain by “wearing a yellow cockade and mounting Guard in that capacity.” In this
case, his defense of ignorance saved him. Holcomb claimed he had not been aware of
the proper officer designation. And, of course, he promised never to do it again.

Gotthold did not do so well. He didn’t have a good English name like Holcomb
and his crime may have been more serious than “wearing a yellow cockade.” In most
colonies then (except Pennsylvania), the punishment for sodomy was death. No one
is known to have been executed in the eighteenth century as in the more religious seven-
teenth century. In Gotthold’s case, his punishment was to be drummed out of the
service. No great pleasure, being drummed out of the army at Valley Forge; nevertheless,
not the worst fate ever to befall a queer. Perhaps they only allowed one obvious queer
in the army then or maybe only one out queer German? Frederick Steuben who had
had to leave Germany under cloud of sodomy charges against him suddenly appeared
at Valley Forge to replace Gotthold.

COLD WINTERS, HOT BODIES

Modern readers should be alert to an important difference between warfare then and
now. Before railroads, armies could hardly move during the winter because the horses
could not get enough forage. Indeed the word “forage” means both “fodder” for horses
and “to look for provisions.” Feeding humans, for instance at Valley Forge, presented
problems secondary only to feeding horses. Buying supplies created difficulties in the
Revolutionary War because the supply was limited. There were only so many farms
to produce grain and meat; once the frost hit there could be no more crops harvested
until the next season.

The armies virtually retired during the winter months. Washington’s Christmas
attack at Trenton in 1776 and Cornwallis’s unsuccessful Princeton response for New
Year’s 1777 were quite exceptional. In 1776 the season began only in late summer; in
1777 and 1778 in June. As the war concentrated in the South the fighting began earlier:
in 1779 and 1780 in April and in 1781 in March. On March 4, 1782, the House of Com-
mons voted to end the war and major fighting stopped.

Basically the soldiers and officers played with themselves between the first frost and
the spring thaw. The winters were unusually cold then. During January 1780 New York
harbor froze solid for the only time in its recorded history and the Chesapeake Bay
froze solid to the mouth of the Potomac. Washington’s very dull diary for 1780 only
records the weather in his Morristown, N.J. headquarters: January 2nd, “Very cold—
about noon it began to Snow, & continued without intermission through the day and
night.” Not much better on March 31st: “Snowing more or less all day & generally
pretty fast.” One of Washington’s aides explained to a merchant that, “Winter quarters
is to us what the stoppage of navigation used to be to you. . . . an increase in business
in the way of paper, pens and ink.”

In examining the papers—diaries, biographies and letters of Washington’s circle—I
am struck with what seems to me something extraordinary. Not a word about food
(except for Washington’s cracking the nuts). Braddock, at least, had a famous cook,
but neither Washington, Mercer nor Gist wrote about the cook’s creations. By con-
trast, William Byrd’s famous diary has as much or more information about his food
life as about his sex life.
Particularly Washington’s Diaries are remarkable for the absolute absence of food. On this evidence alone I would argue that Washington’s sexual interests were entirely anal. On the other hand, his great concern with his false teeth demonstrates some oral interests. His false teeth had been made in England but needed replacement parts which could come only from England. During the war his mouth suffered. Perhaps that’s why he talked so much about this teeth and said so little about what else went into his mouth.

While Washington’s mess group seldom mentioned food, a handsome youth was something else. John Laurens in February, 1778, spotted “a handsome young lad, who call’d himself Cope, and said he was an ensign in the 55th British.” He said he’d had to flee because he’d killed another man in a duel. Lafayette latched right on to him. The mess group gathered a collection to help him, but he spent it on drink. A friend of Lafayette found him “making great noise in a tavern” and saying “so many indecent things” that he arrested Cope. Even so, Lafayette wrote the governor of New York that “the age of the gentleman and his being an enemy in our hands engaged me to indulge his going to Boston.” Soon letters came from the English army “in terms very unfavorable to his character.” And Washington himself reported the incident to the War Board suggesting the lad was probably not a deserter but a spy.

Hamilton in a long letter of October, 1780, explained to John Laurens the beauties of Major John André, the British officer who had been captured dealing with Benedict Arnold. Hamilton was won over by André’s sweetness, which “united a peculiar elegance of mind and manners, and the advantage of a pleasing person.” Moreover, he “possessed a pretty taste for the fine arts, and had himself attained some proficiency in poetry, music and painting.” A perfect lover: “His sentiments were elevated and inspired esteem, they had a softness that conciliated affection. His elocution was handsome; his address easy, polite and insinuating.” Washington despite the pleadings of the boy insisted not only on the death penalty but also on hanging rather than firing squad. Hamilton was profoundly moved by André’s last words: “asked if he had any thing to say, he answered: ‘nothing but to request you will witness to the world, that I die like a brave man.’”

Washington’s headquarters differed from those today; he had no Pentagon. During the Revolution, Washington either rented (from Patriots) or confiscated (from Tories) the largest mansion in the neighborhood. In Cambridge, a big house on Tory row (later Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s residence) became his headquarters. Martha Washington joined him with a coach and servants in mid winter. She maintained a fast social life with concerts, dancing and entertainments. Dorothy Trot Muir identifies nearly a hundred houses where Washington camped in *General Washington’s Headquarters 1775–1783* (1977); a third of these houses still stand, many now museums. They were not shanties.

Washington and his boys usually lived comfortably except when they were on the battlefield. At Monmouth Washington wrapped Lafayette into his coat and they slept the night on the field. More often there were beds. Nevertheless among the boys the quarters could become crowded. In October, 1777, John Laurens wrote that his companions were snoring and “are extended before the fire in the style which we practiced in the interior parts of So. Carolina.” William Byrd of Westover in his description of the Carolina backcountry had written he was “obliged to lodge very sociably in the same apartment with the family, where, reckoning women and children, we mustered in all no less than nine persons, who all pigged lovingly together.” Such close living creates
conditions where men can get to know each other physically which offers a first step in knowing each other sexually.

During the war, Washington appointed thirty-three military secretaries or aides-de-camp. His relations with each one deserves study. The work of Emily Stone Whiteley, Washington and His Aides-de-Camp (1936), provides some fascinating clues to the gay life among Washington's boys. Recent publication of the Washington, Laurens, Hamilton, Lafayette and other papers offers even more suggestive leads. Some of the aides served only briefly. Aaron Burr, a beauty, was promoted in the spring of 1776 from captain to major but was quickly dismissed for his impertinencies. John Trumbull, appointed July 27, 1775, fled in August, terrified. Whiteley writes that, "As Aide it was his part to receive company and to do the honors of Headquarters to the most distinguished people of the country—'of both sexes,' he plaintively records, being evidently especially terrified by the ladies.'" She concludes, that "without drawing invidious comparisons, it is evident that General Washington had a warm friendship for all of his Aides, and for some a deep affection."

Here I am only going to examine the best documented examples of the men loving men in Washington's mess group. Alexander Hamilton, John Laurens, Frederick Steuben, and Lafayette interwove their own lives with that of their commander. With the exception of Steuben, who was near the general's age, Washington took his boys in as he had been taken by Lawrence Washington, Thomas Fairfax, Christopher Gist and Edward Braddock. As a boy he learned from the older soldiers. In 1765 with George Mercer, he took his own aide; Mercer was near Washington's age. A poor student but a better profligate, Mercer was in some ways a transitional figure in Washington's relations. In the Revolution, Washington took on younger men and made them a family. During the Revolutionary War, Washington's mess group maintained a close intimacy. They went to battle together, they ate together, and at night blew the candles out together. Even after the war, the survivors maintained ties; some of them even set up house together.

ALEXANDER HAMILTON

"Washington's devotion to Hamilton was so marked," novelist Gertrude Atherton wrote, "that their enemies spread the story that they were father and son." However, none of the dates claimed for Hamilton's birth—1754, 1755, 1756 and 1757—coincide with Washington's 1752-2 visit to the West Indies. Court records nonetheless branded Hamilton as illegitimate, and dour John Adams dismissed him as "the bastard brat of a Scots pedlar." Hamilton's biological father abandoned his family, and his mother Rachel Levine died in 1768. She had been married to another man, who seized her belongings on her death but rejected the two Hamilton children. Although Alexander had gone to Hebrew school, he clung to claims of a noble Christian father and seldom mentioned his mother.

As a teenaged orphan, Alexander Hamilton had learned to cultivate the kindness of men; in his youth he had seen his mother working the rich men to keep her children and herself afloat. Alexander became a clerk on St. Croix for a merchant friend of his mother. Planter Thomas Stevens had befriended both Hamilton and his mother who may have lived with him before her death. Hamilton became something of a lover with the planter's son Edward Stevens, who wrote a decade later: "have you forgot-
ten those Vows of eternal Friendship, which we have so often mutually exchanged?”

On St. Croix young Hamilton also attracted the loving attention of Hugh Knox, a Pres-
byterian clergyman, apothecary and journalist who had fled a scandalous past in New
Jersey and Saba, a smaller island of the Dutch West Indies. Knox encouraged Hamil-
ton’s readings in poetry and Greek classics, and he may have helped him polish his
French. Biographer Broadus Mitchell writes that “An immediate sympathy sprang up
between them. Both had the taste for study and literature in a community more given
to ledgers and litigation.”

Knox saw that Hamilton’s vivid description of the hurricane of 1772 was published
in The Royal Danish American Gazette. And on the basis of that publication, the
clergyman organized a fund to send his protégé off to school. The older man later wrote
Hamilton, “I have always had a just & secret pride in having advised you to go to
America, & in having recommended you to some [of] my old friends.” Hamilton ad-
vanced rapidly and soon entered King’s (now Columbia) College where he joined his
boyfriend Edward Stevens. In New York City he lived with thirty-two year old
“bachelor” Hercules Mulligan, a haverdasher acquaintance of Knox. Hercules’s shop
carried such decorative items as “gold and silver lace, with some half laces for hats” along
with “gold and silver buttons and loops,” as well as “gold and silver treble French
chain.” At the same time that Hamilton was living with Hercules Mulligan, the mer-
chant got a woman pregnant. He married her and their son John W. Mulligan even-
tually became Steuben’s secretary and later Hamilton’s law clerk. During the war,
Hercules Mulligan served as a Revolutionary spy in New York City. When the British
evacuated and Washington reentered, the general took his first breakfast with Mul-
ligan. Hercules later provided a “resplendent black velvet suit” to Washington when
he became President in 1789. Mulligan and Hamilton were still seeing each other as
late as 1796.

Historians have obscured or avoided explaining Hamilton’s quick rise to become
Washington’s aide-de-camp on March 1, 1777. The reason the couple took up together
is because they found each other handsome. Hamilton first captured the attention of
General Greene while working out in the New York City “Park (or Fields) where he
was attracted by the competent drill. . . . He sent to compliment Captain Hamilton,
invited him to dinner, and thus began their friendship.” Greene in turn introduced the
youth to Washington. Another story has Washington himself picking up Hamilton
him to his marquee, and thus commenced that intercourse which has indissolubly linked
their memories together.”

Despite his cockiness, Hamilton inclined more toward the feminine than any of
Washington’s aides. In 1776 at New Brunswick, a soldier reported seeing Hamilton:
“a youth, a mere stripling, small, slender, almost delicate in frame, marching beside
a piece of artillery with a cocked hat pulled down over his eyes, apparently lost in
thought, with his hand resting on the cannon, and every now and then patting it as
he mused, as if it were a favorite horse, or a pet plaything.” In a 1778 letter, childhood
friend Edward Stevens wrote that he “was tormented” worrying about Hamilton’s
health since the lad had such a delicate constitution (“delicatesse de constitution”). And
as late as 1790, Senator Maclay commented in his diary on Hamilton’s “very boyish,
giddy manner.”

In Washington’s “family” they called Hamilton the “Little Lion.” His beauty sprang
from his carriage which first drew Washington to him and his eyes which made him irresistible to some men and women. The attraction he and Washington felt to each other fulfilled a mainstay fantasy in Anglo literature and life: the dumb, dull fair-skinned hunk linked with the Caribbean (or other exotic) wildflower. Beware of that “sparrow cock,” Abigail Adams warned her husband, “I have read his heart in his wicked eyes many a time. The very devil is in them. They are lasciviousness itself.” John Adams needed no warning, he had himself witnessed Hamilton’s “debaucheries” and promised to keep clear of his “puppyhood.” The Adams’s might maintain their virtue but others willingly flocked to the devil.

The young Lion’s handsome figure explains his entry into Washington’s inner chambers; his wit explains the long relationship. Hamilton’s and Washington’s minds intertwined so that their writing, even their thinking becomes indistinguishable. Theirs was a symbiotic relationship that continued in the army and later in the new national government. Washington’s mind moved slowly while Hamilton’s moved in every direction, brilliantly erratic and unpredictable. Like the subject of his first teenage composition which brought him recognition, Hamilton was a hurricane. The mind may not have genders but it does have variety. Washington needed insemination; Hamilton needed direction and protection. Rather like the Duke of Marlborough and Prince Eugène of Savoy, their interaction conceived something more than the combination of its parts. Biographers of Washington claim that his writings are all his own; biographers of Hamilton argue they are written by Hamilton. But the biographers too often miss the essence of the collaboration in which two men in their love and commitment became irresistible.

Hamilton served as Washington’s aide from 1777 until 1781; they both pushed for the Constitution under which Washington was elected President in 1789. He chose Hamilton as his Secretary of the Treasury and their two administrations ended with the famous Farewell Address in 1796. In those years, they had only one big fight, that in the winter of 1780–81. Hamilton married Elizabeth Schuyler in December; Washington responded to this marriage with more than his usual frostiness. Then in February, 1781, the roof fell in. Going to his room, George passed Hamilton going downstairs and told the lion he wanted to see him. The boy took his time while the General watched the clock. When the boy returned, Washington exploded: “Col. Hamilton you have kept me waiting at the head of the stairs these ten minutes. I must tell you Sir you treat me with disrespect.” Hamilton replied: “I am not conscious of it Sir, but since you have thought it necessary to tell me so we must part.” Washington came back with “Very well if it be your choice.”

Typical lover’s quarrel for the silliness of the issue. Washington apologized both in writing and through intermediaries. But Hamilton made demands: he would not come back as an aide and he wanted command of a field battalion. “I wished,” he wrote the general “to stand rather upon a footing of military confidence than of private attachment.” Washington replied that “Your letter . . . has not a little embarrassed me.” What about all the other worthy contenders for commands? Hamilton stood firm and got everything he asked; he had a field command at Yorktown. His field service was satisfactory but brief; as the war ended he never got his opportunity to be a Caesar. To his father-in-law, Hamilton wrote “At the end of the war I may say many things to you concerning which I shall impose upon myself ’till then an absolute silence.” He hinted that he had the key “to easily unlock the present mystery.” If so, he took his
“key” to the grave.

Hamilton was an adventurer who would sleep with anyone to further his career. Thus he married Elizabeth Schuyler because she was rich and her father influential. Apologizing to another boyfriend in the family, Hamilton wrote Jack Laurens that the marriage would not change their relationship: “as if after matrimony I was to be less devoted [to you] than I am now.” He explained that from a wife he needed what Laurens could not give him: “I am a stranger in this country. I have no property there, no connexions. If I have talents and integrity, (as you say I have) these are justly deemed very spurious titles in these enlightened days.” He invited Laurens to witness and to share the “final consummation,” the breaking of his bride’s hymen.

In Washington’s family distinctions among homosexual, heterosexual and bisexual had less significance than between sexual and asexual. Hamilton’s letters show him to have been (like Laurens, Lafayette and Steuben) very sexual. His love relations with Laurens will be considered shortly. His relations with Mrs. Peggy (Benedict) Arnold and Mrs. Maria (James) Reynolds likewise demonstrate powerful feelings. As disgraced women, they both resembled his mother Rachel and as Elizabeth Schuyler had fallen into his trap so he fell into their traps. When Washington and Hamilton caught Benedict Arnold’s wife Peggy, she staged a grand scene of insanity (clutching her infant) in order to give her traitor husband time to escape. Washington was unmoved; Hamilton cried and pleaded her case. Hamilton also cried and pleaded for Major André, the stunningly beautiful British contact, who was captured while Arnold escaped. Washington insisted on hanging André as a spy. Hamilton wrote a detailed account of his attraction to Peggy Arnold and John André. He sent the account in his letters to friend John Laurens and fiancée Elizabeth Schuyler which evidently provided an extended part of his love making. Documents uncovered in the twentieth century show Peggy Arnold’s pathetic scene was only part of the Arnold plot, while the Arnolds also duped John André.

The case with Maria Reynolds became quite physical as Hamilton fucked her over a year for $2,100. James and Maria Reynolds were married but they had a partner in Jacob Clingman. The team was busy selling Maria’s body to Hamilton, extorting money from him, demanding positions in the Treasury Department and trying to sell the story to Hamilton’s opponents. What won Hamilton over to Maria Reynolds was her sob story: she went to his office and begged his help “to reclaim a prodigal Husband who had deserted her and his Creditors at New York.” The federal capitol and Hamilton’s office as Secretary of the Treasury were then in Philadelphia; he conducted his later meetings in her nearby bedroom. After several visits, Mr. Reynolds appeared and demanded blackmail money. When that was paid, he demanded more money for each time Hamilton visited (alienation of affections). Strangely, Hamilton ended the whole matter by publishing all of their correspondence. Maria later divorced Reynolds and married Clingman.

In his Federalist Paper #6 written to support ratification of the Constitution, Hamilton had denounced “loose women” and listed all the women “whose political intrigues led to religious persecution or foreign adventurism.” That description according to his opponents described his own influence on Washington. In the middle of the Reynolds scandal, Washington sent Hamilton a gift: “a token of my sincere regard and friendship for you, and as a remembrance of me . . . . a Wine cooler for four bottles.”

In studying Hamilton’s sexual/love life, the major question should not be whether
he preferred men or women. The real question (which must be asked of any hustler or sexual adventurer): what if anything (beyond benefits) might be the object of his/her desire? Hamilton always said fame and glory, but such a pat answer sounds like the religious fanatic who claims divine love leads them to kill unbelievers. John Adams called Hamilton “a proud-spirited, conceited, aspiring mortal, always pretending morality” but with totally “debauched” morals. Much has been written on the question of Hamilton’s sincerity, but that question comes more from the Reformation than from the Enlightenment. Hamilton lived in the eighteenth century of courtly intrigue and never understood how scandalous his revelations and honesty about adultery would be to Puritans and nineteenth century romantics.

Hamilton’s view of sex/love as manipulation with either man or woman caught him in a trap of his own design. Strangely, he blamed James Monroe (later fifth president of the United States) for his troubles in the Reynolds affair. In a wild bullying gesture he threatened Monroe to a duel. Monroe sensibly avoided that, but in 1804, Hamilton fought a duel on another issue but with Monroe’s second, Aaron Burr. Burr killed Hamilton. Hamilton’s own second claims that the young lion never fired at all. If this account is true, then Hamilton used the duel as suicide: he would rather die than retire to a quiet domestic life like Washington’s at Mount Vernon.

JOHN LAURENS

Washington never chose an ugly boy to become aide-de-camp. He himself was a handsome man; consequently his boys could easily not only love him but also love each other. Hamilton’s and Washington’s relationship to Laurens, of course, contained a strong element of self-interest. In the 18th century both friendship and love had to fill such a requirement. Between 1775 and 1777, John’s father, Henry Laurens (1724–1792) led the revolution in South Carolina. From 1777 to 1778 he was president of the Continental Congress, which had the final say on military matters including officers’ commissions. In 1779 he was sent on a diplomatic mission to Holland but was captured en route by the British. Held in the Tower of London until 1781, the elder Laurens then became a negotiator for the Paris treaty, which ended the war. Son John, consequently, provided a useful connection with his father. Nonetheless, had he been ugly John Laurens would never have been chosen as an aide nor have become Hamilton’s bosom buddy.

John (or Jack) Laurens came from a prominent Huguenot family in South Carolina; his birthdate has been given as 1753, 1754 and 1756. He went to school in Geneva and studied law in England. Returned to the United States to fight in 1777, he immediately became Washington’s aide-de-camp. In a South Carolina campaign in the summer of 1780 he was captured in the defeat of Charleston, but was soon released on parole (free but excluded from fighting). In December 1780 he went on a most successful diplomatic mission to France, where he obtained needed funds for the army. He returned, fought at Yorktown and was killed in a minor skirmish at Combahee Ferry, South Carolina, August 1782. Washington wrote, “No man possessed more of the amor patriae.”

John Laurens’ father tried to raise his son straight but failed to save Jack from the 18th century sensuality. By all accounts Laurens was a stunning beauty. After meeting the boy when he was making a delivery in East Florida, Governor James Grant asked Jack to move to England with him in 1776. Father said no and the son reluctantly wrote the older man: Nil est Tam difficile quod Solertia non vincat [Nothing’s too difficult for
wit to overcome]. The governor was thirty years older than the teenage boy; he had served in the French and Indian War with Washington and had indulged George Mercer with him to South Carolina. Can we believe that Governor Grant asked for the boy's hand before he had enjoyed his body? As a General he later led British troops against the colonies; he almost captured Lafayette at Brandywine in 1778. After the war Grant became a member of Parliament.

His father warned John: “The Evil of Prodigality is not confined to the Loss of Money. Loss of time is a greater, & bad example possibly the greatest.” In South Carolina Jack’s French tutor formed “an attachment to a Trumpey Woman who Travels with him & whose quality is doubtful.” Father Henry’s warning to his son: “All, All, sacrificed upon the Knees of a little Freckled Faced ordinary Wench.” And worse examples abounded in South Carolina. Jack’s cousin Mary Bremar had attended her sister’s funeral when the brother-in-law began an affair over the wife’s coffin. Young Mary soon became pregnant and when the baby was due, the husband tried to sneak her out of Charleston, but before the ship left, the baby was born and the child died five days later out of neglect. Henry Laurens wrote his son, “There’s unnatural Adultery & I am afraid Murder. The Scene is Black. My Tears continue flowing & I can’t describe it.”

With all the debauchery and profligacy abounding, Henry Laurens decided London would ill serve his son for further education. Jack was sent to Geneva, a stern Protestant, democratic stronghold. Young Laurens did well there and then in 1774 entered the Middle Temple in London to study law. He soon impregnated the daughter of a family friend—the young woman’s father later became a Trustee of the Bank of England. Jack married Mary Manning in October 1776, but he left for America by way of France in January 1777. More than revolutionary fervor to fight in the War for Independence or simple male callousness may have motivated Laurens (like Lafayette a year later) to leave their wives so near childbirth. To many men childbirth can represent a threat; a combination of womb envy and competition with the newborn for the woman’s affection often bring out or intensify existing homosexual feelings. In any case, Laurens not only took off but he also hooked up almost immediately with a boyfriend, John White from Philadelphia who was then in Paris. They travelled from France, stopped in South Carolina, joined the Continental Army, went north and fought together at Brandywine, where White was killed in battle. Laurens rejoined his wife briefly when he went to France in 1781 but he was glad to return to the battlefield and avoid her.

Washington’s aides-de-camp routinely knew French, Greek and Latin. (Lafayette and Steuben knew only a little English). In speaking to each other, they could use code to cover their libidinous intent. Thus on December 18, 1779, John Laurens in a letter to Alexander Hamilton casually dropped (using Greek letters) the phrase kalos ka agathos. Roughly translated, “the good and the beautiful,” the phrase only came into use in the 5th century BCE, when the Athenian ideal of beauty (kalos) was linked (ka) with the Spartan ideal of valor (agathos). In English the term has been used among boy lovers as a code, while in Greece the usage is still understood among lovers. Recently I met a man in Athens’ Harmony Square and we went to a by-the-hour hotel. He had beautiful thighs and a lovely cock; the room had wall to wall mirrors. I blew him and when we were lingering in detumescence, (he only spoke Greek) he said “how was I” and I answered kalos ka agathos. His whole body smiled and then I thought he asked “Do you want to do it again?” and as I went down on him he laughed and said, “No, no, I meant do you want to meet again.” So we met again the next day.
Discussing the Greek tongues of Washington's aides, John C. Miller, in his 1959 biography of Hamilton, claims that, "The friendships thus formed in the army were compared by the young men themselves to that of Damon and Pythias, and they expressed their devotion in the high-flown literary language of the day." Many academics echo Miller's thesis that these phrases are only rhetorical, common conventions. Their argument is faulty. Neither Washington nor any of his aides referred to Damon, Pythias or Corydon, or other shepherds in Virgil's Eclogues and Odes who sang of their love of men. Such literary references may have provided polite or euphemistic designations of butt fucking and cocksucking. But does euphemism imply the opposite? Does the use of a nice word mean that what prudes consider nasty or unspeakable never happens?

"Hamilton and Laurens were not merely soldiers doing a job," according to Miller, "they were classical scholars whose thoughts and actions were colored by the grandeur of antiquity. They lived—and often died—by the code of the heroes of Plutarch." Hamilton kept notes on his reading of Plutarch from an English translation. He read with particular care the life of Lycurgus, the founder of Sparta; and in his spare time (while he was supposed to be doing the payroll) commented: "Every lad had a lover or friend who take [sic] care of his education and shared in the praise or blame of his virtues or vices. It was the same with the women." His misreading on "take" (should be "took") may be as significant as an inelegant pun of his. The Spartan's realm was called Lacedaemonia (from which the English word "laconian" for tight lipped); Theopompus of Sparta was called Philolacon. Philo, of course, means love; Hamilton then wrote "(La—d—s)"); Theopompus was thus a lover of lads. Hamilton's twisted philology (love of words) demonstrates minor wit and less literary flourish, but a clear understanding of the usage of "lads" in his army and in Sparta.

The letter John Laurens received from Alexander Hamilton in April, 1779, certainly contains the word "sensibility," but the passion for another man exceeds the demands of empty literary convention: "You should not have taken advantage of my sensibility to steal into my affections without my consent. But as you have done it and as we are generally indulgent to those we love, I shall not scruple to pardon the fraud you have committed . . . if . . . you will always continue to merit the partiality, which you have so artfully instilled into me." In his reply Laurens acknowledges and reciprocates Hamilton's love when he writes back, "how many violent struggles I have had between duty and inclination—how much my heart was with you, while I appeared to be most actively employed here."

In September, Hamilton writes "like a jealous lover, when I thought you slighted my caresses, my affection was alarmed and my vanity piqued. I had almost resolved to lavish no more of them upon you and to reject you as an inconstant and an ungrateful -----." (Is "slut" the word left out? or is it a Greek word like pontos?) And again in September 1780, Hamilton replies to Laurens' desire for more letters: "I have conveyed your reproof to the lads. . . . Writing or not writing to you, you know they love you and sympathise in all that concerns you." And he closes with "My ravings are for your own bosom." And later again "The General and all the lads send you their love."

In February, 1781 Hamilton wrote, "Do justice to my regard for you. Assure yourself that it is impossible more ardently to wish for your health safety pleasure and success than I do."

This 18th century language of sensibility may have been common among the army officers of the time (but where are the studies?). If so they represent neither latent nor
suppressed but instead openly expressed homosexual feelings within the military. These letters were read to the whole group gathered around the general in the evening. Washington enjoyed hearing his boys read and chat while he cracked his nuts. Little reserve is observed and not much classical illusion. For instance, Hamilton wrote: "Cold in my professions, warm in my friendships, I wish my Dear Laurens, it might be in my power by action rather than words to convince you that I love you." This common literary conceit—words will never express my love—raises the question of what "act" exactly Hamilton had in mind.

While they flirted in Greek, Latin and French, Hamilton at least could call on the Anglo-Saxon. When writing to Laurens, Hamilton admonished him: "mind you do justice to the length of my nose and don't forget that I..." Here the manuscript has been mutilated so that the rest of the sentence is lost, but I would read "have a corresponding part." There is a folk tradition that men with big noses have big cocks. And Hamilton asked rhetorically: "After reviewing what I have written, I am ready to ask myself what could have put it into my head to hazard this Jeu de folie [crazy game]. Do I want a wife? No." This letter concludes; "Did I only intend to frisk? In this I have succeeded, but I have done more, I have have gratified my feelings by lengthening out the only kind of intercourse now in my power with my friend." Big cock—"lengthening"—our fucking—"intercourse"? These are not common rhetorical phrases such as "your obedient servant" but double entendre. Even so George Washington surprisingly gave that cliche a gay twist, when he wrote Lafayette that after the war, they could retire together to Mount Vernon "where I will endeavour... to shew you how much and how sincerely, I am, Your Affectionate and obedient servant."

In a letter dated September 16, 1780, to Laurens, Hamilton had distinguished between love à l'Americaine and à la française. Hamilton's mother was French; perhaps he learned his French from her; certainly he was bilingual. As Washington's aide, his linguistic skills were particularly useful in communicating with Lafayette and Steuben (who at first knew at best tourist English) and with the French military. John Laurens himself was bilingual. Their mastery of French if not love à la française may account for Hamilton's and Laurens' making such quick and strong ties with Lafayette and Steuben. Lafayette either already knew or learned to play jeu de folie himself. He wrote May 25, 1778, sending his "warmest thanks" to Laurens' father for having "progenited a son like yours whose company and friendship is so agreeable to me in camp... and tho' you dint think much of me when you did get him, I however acknowledge myself under great obligations to you for that so well performed work of yours."

**GILBERT LAFAYETTE**

All of the aides in Washington's headquarters loved him and vied for his affections. In his dealings with the lads the commander kept teasing them, leading the boys on and playing them off against each other. His closest ties, however, were with a young Frenchman, Gilbert Lafayette (1757–1834), whom in Gershwin-style George called "the man I love." Alexander Hamilton and Jack Laurens served as teachers, translators and interpreters for Lafayette after he joined Washington (July 31, 1777). A teenager when he left France, Lafayette's hazel eyes, red hair and puppydog obedience rapidly won Washington's heart. Lafayette's father had died when he was a child and his mother when he was a teenager. This orphan found his first family with his new commander
in chief. He claimed Washington’s “very intimate” friendship. When the couple went into the field, Washington kept an anxious eye on his movements. After the battle of Monmouth in 1778 the two spent the night inside the general’s great coat snuggled together under a tree. By 1780, Lafayette could write the general that “my sentiment has increased to such a point, the world knows nothing about.”

Lafayette was stunningly exotic to the Americans, who had grown up amid the long protracted wars between France and England. In the French and Indian War Washington had fought many battles against the French armies. France under Louis XIV (1638–1715) and Louis XV (1715–1774) had come to dominate Europe culturally, politically, and, in the Americas physically in the West Indies, Montreal and Louisiana. Lafayette unlike other soldiers of fortune traced his noble pedigree back to Charlemagne. And he was no younger son without prospects. Through marriage and inheritance the noble youth was one of the wealthiest men in France. His family had great influence in the court of Louis XVI (1774–1793); one relative was French ambassador to England; another first lady in waiting for the Queen, Marie Antoinette.

Among the earliest of his class to rebel against monarchy and aristocracy, Lafayette had defied a direct order from Louis XVI in coming to America in 1777. His foreign service, however, endeared him to Marie Antoinette and other French patriots; Lafayette became a popular hero in France like Franklin and Washington. When Louis XVI signed an alliance with the United States in 1778, as an aide to Washington Lafayette could build bridges between the ancien régime and the revolution. Of course, both the United States and France held exaggerated views (which he did not discourage) about Lafayette’s greatness in the American Revolution and in France.

Marcus Cunliffe in his biography George Washington, Man & Monument (1959) concludes that “Washington opened his heart to Lafayette—there is a sprightliness in his correspondence with the Frenchman” absent from his other letters. In his own Memoirs, Lafayette wrote that the general’s “confidence in other people always had limits, but for M. de Lafayette it had no bounds, because it came from the heart.” Washington himself wrote the young boy (September 15, 1778) that “I think myself happy in being linked with you in bonds of strictest friendship.” And Lafayette’s tender expressions of love to the older man brought Washington to rejoice “at the happiness of my acquaintance with you.” Washington took special care of the lad’s horse when he was away, and as the lad was returning the commander expected to embrace him “with all the warmth of an affectionate friend when you come to Q[uaete]rs, where a bed is prepared for you.”

Returned to France in 1779 for a furlough, Lafayette wrote that he was homesick for his general. “Happy in our union, in the pleasure of living with you,” he wrote, “I had taken such a habit of being inseparable from you, that I can’t now get the use of absence and I am more and more afflicted of that distance which keeps me so far from my dearest friend.” The lad wrote of his fears for the health and safety of the General and complained when he was away that Washington didn’t write often enough: “Let me hear from you. Write me how you do, how things are going. . . . Don’t forget any thing concerning yourself, and be certain that any little event or Reflection concerning you . . . will have my warmest attention and interest.”

In another letter to his commander, the youth asked for a picture from Washington and called himself his “sweetheart.” Washington replied that he thought he was too ugly for the boy and feared to be considered vain if he had sat for a portrait to give
him. The commander wrote that “I really had not so good an opinion of my own worth, as to suppose that such a compliment would not have been considered as a greater instance of my Vanity, than a means of your gratification.” Washington has such dread of appearing vain that he refused to assist potential biographers. He wouldn’t allow extracts from his letters on farming to be published for fear some “officious tongue” would use “my name with indelicacy.” Yet as a sweetheart, he could allow Lafayette intimacies denied all others.

The Frenchman speculated to Washington, “you possibly may laugh at and call woman-like” the desire for pictures, letters and mementos. “Woman-like” or not, Lafayette claimed that he would never conceal nor deny the true “sentiment of my heart.” Washington sometimes did see Lafayette as a woman. And while these apparitions might be inside elaborate conceits or overdrawn jokes, their import is unambiguous. On his return to France in the fall of 1779, the youth had joked to Washington that his wife Adrienne Lafayette might want to make love with him. In reply, September 30, 1779, Washington asked (tongue in cheek?) “if you have not made a mistake, & offered your own love instead of hers to me?” Then he considers that they are separated by the Atlantic (that can be overcome) and by age (a greater gulf?) “Will you not remark that amidst all the wonders recorded in holy writ no instance can be produced where a young woman from real inclination has prefered an old man.” An obstacle perhaps, but with Lafayette’s own encouragement, Washington nonetheless promises to “enter the list for so inestimable a jewel.”

Lafayette also became mixed in Washington’s mind with his own wife Martha. Several times Washington called Lafayette to retire with him to his humble cabin in Virginia. After the war as a “friend & companion—I shall welcome you in all the warmth of friendship to Columbia’s shore . . . to my rural Cottage, where homely fare & a cordial reception shall be substituted for delicacies & costly living.” Just as Martha was conveniently forgotten in this fantasy, Washington scheduled Lafayette so that the two should seldom meet. On January 6, 1778, Lafayette wrote his own wife that “General Washington has also just decided to send for his wife, a modest and respectable person who loves her husband madly.” But by a remarkable providence suddenly Lafayette received orders from Congress to take charge of a non-existent expedition to Canada. Washington claimed to be totally surprised. Lafayette went to Albany and spent the winter there (while Martha was visiting Valley Forge) in search of an elusive Canadian expedition. When Martha returned to Mount Vernon, Lafayette was quickly recalled. Likewise between January 12, 1779 and March 20, 1780 he spent the winter on a mission to France. And in November, 1780, as he was going South, he wrote, “I flatter Myself with the hope of Meeting Mrs. Washington on the Road.” But alas, Martha Washington’s itinerary was unexpectedly changed.

Both Washington and Lafayette shared a desperate passion for honor. All the boys shared this passion for themselves individually, for their leader and for the cause of independence. Thus Lafayette challenged Lord Carlisle, a British official, to a duel because he had besmirched the integrity of France. Jack Laurens likewise challenged Charles Lee to a duel over the honor of Washington. Thus the boys remained hypersensitive to any criticism of their general. One of the remarkable signs of Washington’s love for Lafayette was his indulgence in Lafayette’s support for Thomas Conway, a general who criticized the commander. Conway had been a colonel in the French army and Washington feared the French were plotting to overthrow him. While historians now
find these fears groundless, Washington managed to squeeze Conway and all his supporters aside before the end of the war. Only Lafayette managed to get away with such outright disobedience.

Washington’s view of honor (and of his officers) required proof on the battlefield. He demonstrated favor by offering his boys opportunities for glory. “Who is there,” Washington asked, “that does not rather Envy, than regret a Death that gives birth to Honour and Glorious memory.” The foreign officers, however, sometimes annoyed him because he feared that they and not the locals would get the glory and honor for winning the war. “It hurt his sense of honor,” Edmund Morgan in his Meaning of Independence (1976) explains, “to have to rely so heavily on the French. . . . [Washington] had not counted on military assistance and would have been happier to win without it.”

Like all Washington’s aides, Lafayette wanted an independent command, the higher the rank the better. In 1781 it became clear that the British had decided to pursue the war in the South, where they saw greater opportunities to use their superior naval power. All the boys wanted Southern commands and they got them. Steuben, Hamilton, Laurens, and Lafayette displayed their glory against Cornwallis. Washington coyly asked Lafayette to stay with him: “It is unnecessary I trust, on my part to give assurances of mutual regard because I hope you are convinced of it, and as I have already put it absolutely in your choice to go to the Southern Army or stay with this [command. C]ircumstan[ce]s & Inclination alone must govern you.” Washington did not in his anguish complete his thought after “this;” my “command” falters in the ellipsis. Lafayette struggled with the question in a letter to Hamilton: “He is going to be alone, you know how tenderly I love him, and I don’t like the idea of abandoning him. On the other hand every Body, Laurens himself, advises me to stay.” The Frenchman, however, had his mind set on action and glory.

The boys trapped the British at Yorktown in 1781 as Washington brought up the main body of his army; the French fleet temporarily controlled Chesapeake Bay. And Cornwallis had no choice but to surrender. When the two met on the battlefield, Lafayette kissed Washington from ear to ear several times “with as much ardour as ever an absent lover kissed his mistress on his return.” The band played “The World Turned Upside Down.” In Rembrandt Peale’s painting of Washington and Lafayette at Yorktown, the General, sternly mounted with his dollar bill dignity, holds his hat in hand with his finger simultaneously pointing and the hat covering any view of Lafayette’s crotch.

Lafayette returned to France in December 1781. In 1784 he finally got to Mount Vernon, but soon returned to Paris to participate in the French Revolution. On July 14, 1789, the Bastille fell; and the next day Lafayette became commandant of the Paris National Guard. He sent Washington the key to the Bastille, which had been totally dismantled by the revolutionary uprising. In 1792, however, he was impeached by the Revolutionary government and fled France. On the other side of the border he was captured by the Austrians and thrown into prison. Now President of the United States, Washington did everything he could to help his lad. In 1797, released from the Austrian prison, Lafayette soon returned to France where in 1815 as a member of the Chamber of Deputies, he led the movement for Napoleon’s abdication. In 1824, he had a triumphal tour of the United States (he met Walt Whitman then only five years old) and returned to France where he was a leader in the 1830 revolution which overthrew the restored Bourbon monarchy. He died in 1834 in Paris.
FREDERICK STEUBEN

For his quartermaster, Washington chose Frederick Steuben (1730–1794) who had served Frederick the Great as well as his brother Prince Henry of Prussia. Steuben claimed the closest intimacies with these famous generals; his stories of being a baron and being so close to the royal family like so many queen stories have a kernel of truth and a dash of imagination. His letter to Washington declared, “Your Excellency is the only person under whom, after having served the King of Prussia, I could wish to pursue an art to which I have wholly given up myself.”

The French and Indian War (or Seven Years War, 1754–1763) created a need for soldiers. Frederick Steuben had entered the Prussian officer corps when he was seventeen and advanced rapidly under General Mayr, a soldier famous for “debauchery and profligacy” as well as a “riotous and daring disposition.” In 1759, Steuben was captured by the Russians and later returned to Prussia with the good news that with the death of the Czar, Russia would end their conflict with Prussia. Steuben then caught the Great Frederick’s eye. The Prussian King enlisted him as an aide-de-camp and later enrolled him in a small elite corps, whom the King personally drilled in the military arts.

After conflict with another of Frederick’s favorites, Steuben suddenly left the service and Prussia. With the war’s end, the army was reduced; the King dismissed all officers without firm noble pedigrees. Steuben’s departure from Prussia, however, must have entailed more than the usual military cutbacks since he never returned home. He next went to Hechingen (one of the minor German principalities) where he served ten years. When he sought a position in another principality, an opponent wrote, August 13, 1777, that Steuben had been “accused of having taken familiarities with young boys which the laws forbid and punish severely. . . . that is the reason why M. de Steuben was obliged to leave Hechingen.” He then fled to France. To his surprise, the French minister of war financed Steuben’s trip to the United States for service with Washington.

After Steuben’s arrival in camp, Jack Laurens (one of his translators) wrote that “The Baron Steuben has had the fortune to please uncommonly, for a stranger, at first sight.” Steuben’s later portraits make him appear rather like a cartoon dirty old man, but the boys saw him as handsome in his prime. William North remembers first seeing Steuben and admiring “his graceful entry and manner in a ball-room, the novel splendor of his star and its accompanying ornaments.” And added curiously that no one had “reason to be ashamed of him.”

Steuben’s entrance when he met Washington resembled a queen entering a gay bar. Later recollections of the event may well be embroidered since the meeting occurred during the harsh winter at Valley Forge. The German wore “a highly polished medal the size of a saucer and a gargantuan jeweled star” and was followed “by crisp aides and a high-stepping greyhound, as a figure of striking martial aspect.” Being a lover of dogs, Washington particularly liked the greyhound. Steuben’s own account dramatized their meeting: “General Washington came several miles to meet me on the road, and accompanied me to my quarters, where I found an officer with twenty-five men as guard of honor.” Steuben responded, no, no, I’m only a humble volunteer. Washington responded “in the politest words, that ‘The whole army would be gratified to stand sentinels for such volunteers’.”

Steuben spoke virtually no English when he arrived. In his first interview, he spoke French and Laurens “assisted in quality of interpreter.” In regards to Steuben, Laurens
made a note on the French word for “boy”: “Garçon being masculine, requires the article to be of the same gender; therefore, *une*, which is feminine, makes a false concord; take away the *e* final and make it *un*, all will be right.” Had the new guy in camp used the feminine when convention called for the masculine? Bruce Rogers’ *Gay Talk* (1972, 1979) and Héral & Lovett’s *Dictionary of Modern Colloquial French* (1984) both recognize the sexual connotations *Garçonnière* (boy house). *Garçonnière* is feminine and unlike the more general *Garçon* has only sexual connotations.

Steuben wrote that he “was fortunate enough to find a few officers of merit, who gave me every satisfaction; they were General Greene, Colonel Laurens, and Colonel Hamilton.” Hamilton and Laurens immediately took up with General Steuben and found him boyfriends and assistants. Laurens wrote of “the pleasure of Baron Steuben’s acquaintance. Nothing that depends on me shall be wanting to make his stay in camp agreeable.” Alexander Hamilton sent an invitation to the German to celebrate Lafayette’s recent return: “We have heard from the Marquis. He will be here at Dinner. Will you dine with us also? The General requests it.” For the rest of his life, Hamilton looked after the affairs of Steuben and his spendthrift boyfriends.

By 1780, Lafayette had become attached to Steuben as well as Washington; the two fought together at Yorktown. Lafayette usually wrote Steuben in French as he did in July 1780: “Feeling with great pleasure the new obligation I shall have toward you . . . I hope I do not need to assure you of my tender affection.” Relations between the two became somewhat strained when Lafayette was promoted over Steuben at Yorktown. The German, nonetheless, retained his good humor. When Steuben jumped into a trench to avoid a shell, Mad Anthony Wayne landed on top of his ass. Turning to Wayne, Steuben said, “I always knew you were a brave general. . . . You cover your general’s retreat in the best manner possible.”

Washington and Steuben who were about the same age understood each other at once. Steuben needed a job, boys, honor and an army, which the American commander provided. Washington needed the German’s military prestige and his intricate knowledge of military drills. The marching servicemen constitute a masculine equivalent of the female chorus line and both perhaps provide the discipline necessary for assembly line production. In any case, Steuben began drilling the Yankees at Valley Forge. In an often quoted letter to a German friend, Steuben wrote, “The genius of this nation is not in the least to be compared with the Prussians, the Austrians or the French. You say to your soldier, ‘Do this,’ and he doth it, but I am obliged to say, ‘This is the reason why you ought to do that,’ and then he does it.”

Steuben with the help of his translators compiled the first edition of *Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States*, basically the drill manual in use today. In a 1937 biography, John McAuley Palmer claimed that, “If you would catch the still surviving thrill of his personality, go to West Point some morning in mid-June when the new yearling corporals are drilling the plebe recruits. They do not know it, but each of these young drillmasters is doing his best to follow the Baron’s example.”

Steuben called his American boys *sans culottes* (without breeches or *culottes*, the tight pedal pushers Washington always wore). Steuben thus coined the term later used for radicals in the French Revolution. Doubtless Steuben had studied the soldiers’ asses and crotches closely and was curious at his *sans culottes*’ physical modesty. In so-called developed countries, the relatively modest trousers (or *sans culottes*) have covered men’s bottom (better?) half ever since the French Revolution. In his quarters at Valley Forge,
Jean Genet in his play *The Balcony*. Here customers come to a bordello to imitate or have imitated various figures in their sexual fantasies. Outside the house a revolution occurs; the respectable figures of society—Bishop, General, Judge, Rebels, etc.—have all been killed. The sexual palace image-mavens instantly replace the dead by their imitators. Washington thought he was living and acting in *Cato*, but instead he was in *The Balcony*. In that play Irma urges everyone to prepare their disguises:

> Prepare yours . . . judges, generals, bishops, chamberlains, rebels who allow the revolt to congeal. I’m going to prepare my costumes and studios for tomorrow . . . You must now go home, where everything—you can be quite sure—will be falser than here.”

The notion that “Washington slept here” now takes on another meaning for gay revolutionists—when they tell you to go home, don’t listen. And don’t ever “allow your revolt to congeal.”

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I give special thanks to those who encouraged me first to continue and publish this essay on Washington. In April, 1990 Eugene Rice invited me to present my work in progress to the Columbia University Seminar on Homosexualities. Chris Wittke, *Gay Community News* features editor, published an early version in *Gay Community News* (Boston) (July 1–7, 1990). In December 1990, William A. Percy, chair of the American Historical Association Committee on Lesbian and Gay History, assembled a panel at the AHA annual meeting where I presented my research on Washington and Gitt. And Winston Leyland by encouraging me to finish this work helped pull me out of my despair and depression from these waves of dying friends. If not the best revenge, publication can be gratifying. Thanks to William Andrew Jones for letting me read his play, *Friedrich*, based on the life of Steuben. Warren Johansson, Michael Bronski, John Mitzel and others have offered me some good leads, but one of my best informants ("Deep Throat") wrote that “if anything develops from research further, credit to inspirer is not only not sought but explicitly rejected.” That important gay historian must remain anonymous.

**SOURCES**

Intended for the general reader, this essay does not include author’s footnotes, endnotes or bibliography. Claiming to be easily distracted, sensitive readers have complained about notes at the bottom of the page, embedded in the text or included at the back of the book. Their instincts are correct: most authors use such paraphernalia to intimidate and belittle the reader. “Look how many marbles I’ve got,” the authors shout. Those interested in the marbles can write the author with ten dollars and will receive an annotated copy of the text with bibliography. (Charles Shively, American Studies Program, University of Massachusetts, 100 Morrissey Boulevard, Boston, MA 02125-3393.) Also any complaints, leads to unused sources or other suggestions would be appreciated.

For those who can’t wait or don’t have the fin, my sources should be obvious. There are standard and recent biographies of most of the figures here. For Washington himself the best short biography is Marcus Cunliffe, *George Washington, Man & Monument* (1958) and the best long biography, Douglas F. Freeman, *George Washington: A Biography* (7 vols. 1948–57). *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton* have been published by Columbia University Press in twenty-seven volumes; Lafayette’s papers, *Lafayette in the American Revolution*, have been published by Cornell University Press in five volumes; *Henry Laurens Papers* (with many of his son John’s letters) are in progress with University of South Carolina Press. *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745–1799* were published (1931–44) by the U.S. Government Printing Office in thirty-nine volumes. And collecting his work has again been undertaken by the University of Virginia Press, whose twenty volumes are only a fraction of what will be the completed work.

Despite the monumental efforts to commemorate the founding fathers, much has been lost. Martha Washington burnt a vast body of the Washington correspondence including all the letters between her and George excepting only two letters which she had missed; and in the 1920s J. P. Morgan was reported to have burned a batch of Washington’s “smutty” letters. On the other hand, a cottage industry keeps busy forging romantic letters from Washington to women. The heterosexuals, however, don’t really need evidence to spin their tales. In 1989 Bill Moyers with General Motors celebrated the 200th Anniversary of the President by having Barry Bostwick, Patty Duke, Jeffrey Jones, Penny Fuller and Richard Bekins redo Washington’s life as a soap opera. The Kansas City Star called this “a lesson in American History more enlightening than a dozen speeches on the Fourth of July.” Few things could be less enlightening than a dozen Fourth of July speeches, but this General Motors production may qualify.
Washington’s praying at Valley Forge. A soldier spies him “in a dark natural bower of ancient oaks” going down “on his knees at prayer!” As religious revivals swept the country and claimed a monopoly on virtue, they incorporated Washington as one of their own. Soon Washington had become America’s new center and circumference a naturalized version of both the Old Testament father and New Testament savior.” By 1832, the centenary of his birth, a congressman declared that “Mount Vernon and Mount Calvary will descend to posterity with coextensive remembrance.” And Catherine L. Albanese treats Washington as indeed coeval with Christ in Sons of the Father, The Civil Religion of the American Revolution (1976).

The heterosexual image of Washington distorts him as profoundly as the religious image. Finished only after the Civil War, his monument in the city named after him represents Washington as one big cock. Seen as a super stud in the age of imperialism he has come to symbolize male dominant heterosexuality. The cock represented republican virtue or imperialism equally well, but Washington with his uniforms and boys ill fitted the cock and balls image. In our own twelve step time, Washington has even been made into an amiable family man. Miriam Anne Bourne wrote First Family, George Washington and His Intimate Relations (1982); here “intimacy” can only be heterosexual. Jay Fliegelman in Prodigals & Pilgrims, The American Revolution Against Patriarchal Authority, 1750–1800 (1982) makes Washington into a “sensitive” straight man who led families in his own new age bliss: “Parents who embraced the new childrearing felt a deep moral commitment to prepare their children for a life of rational independence and moral self-sufficiency.” Fliegelman reconciles the big cock and no children contradiction in Washington’s life by giving him mumps as a boy: “At an early age Washington was rendered sterile by a case of mumps.” Fliegelman uses the word “rendered” in an interesting way.

Ideology in Washington historiography had recently been overwhelmed with advertising: the Presidents’ Day automobile sales and shopping sprees. In keeping with our times, there are a flood of “image” books. Historians now care less about controlling the records of wars, politics, ideas or economies; they flow where the real power seems to be: in perception. These secretaries of perception have turned out useful studies like Barry Schwartz, George Washington, The Making of An American Symbol (1987). And Karal Ann Marling carries Washington into his ultimate depths as a consumer item. George Washington Slept Here, Colonial Revivals and American Culture, 1876–1986 (1988) ends on “a cold afternoon in the 1980s when Ronald Reagan dragged Washington into his inaugural festivities as a mark of his adherence to a never-to-be-defined credo of traditional American values.”

To argue that Washington was not his monument may be to shout against the wind as well as to speak the obvious. My evidence may not be universally compelling, but that is not the fault of either the evidence or the messenger but of the poisoned networks of communication imposed on us. Without the independent Gay Sunshine Press this essay would never have appeared and would probably not have been written. Even homosexuals too often assume that because we have been boxed into limited ghettos that everything beyond that ghetto must be straight. When lesbians, gays and their friends marched on Washington in 1979, they gathered by the Washington monument but not one person I met talked about what the general might have been doing down on his knees at Valley Forge.

The queer who understood the position of George Washington best may have been
deed in the first cabinet a division between Thomas Jefferson from Virginia and Alexander Hamilton from New York presaged the two-party system in the United States and the division between agrarian and commercial interests. Washington’s aligning himself firmly on Hamilton’s side can be explained by his love for the lad. Jefferson never understood that love and most historians have remained perplexed. They might just cut the Gordian knot.

The other great division in United States history has been between the “free states” and the “slave states”—labels used at the time and subsequently. I certainly would not want to argue that homosexuals are less racists than other people, although miscegenation has less meaning for us than for biological families. On the issue of slavery, his boys may have helped Washington because they to a man opposed slavery. Jack Laurens from a large slave-owning family wrote his father from Washington’s table at Valley Forge: “I have long deplored the wretched state of these men, and considered in their history, the bloody wars excited in Africa, to furnish America with slaves—the groans of despairing multitudes, toiling for the luxuries of merciless tyrants.” Lafayette, Hamilton and Steuben likewise joined in opposing this “peculiar institution.” John Brown in his famous 1859 raid on Harper’s Ferry used Washington’s sword in his effort to free the slaves in Virginia.

In the 1820s Lafayette visited Monticello, Jefferson’s plantation. Jefferson sired seven children with his slave Sally Hemings. One of Sally’s children who acted as coachman overheard Lafayette ask Jefferson how he could reconcile slavery and freedom (as in the Declaration of Independence). Hemings listened closely for Jefferson’s answer, which the master nearly whispered, that the slaves weren’t ready for freedom; they still needed education. When Jefferson died, he owned about two hundred slaves; he emancipated only his mestizo children. The other slaves were willed to his white children.

Washington wanted Laurens to go slow with abolition, but he never himself favored slavery. He encouraged slaves to enlist in the army in return for their freedom. He thanked Phylis Wheatley, the Boston slave who wrote a poem for him, and he may have entertained her at tea. With Hamilton at his side, Washington “was known to favor the gradual emancipation of slaves ‘by legislative authority,’ a position that he clung to until the end of his life.” At his death he owned 124 slaves; he willed them to Martha with provision for their emancipation on her death. In confronting slavery, Washington responded as he had to the English and to the church people and to other enemies: cautiously and slowly. The nineteenth century historian George Bancroft wrote of Washington “that placed upon the largest theatre of events, at the head of the greatest revolution in human affairs, he never failed to observe all that was possible, and at the same time to bound his aspirations by that which was possible.”

**MYTH OF THE AGES**

Washington despised religion and pedlars of religion. In this he was an Enlightenment man. Steuben had struck the fitting classical image in naming the soldier’s society, Cincinnati, after the Roman general who had left his farm to fight a war and then returned to his crops and animals. But history has been unkind to Washington as the various forces he hated most have obliterated his life.

Religious writers have deformed Washington to have him constantly saying his prayers before battles. Only after Washington’s death did Weems tell the fable of
king completely destroyed any chances of their success.*

Jefferson gave Washington credit for saving the United States as a republic or democracy. He wrote in 1784 that “the moderation and virtue of a single character has probably prevented this revolution from being closed as most others have been by a subversion of that liberty it was intended to establish.” Among revolutions, in England Charles I had his Cromwell; in France Louis XVI had his Napoleon; in Mexico Hidalgo had his Iturbide; in Russia Czar Nicholas had his Stalin; in China the last Emperor had his Mao Tse Tung; and in Cuba Batista had his Castro. Virtually every revolution but one has ended with a military dictator.

In examining Washington’s uniqueness no one has given due credit to his sexual ambivalence. Some say he turned the way he did from his love of Addison’s play Cato. But if so who but a queen would live their life from a play? When the French Alliance was announced to the troops in 1778, Washington set aside May 6, as a day of celebration. “Prisoners convicted at courts-martial were granted pardons. An elaborate feu de joye was arranged, in which cannon salutes were followed by a running fire of musketry for each of three cheers—to the king of France, the friendly European powers, and the American states.” Steuben had his boys show their stuff with elaborate marching drills, and to finish off the week of festivities, Washington’s officers staged Addison’s Cato. Cato fights for the Roman Republic and against Caesar. Addison’s play ends with Cato dying on his sword: “These are thy triumphs, thy exploits, O Caesar!/ Now is Rome fall’n indeed!” Washington to paraphrase John Wieners was “in only one play, still living it, through his loves, acting himself, writing it, staring it and directing it.” ("A Casket Before Dark?") Steuben later named Utica after Cato’s hometown.

**FREEDOM’S JUST ANOTHER WORD**

The role of the lads in improvising a monarchy failed to thrill Washington perhaps because they assigned too great roles for themselves. While he always took care (in so far as possible) of his lads, he did not want them to outshine or outrank him. Washington’s man/boy/love circle impacted history in two important ways: first, in the premiership of Alexander Hamilton and second, in the circle’s opposition to slavery.

Historians have been unable to explain satisfactorily the close alliance between Hamilton and Washington in the new national government. Hamilton as Secretary of the Treasury represented a very different group than Washington’s Virginia friends. In-

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*Wisely for his country, George Washington did not choose to become a monarch. Had he done so, however, America would have had a ruler with a bloodline as noble (if not more so) as that of Washington’s nemesis, king George III. And since Washington did become president, our first holder of that office surpassed in antiquity of traceable ancestry the Hanoverian usurpers on the British throne. The Washingtons probably descend in the direct male line from Maldred, lord of Cumbría, an eleventh century Scots noble and younger brother of Duncan II, king of Scots from 1034 to 1040, when he was deposed by the historical Macbeth. According to the eminent, contemporary historian Sir Iain Moncreiffe, both brothers in turn descend in the direct male line through many generations from Niall of the Nine Hostages (died A.D. 438) pagan, sacral high king of Ireland. Ironically, then, George Washington had a better claim to be king of Scotland and Ireland than George III, who was almost totally of German descent. It was only in the 20th century, however, that modern historical research unearthed Washington’s royal ancestry; it was apparently unknown in his own time.

It is interesting to note also that George Washington’s very distant cousin, Prince Charles Edward Stuart (1720–1788), the “Bonnie Prince Charlie” of the ill-fated military invasion (1745–46) to restore his family to the thrones of England and Scotland, was contacted in his Italian exile (ca. 1775) by a group of Bostonians to make him figurehead of a provisional American government—perhaps even to be elected as constitutional, democratic king after independence had been won. (See Frank McLynn, Charles Edward Stuart, A Tragedy in Many Acts, 1988, p. 519)

—Editor (Winston Leyland)
A QUEEN BUT NOT A KING

Washington's love of boys and men means more to the United States than a little gossip. Had he had lots of children (like the Kennedys) he might well have been tempted to become king for his descendants' sake. But he resisted that temptation. In a draft for his first inaugural, which was not delivered, he (or Hamilton) had written "that the Divine Providence hath not seen fit that my blood should be transmitted or my name perpetuated by the endearing, though sometimes seducing, channel of immediate offspring. I have no child for whom I could wish to make a provision—no family to build in greatness upon my country's ruins." Washington thus recognized that perhaps his greatest gift to the world was in his not siring children.

But what about his "lads?" As a group they unfortunately tended towards the monarchical more than the republican party in the politics of the early United States. Jack Laurens died in battle in 1782, but Frederick Steuben, Alexander Hamilton and even Gilbert Lafayette had connections with monarchy. Today such inclinations lack fashion. United States historians shun the topic of monarchical tendencies in the early republic almost as firmly as they ignore same sex love.

Even within the lesbian/gay community monarchs have been largely ignored. There are contemporary homosexuals who admire monarchy, but their position goes far beyond the imagination of lesbian/gay politicos—whether anarchist, Marxist or mainstream. Royalist queers, nevertheless, abound. They follow closely the fortunes of various pretenders to deposed royal families—in Romania, for instance, not to mention Russia or France. Elizabethan historian A.L. Rowse celebrates monarchs in his Homosexuals in History, Ambivalence in Society, Literature and the Arts (1977). Few of his critics even seem aware that his monarchism makes the book so ditzy; they say the book lacks context when in fact it has a context, but one very alien to their lights.

In hindsight, the United States rebellion from monarch George III represented the opening shot in making the world safe for democracy. But at that time, many royaltyists expected that the independent United States would want and need a king. Lafayette, DeKalb, Steuben and a whole slew of European officers had encouragement from the secret services of the day. Henry of Prussia, younger brother of Frederick the Great allowed the possibility that he might be available. As recently as 1714, George I from Hanover had become king of England without being able to speak English. In 1832, newly independent Greece took first a Bavarian and then a Danish king. The idea of a king for the United States was far from impossible in 1783.

Thomas Jefferson (second vice president and third president) wrote the first draft of the Declaration of Independence and consulted on the French Revolutionary Declaration of the Rights of Man in 1789. Returned home to become the first Secretary of State in 1790, he was dismayed to find: "Some officers of the army... trained to monarchy by military habits, are understood to have proposed to General Washington to decide this great question by the army before its disbandment, and to assume himself the crown, on the assurance of their support." Jefferson identified Steuben and Hamilton as active leaders first in the Newburgh Revolt which would have made Washington dictator or king until he repudiated them. And then they supported subsequent intrigues to recruit European monarchs. Steuben corresponded with Prince Henry of Prussia to take the throne after Washington refused, but Washington's refusal to support another
Steuben, New York. Some of the Indian lands there had been granted to the general for his army service; the Iroquois even attempted to kidnap Steuben. But they failed and his name survives in the state park as well as Steubenville, Ohio. A French architect Pierre Pharoux came for a visit and designed an elaborate estate, which centered on “a little pond in the English style to receive all the waters” drained from the meadows. At the time of Steuben’s death in 1794 he was living on his as yet undeveloped estate with a young Columbia graduate John W. Mulligan; his final house was little more than a log cabin.

Mulligan’s history provides further evidence of a same sex circle of lovers. The youth received his M.A. from Columbia in 1791 and then served as Steuben’s “secretary and companion.” In 1794, Mulligan received Steuben’s last words: “Don’t be alarmed my son.” Billy North described Mulligan at the funeral as “the young gentleman, his late companion,” and himself as “one on whom for fifteen years his eye had never ceased to beam with kindness.” Mulligan returned to New York City, where he served as a law clerk for Alexander Hamilton and was admitted to the bar in 1795. John Mulligan subsequently held minor offices in New York City such as justice of the peace, clerk of courts and similar patronage positions, then he landed a queen’s dream of an appointment in 1848, United States consul in Athens. He died in 1864.

Steuben’s life presents every evidence of male to male love and he even demonstrates some secondary characteristics often only associated with gays in the 1980s. Who could dare say he was “heterosexual” or even “bisexual”? His tastes and desires were hardly a cause for disguise or shame, although he did have to flee Germany and he did flirt with men regarding their wives (not unlike Washington). At a tea, he told Martha Washington that he had been fishing in the Hudson; she asked what he’d caught; he replied, “a whale.” And he wrote the wealthy Richard Peters who had a mansion (Belmont) in Philadelphia that he wanted a house like Belmont but he lacked two things: money and a wife. On money he gave up. “As to the second, it is my hope that you will not insist upon living forever, and then—But why in the devil should I tell you all my secret plans?”

To the end Steuben remained faithful to Washington and Washington to him. Steuben organized the Cincinnati group of officers who celebrated the great general. While Washington resisted their effort to make him or anyone else king, he tended to accept worship from his army comrades as Alexander had among the Egyptians. And when Washington was inaugurated as the first president, Steuben was at his side on the platform. Steuben’s carrying on provides a thread through the Virginian’s camp and even his life: loving the boys could be perfectly acceptable as long as it remained within certain boundaries (among officers and officers, for instance, but not between officers and enlisted men).

As Commander of the Revolutionary Army, Washington’s last official act was to sign an encomium for Steuben. His expression of “regard and Affection . . . Sincere Friendship and Esteem” was the last document he signed before he retired to Mount Vernon: “I wish, to make use of this last Moment of my public Life,” the commander wrote, “to Signify in the strongest terms my intire Aprobation of your Conduct, and to express my Sense of the Obligations the public is under to you for your faithful and Meritorious Services.”
Steuben held a gay themed party centered on pants. He invited a select group of handsome young officers to dine with him "on condition that none should be admitted that had on a whole pair of breeches...torn clothes were an indispensable requisite for admission, and in this the guests were very sure not to fail." There is no record of who worked the door for this event. But Steuben's party may have given rise to the legend of soldiers in rags at Valley Forge.

Steuben himself quickly assembled his own family, which dined two or three times a week with Washington's but maintained their own house, tent or hut. His two most intimate aides were Ben Walker and Billy North. North described the general's meeting with Walker: he was doing drill and Walker volunteered to help: "'If,' said the baron, 'I had seen an angel from heaven, I should not have more rejoiced.'...Walker became from that moment his aide-de-camp, and remained to the end of the baron's life his dear and most worthy friend." Likewise Billy North joined the family "until death do us part." Palmer in his biography rejoices at the "relation between an old general and an ideal aide-de-camp that is closer than the relation between father and son. When this rare bond is once formed it is one of the closest and tenderest ties in all human relations." On the general's birthday in 1787, the fifty-seven year old man fondly watched Billy cut their names "in a Big tree" at the Baron's new mansion in upstate New York.

Steuben never married and never had any children. After the war, he maintained a loose and extravagant household that sometimes worried Alexander Hamilton, Billy North and Ben Walker. The latter two lived for some time with him in his New York City Mansion "The Louvre." Here Billy's picture hung prominently in the entrance and guests were asked to speculate which was more handsome the soldier or his picture. Steuben lived beyond his means with a "chariot," "front carriage," as well as a "steel-spring sulkey." He had an expensive habit of picking up stray boys. For instance in Connecticut Steuben had met Jonathan Arnold, whom he convinced to drop the "Arnold" (because of Benedict) and had the boy take Steuben's own name; in turn good Jonathan later named his children after Steuben's boyfriends North and Walker. The Louvre served as a magnet for loose boys needing a job or a place to stay.

Steuben and his circle in New York pioneered in house remodeling and in the introduction of French architectural design into the United States. Roger G. Kennedy in a recent study, Orders from France, The Americans and the French in a Revolutionary World 1780–1820 (1990) documents a busy group of architects, designers and engineers, whom Steuben indulged. Pierre-Charles L'Enfant, for instance, served with Washington and after the war was hired to renovate the Federal Building in New York City and then commissioned to build the whole District of Columbia in 1789. Washington and Hamilton both supported their boy L'Enfant, who had shown up at Steuben's tent in 1782 and served with him for a time in a 1783 military expedition.

Steuben's extravagances overtook him and he was forced to move into less elegant quarters, owned by another friend James Tillary at the southeast corner of Broadway and Wall Street. Tillary wrote Hamilton that the old general "is still in my debt, but such is his delicacy & his honor, that I could as soon offend the former, as suspect the latter." Alexander Mitchell his roommate valet was spending money wildly and dressing "like a beau, with his silk stockings and waistcoats." Indeed, the old man was skidding down: from mansion to flat and finally out of town.

Debts and extravagant boyfriends forced him to move upstate to the present-day