

THE WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

Timelines – Presidents

1790s

GEORGE WASHINGTON . 1789-1797

On April 30, 1789, George Washington became the first president of the United States. "As the first of every thing, in our situation will serve to establish a Precedent," he wrote James Madison, "it is devoutly wished on my part, that these precedents may be fixed on true principles."

Born February 22, 1732 into a Virginia planter family, Washington pursued two interests: military arts and western expansion. At 16 he helped survey Shenandoah lands. In 1754, he fought the first skirmishes of the French and Indian War. He escaped injury although four bullets ripped his coat and two horses were shot from under him.

From 1759 to the outbreak of the American Revolution, Washington managed his lands at Mount Vernon and served in the Virginia House of Burgesses. He devoted himself to a busy life. Like his fellow planters, Washington felt exploited by British merchants and regulations. He moderately but firmly voiced his resistance to the restrictions.

When the Second Continental Congress assembled in Philadelphia in May 1775, Washington was elected commander in chief of the Continental Army. He took his ill-trained troops and embarked upon a war that lasted six grueling years. Finally in 1781 - with the aid of French allies - he forced the surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown.

Washington longed to retire to his fields at Mount Vernon. But the nation under its Articles of Confederation was not functioning well, so he became a prime mover in the steps leading to the Constitutional Convention at Philadelphia in 1787. When the new Constitution was ratified, the Electoral College unanimously elected him president.

He did not infringe upon the policy-making powers he felt the Constitution gave Congress. But the determination of foreign policy became a preponderantly presidential concern. When the French Revolution led to a major war between France and England, Washington insisted upon a neutral course until the United States could grow stronger.

To his disappointment, two parties were developing by the end of his first term. Weary of politics, he retired at the end of his second. In his Farewell Address, he urged his countrymen to forswear any excessive party spirit and geographical distinctions. In foreign affairs, he warned against long-term alliances.

Washington enjoyed less than three years of retirement at Mount Vernon, where he died of a throat infection on December 14, 1799.

JOHN ADAMS . 1797-1801

Learned and thoughtful, John Adams was more a political philosopher than a politician. "People and nations are forged in the fires of adversity," he said, doubtless thinking of his own as well as the American experience.

Adams was born in the Massachusetts Bay Colony on October 30, 1735. A Harvard-educated lawyer and a delegate to the First and Second Continental Congresses, he led in the movement for independence. During the Revolutionary War he served in diplomatic roles, and helped negotiate the treaty of peace. In 1788 he was elected vice president under George Washington.

Adams's two terms as vice president were frustrating. He complained to his wife Abigail, "My country has in its wisdom contrived for me the most insignificant office that ever the invention of man contrived or his imagination conceived."

When Adams became president, the war between the French and British was causing partisanship among factions within the nation. His administration focused on France, where the Directory, the ruling group, had refused to receive the American envoy and had suspended commercial relations. Adams sent commissioners to France, but the Directory refused to negotiate unless they were bribed. Adams reported the insult and the Senate printed the correspondence, in which the Frenchmen were referred to only as "X, Y, and Z. " The nation broke out into what Thomas Jefferson called "the X. Y. Z. fever." The populace cheered itself hoarse wherever the president appeared. The Federalists had never been so popular.

Hostilities began at sea. After several naval defeats, France agreed to receive an envoy with respect. Sending a peace mission to France turned the Hamiltonians against Adams. In the campaign of 1800, the Republicans were united and the Federalists divided. Still, Adams polled only a few less electoral votes than Jefferson, who became president.

Just before the election, Adams had written these words about his new residence, the White House:

"I pray Heaven to bestow the best of Blessings on this House and all that shall hereafter inhabit it. May none but honest and wise Men ever rule under this roof."

Adams retired to his farm in Quincy. Here on July 4, 1826, he whispered his last words: "Thomas Jefferson survives." But Jefferson had died at Monticello a few hours earlier.