
George Washington, the West, and the Union

W. W. Abbot*

George Washington's involvement with the American West was lifelong, beginning when he was sixteen years old and ending only with his death. From start to finish Washington's interest in his country's advancing frontier was both personal and political. Private interest and public advantage were for him seldom at odds as he extended or developed his holdings in the West and at the same time promoted public measures that made for the greater security and accessibility—and value—of such lands. A full review of Washington's enduring, complex, and deep involvement with the West and its land might indicate something heretofore missed about how George Washington and his times joined forces to make a great man or, to paraphrase Thomas Jefferson on Washington, how nature and fortune combined to make a man great.¹

On the day after he crossed the Blue Ridge Mountains for the first time—it was a fine Saturday in March, 1748—the sixteen-year-old Washington reported that the men in the surveying party rode their horses along the Shenandoah River “through most beautiful Groves of Sugar Trees & spent the best part of the Day in admiring the Trees & richness of the Land.”² Before he was twenty Washington had surveyed for himself, or had bought, a number of tracts of fertile land on the Virginia frontier totaling at least two thousand acres.³ At his death nearly one-half century later, he owned more than forty-five thousand acres of carefully chosen western lands in

* W. W. Abbot is James Madison professor of history and editor of *The Papers of George Washington*, University of Virginia, Charlottesville.

¹ Jefferson's famous appraisal of Washington's character appears in a letter to Dr. Walter Jones, January 2, 1814. See Paul L. Ford, ed., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*: Vol. IX, 1807–1815 (New York, 1898), 446–51.

² Donald Jackson and Dorothy Twohig, eds., *The Diaries of George Washington*, I, 7, in *The Papers of George Washington* (Charlottesville, Va., 1976–).

³ For Washington's surveys and his landholdings in Frederick County, Virginia, see “George Washington's Professional Surveys, 22 July 1749–25 October 1752,” in W. W. Abbot, ed., *The Papers of George Washington*, Colonial Series, I, 8–37, esp. 35 n. 24.

what are now Kentucky, Ohio, West Virginia, and Pennsylvania, as well as in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia.⁴

From his initial trip to the Shenandoah until his marriage early in 1759 shortly before his twenty-seventh birthday, Washington more often than not was on the frontier, first as a very young surveyor and then for five years as a scarcely less precocious colonel of a regiment of soldiers. It was as a military man that Washington became familiar with the trans-Allegheny West and began to dream of what the future held for its fertile land and navigable streams. In 1753 the governor of Virginia, Robert Dinwiddie, sent young Washington over the mountains to the Ohio country to deliver a warning to the commandant of the French forces there. The next year, when Washington became colonel of the Virginia troops, he was again out on the Pennsylvania frontier, on land he was in a few years to own, when he was attacked and forced to surrender to a party of French soldiers and Indians, setting in motion, as it happened, a great war for empire between Britain and France. He was back in the west in 1755 with General Edward Braddock on the day that Braddock's army was ambushed and routed as it approached Fort Duquesne, the fort that the French had recently built at the forks of the Ohio. Three years later he was once again marching through the Ohio country in the successful campaign against Fort Duquesne mounted by General John Forbes during the summer and fall of 1758. Washington was in command of one of the three brigades of Forbes's army when the army finally reached the abandoned and burned out fort in November. After returning to Williamsburg in December of 1758, he did not go back to the Ohio country until his journey there in 1770, then not again until his shorter visit of 1784; but Washington's view of the West, and of its importance, which he held even through his presidency and to his death, had by 1758 been firmly fixed.

In the early stages of the Forbes campaign Washington engaged in a bitter controversy that revealed how completely his experiences of the previous four years had convinced him of the crucial importance of the transmontane west to the future of his country, at that time Virginia, soon to be the United States. Upon learning in July that for his army's march to the Ohio Forbes proposed to cut a new road from Raystown (now Bedford) in Pennsylvania rather than to use the old Braddock road from Winchester in Virginia, Washington persuaded himself that the British general had been duped by men in Pennsylvania. The Pennsylvanians would,

⁴ Roy Bird Cook pulled together a great deal of information on Washington's landholdings in his *Washington's Western Lands* (Strasburg, Va., 1930). A great deal more may be gained from the texts and annotation in the *Diaries* and the various chronological series of the new edition of Washington's *Papers*, cited above. See particularly his Advertisement of March, 1784.

Washington foresaw, use the new road after the war to monopolize trade with a burgeoning West rather than allowing commerce to flow, in the way Washington believed it otherwise would and should, along Braddock's road into Virginia. For six weeks the young provincial officer fought, right up to the brink of insubordination, first to sway the British general and then to thwart him as Forbes moved to begin construction of a new road. Finally, on September 1, 1758, bemoaning "the luckless Fate of poor Virginia to fall a Victim to the views of her Crafty Neighbours," Washington hinted to John Robinson, speaker of the Virginia House of Burgesses, that he (Washington) should be sent to London to reveal to George III the wrongheadedness, if not the duplicity, of the man who was the king's general and Washington's commanding officer.⁵

Besides this strong sense that whatever the future held for the West would vitally affect the people in the East, Washington also gained from the war what was to be a very large personal stake in the region beyond the mountains. In 1754 Governor Dinwiddie issued a proclamation declaring that two hundred thousand acres in the West should be set aside for the men participating in Virginia's military expedition of that year, the one ending with Washington's surrender at Fort Necessity; and at the end of the war in 1763 a royal proclamation held out the promise of land in America for the army officers who had fought there in the war against France. Before any grants could be made under either of the proclamations, the British government in 1763 closed the land beyond the mountains to further settlement. Even with the frontier closed, Washington continued to look upon the West as holding out the best hope both of enrichment for enterprising Virginians, himself included, and of an eventual return to prosperity for Virginia's faltering economy.

In 1767 Washington urged a friend and neighbor who had fallen on bad times to pull up stakes and move out to lands soon to be available in western Pennsylvania, "where an enterprising Man with very little Money may lay the foundation of a Noble Estate . . . for himself and posterity . . . for proof of wch only look to Frederick [County], & see what Fortunes were made by the . . . first takers up of those Lands; Nay how the greatest Estates we have in this Colony were made; Was it not by taking up & purchasing at very low rates the rich back Lands which were thought nothing of

⁵ Washington's letter to John Robinson is printed in volume V of the Colonial Series of the *Washington Papers*. All of the letters to or from Washington that are hereafter referred to or quoted from have been or soon will be published either in the Colonial Series (1748–1775) or the Confederation Series (1784–1788) of the *Papers*. The letters from Washington may be found, usually in a slightly different form, in John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington* . . . (39 vols., Washington, D.C., 1931–1944), II–III, xxvi–xxx.

in those days, but are now the most valuable Lands we possess?"⁶ Showing himself willing to put his money where he was advising others to put theirs, three months later, on September 17, 1767, he wrote to his old comrade-in-arms William Crawford on the Pennsylvania frontier, asking him "to look me out a Tract of about 1500, 2000, or more acres somewhere in your Neighbourhood" and find "some method to secure it immediately from the attempts of any other" to lay claim to it. Crawford found a suitable tract and surveyed it for his friend, and the next year Washington secured title to it, his first land west of the Alleghenies, on the Youghiogeny River thirty five miles southeast of Fort Pitt.⁷ Many more acres to the south and west were soon to be his.

In the same letter that he wrote to Crawford about land in Pennsylvania, Washington proposed that the two of them join forces "in attempting to secure some of the most valuable Lands in the Kings part" to the West. Washington pointed out that anyone "who neglects the present opportunity of hunting out good Lands & in some measure Marking & distinguishing them for their own (in order to keep others from settling them)" would be left out in the cold, for the Proclamation of 1763 forbidding settlement was certain to "fall" within "a few years." Crawford was to "be at the trouble of seeking out the Lands" while Washington took upon himself the task of securing them as soon as there was a possibility of doing so. He would also "be at all the Cost & charges of Surveying Patenting &ca." Washington warned Crawford to "keep this whole matter a profound Secret" by "a silent management . . . snugly carried on by you under the pretence of hunting other Game." As soon as there was the "bear possibility" of the Ohio country's being opened up, Washington would "have the lands immediately Surveyed to keep others off."

In the end it was Washington himself, though accompanied by Crawford, who went down the Ohio in search of good land. The tracts that he selected were to be surveyed not for himself and Crawford alone, however. On December 15, 1769, Washington petitioned the Virginia governor and council for two hundred thousand acres of land for the former Virginia officers and soldiers entitled to grants under the terms of Dinwiddie's Proclamation of 1754.⁸ The council agreed that Washington and his associates could, in no more than twenty surveys, claim two hundred thousand acres of vacant land to the south and east of the Ohio River in an area recently made available for settlement as a consequence of two In-

⁶ Washington to John Posey, June 24, 1767.

⁷ See William Crawford to Washington, January 7, 1769. Fitzpatrick misdates Washington's letter of September 17, 1767, as September 21.

⁸ *Executive Journals of the Council of Colonial Virginia: Vol. VI, June 20, 1754–May 3, 1775* (Richmond, Va., 1966), 337-38.

dian treaties. The next fall Washington and Crawford spent a month on the Ohio and Great Kanawha rivers identifying approximately two hundred thousand acres that Crawford was later to survey in twenty-five surveys. From 1771 through 1773 Washington oversaw Crawford's activities and the collecting of money to defray the cost of Crawford's surveys, and he personally managed the distribution of the surveyed land to the old officers and soldiers or to their heirs. His own share of the two hundred thousand acres and the shares he acquired from others added up to more than twenty-three thousand acres stretching for forty unbroken miles along the Great Kanawha River and nearly ten thousand acres on the banks of the Ohio.⁹

Aside from strictly personal affairs and perhaps his involvement in Virginia's resistance to British policy between 1773 and 1775, Washington devoted more time and attention to managing the acquisition and distribution of western land for himself and his old comrades than to anything else between the French and Indian War and the Revolution. While with one hand in the early 1770s he was getting western land into private hands and amassing great holdings for himself, with the other he was doing what he could to promote the future development of these western lands by involving himself in a public project that was to become of consuming interest to him after the Revolution. In 1770 Washington wrote about the great advantage to Virginians and Marylanders of "making Potomack the Channel of commerce between Great Britain and that immense territory, which is unfolding to our view."¹⁰ To hasten the day when the Potomac would become "the Channel of conveyance of the extensive & valuable Trade of a rising Empire,"¹¹ Washington in 1772 helped push through the Virginia General Assembly a bill to raise money "for opening and extending the Navigation of the River *Potowmack* from Fort *Cumberland* to Tide Water."¹² Opposition from Baltimore merchants and the war halted the project for the time being, and Indian unrest defeated Washington's two costly efforts before the Revolution to place people on his Ohio land, which he had been determined to do in order to

⁹ See Cook, *Washington's Western Lands*, esp. chapters 1-4; *Washington Diaries*, II, 277-328; and correspondence between Washington and Crawford, 1767-1773. Some of this land was a part of the five thousand acres Washington was entitled to under the terms of the royal proclamation of 1763 and some of it was what others had received under its terms and conveyed to Washington.

¹⁰ Washington to Thomas Johnson, July 20, 1770. See also Washington to Thomas Jefferson, March 29, 1784.

¹¹ Washington to Thomas Johnson, July 20, 1770.

¹² *Journals of the House of Burgesses of Virginia*: Vol. 8a, 1770-1772 (Richmond, Va., 1906), 292, 312. See also Washington to Jonathan Boucher, May 4, 1772; Washington to Jefferson, March 29, 1784. See also Corra Bacon-Foster, *Patomac Route to the West* (Washington, D. C., 1912), 17-21.

secure his claim to the land and hasten the day when it would become profitable.

During the war years Washington was, of course, not able to devote much attention to his western lands, but immediately after the war his western claims became a main concern. In the first six months of 1784 after his return to Mount Vernon, he took steps to have legal title to the various parcels of his western lands confirmed by the state of Virginia, and he began to search for ways to make his holdings productive and profitable. He wrote and talked to people about what could be done with these lands; he ran notices in newspapers and distributed handbills, in Maryland and in Pennsylvania as well as in Virginia, inviting settlers to take up and improve small parcels under long-term leases; and he tried to identify and make contact with people abroad who might be induced to come to America and become his tenants.¹³ A trip he made in September, 1784, to inspect his western holdings was cut short by reports of Indian violence, and he was not able to go down the Ohio to the Great Kanawha as he had done in 1770. On his return from the frontier, however, he single-mindedly and almost single-handedly mounted a campaign to have a company formed for developing a water passage up the Potomac, over to the Ohio, and from there to Lake Erie beyond. Here in 1784, as in 1773, personal profit and local advantage were very much at work; but changes wrought by independence, both in the relationship of the union of states to the West and in Washington's own perceptions, also were at work, fundamentally altering Washington's view of the potential dangers and advantages posed by the West for the thirteen confederated states. His activities in the fall and early winter of 1784–1785 merit examination in some detail.

A year earlier, in 1783, after touring upstate New York with Governor George Clinton shortly before he left the army, Washington wrote the French philosophe François Jean Chastellux on October 12, 1783, about his trip: "Prompted by these actual observations," he concluded in his letter, "I could not help taking a more contemplative & extensive view of the vast inland navigation of these United States . . . & could not but be struck with the immense diffusion & importance of it . . . I shall not rest contented 'till I have explored the Western Country, & traversed those Lines . . . which have given bounds to a new Empire." A few months later, back at Mount Vernon, Washington received a letter from Thomas Jefferson dated March 15 urging him to give up "the sweets of retirement & repose" for a time in order to assume "the super-

¹³ Much of his correspondence at this time deals with one or another of these matters, but see particularly his letters to Samuel Lewis, February 1, to Thomas Lewis, February 1, to John Harvie, February 10, to Gilbert Simpson, February 13, to John Witherspoon, March 10, and his Advertisement, March 10, all in 1784.

intendance” of a project to open up the navigation of the upper James and Potomac rivers and to connect them with streams flowing into the Ohio. After expressing his strong support for the project and his equally strong doubts that sufficient public funds could be got for it, Washington on March 29 conceded that “the immense advantages which this Country would derive from the measure would be no small stimulus [for me] to the undertaking; if that undertaking could be made to comport with those ideas, & that line of conduct with which I meant to glide gently down the stream of life.”

Jefferson knew that more than the “sweets of retirement” were at stake for Washington, and neither he nor anyone else would have had trouble understanding what Washington meant by “those ideas, & that line of Conduct” by which he was bound. When the hero of the Revolution laid down his arms in December, 1783, and returned to his farm, the world discovered a new Cincinnatus and began to bestow on Washington the *fame* that was to place him among the great men of history.¹⁴ Washington well understood, and said as much often enough, that the fame being bestowed on him by the world, and yet to be ratified by posterity, required that he act the part until the end, lest it be diminished or ultimately lost. This is what Washington was referring to when he spoke of the “line of Conduct” that he had set for himself. His heightened, seemingly excessive concern for his reputation, especially apparent in his correspondence in the 1780s, was not entirely, or perhaps even primarily, for its own sake. His fame, though to be cherished for its own particular worth, had, as he and Jefferson and the rest knew, its great symbolic value for a newly independent people. If the need arose, its weight could be thrown into the balance to preserve the union of states and save the Revolution. The question in Washington’s mind in the spring of 1787, for instance, and in the minds of his advisers, as the record shows,¹⁵ was whether his hard-won reputation must be put on the line to give the constitutional convention its best chances of succeeding or whether it should be held in reserve as a rallying point in the crisis that would ensue if

¹⁴ For the meaning of “fame” to Washington and his contemporaries, see Douglass Adair, *Fame and the Founding Fathers* (Bethlehem, Pa., 1967). A passage from an address to Washington from the Virginia legislature, dated June 24, 1784, conveys something of what fame meant to this generation of Americans: “Nor shall we ever forget the exemplary respect which in every instance you have shewn to the rights of civil authority: or the exalted virtue, which on many occasions led you to commit to danger your fame itself, rather than hazard for a moment the true interest of your country.” *Journal of the House of Delegates of the Commonwealth of Virginia* (Richmond, 1828), June 22, 1784.

¹⁵ See in particular Washington to David Humphreys, December 26, 1786, Humphreys to Washington, January 20, 1787, and Washington to Edmund Randolph, April 9, 1787.

the convention failed. It was not as easy a decision as one might now suppose.

Despite the strength of the forces that pushed and pulled him into retirement in 1784, Washington did not, of course, wait until duty called in 1787 to put what he had learned and what he had become to the public use. He was hardly settled under his fig tree and vine at Mount Vernon before he began to persuade himself that Jefferson was right, that he might properly perform one last service for his country. To assure Washington that his efforts to enlist the great man in this important public project did not arise from selfish or unworthy motives, Jefferson had written that he himself was someone "not owning, nor ever having a prospect of owning one inch of land on any water either the Patowmac or Ohio." In his reply Washington wrote: "I am not so disinterested in this matter as you are; but I am made very happy to find a man of discernment and liberality (who has no particular interest in the plan) thinks as I do, who have Lands in the Country the value of which would be enhanced by the adoption of such a scheme." Although Washington recognized that both public and private interests were involved and was aware of the connections as well as the distinctions between the two, his initial hesitation about taking the lead in the Potomac River project probably had less to do with any fears that his motives would be misunderstood than with how his early emergence from his much vaunted retirement would be perceived. In any case, by the end of the summer of 1784 his mind seems to have been made up.

When he set out in September to inspect his western lands, Washington confided to his diary that "one object of my journey" was "to obtain information of the nearest and best communication between the Eastern & Western Waters; & to facilitate as much as in me lay the Inland Navigation of the Potomack." Because of the "discontented temper of the Indians," he decided not to go down the Ohio, but he quizzed the frontiersmen about navigable streams and about land portages between the Potomac and the Ohio and between the Ohio and the Great Lakes. After a month on horseback he arrived back at Mount Vernon in October, 1784, with misplaced confidence that convenient passage from the great falls of the Potomac all the way to Detroit on Lake Erie could be achieved with relative ease. Early in the journey prospects for success had been brightened for him when he watched a model of James Rumsey's boat mechanically propelling itself upstream.¹⁶

After his return to Mount Vernon Washington waited less than a week to write Virginia Governor Benjamin Harrison a remark-

¹⁶ Washington's journal of his trip to the frontier is printed in *Washington Diaries*, IV, 1-71, quotations pp. 4, 21.

able letter in which he effectively put himself at the head of a public campaign to use the Potomac to develop better access to the West and tie it to the East. He urged Harrison to mark his administration “as an important æra in the Annals of this Country” by taking two specific steps to promote inland navigation: first, Harrison should arrange for the state to have the James and Potomac rivers surveyed “to their respective sources” and to have the same done for those “Waters East & West of the Ohio, which invite our notice by their proximity, & the ease with which Land transportation may be had between them & the Lakes on one side, & the rivers Potomac & James on the other”; and, second, if the Virginia assembly could not be persuaded to provide the funds—and Washington expected this to be the case—he should induce it to pass a bill empowering private citizens to set up a company for “extending the navigation of Potomac or James river.”¹⁷

In this letter to Harrison written on October 10, and in those he wrote to others later in the fall of 1784 regarding the navigation of the Potomac, Washington set out his enlarged views of the West. It becomes clear why inland navigation was the one thing that could draw the hero of the Revolution back into the public arena so quickly and unequivocally. He was convinced, as he wrote Harrison, that the Ohio country would “settle faster than any other ever did, or any one would imagine.” The hordes of new settlers inevitably would demand outlets for their products. Whoever provided the outlets—the Spanish to the south, the British to the north, or the Americans to the east—would win their allegiance. It is a matter “of great political importance,” Washington wrote Jacob Read in Congress on November 3, “to prevent the trade of the Western territory from settling in the hands, either of the Spanish or British,” for if “the trade of that Country should flow through the Mississippi or St Lawrence . . . they would in a few years be as unconnected with us, indeed more so, than we are with South America.” Washington saw “a separation or a war” as a “consequence” if Britain and Spain, “instead of *throwing stumbling blocks* in their way as they now do, should hold out lures for [the settlers’] trade and alliance.” When writing to Henry Knox a month later, on December 5, about his endeavors “to stimulate my Countrymen to the extension of the inland navigation of the rivers Potomac and James,” he made his point unmistakably clear, declaring that “if this Country . . . cannot, by any easy communication be drawn this way . . . they will become a distinct people from us—have different views—different interests, & instead of adding strength to the Union, may in case of a rupture with either of those powers [Spain or Britain], be a formidable & dangerous neighbour.”

¹⁷ Washington to Benjamin Harrison, October 10, 1784.

Washington's solution was to provide westerners easy access to eastern markets. "The more communications are opened" between East and West, Washington wrote George Plater of Maryland on October 25, "the closer we bind that rising world (for indeed it may be so called) to our interests; and the greater strength shall we acquire by it These when viewed upon a Commercial scale, are alone sufficient to excite our endeavors; but the political object is, in my estimation, immense." He pointed to the advantages that would accrue to the states of Maryland and Virginia and to particular individuals in them as well from an active trade with the West along the Potomac. "But," he wrote Plater, "I consider this business in a far more extensive point of view—and the more I have revolved it, the more important it appears to me; not only as it respects our commerce, but our political interests, and the well being, & strength of the Union also." It was to advance national goals that Washington came out of retirement to create the Potomac River Company;¹⁸ the enrichment of Virginia and of some Virginians was now, at best, a secondary consideration for him.

While Washington himself never lost sight of the larger implications—the "political object"—of inland navigation, in order to gain support for his Potomac project in the Virginia and Maryland legislatures he emphasized the wealth that would flow into the region from increased trade with the West—trade, he warned, that would be lost to the more commercial-minded Pennsylvanians and New Yorkers if the people did not act promptly. When calling upon the legislatures of Virginia and Maryland to create a private company for opening the upper Potomac to navigation, he reminded them that the company must be given the power "to hold out sufficient inducements to engage men to hazard their fortunes in an arduous undertaking."¹⁹ Later when he was seeking funds for the company from men such as the Marquis de Lafayette and Robert Morris, he was careful to hold out for investors the prospect of great gains from fees collected on the waterways.²⁰ As he reminded James Madison on December 3, when Madison was preparing to shepherd the bill creating the Potomac River Company through the Virginia legislature, "the motives which predominate most in human affairs is self-love and self-interest." To get his company and to get it going Washington talked as of old about sectional advantage and private gain, but he also spoke to investor and politician about his basic concern: how links to the West could well determine the future safety and prosperity of the Union.

¹⁸ For Washington's attempt to draw the Congress of the Confederation into his scheme for opening up communication to the West, see particularly his letter to Richard Henry Lee, December 14, 1784.

¹⁹ Washington to Joseph Jones and James Madison, December 3, 1784.

²⁰ See Washington to Robert Morris, February 1, 1785; and to the Marquis de Lafayette, February 15, 1785.

Washington did more than talk and write. Nor was he content only to lend the prestige of his name, though even that in any other connection he consistently refused to do. He instead intervened, directly and decisively, to secure prompt interstate cooperation in forming a company to his liking for opening up communication to the West by way of the Potomac River. Convinced of the feasibility of the project by what he had learned on his recent journey to the West, Washington in October set to work, marshaling support for it among his friends and neighbors on both sides of the Potomac. A large number of these met in Alexandria, Virginia, on November 14 and drafted a bill for creating a company to finance and oversee the opening of the upper Potomac for navigation. In the meantime Washington was in touch with the governor and with friends in the Virginia legislature in Richmond, and on November 13 or 14 he arrived at the state capital for ten days to talk, particularly to James Madison and Joseph Jones in the House of Delegates, about creating a Potomac River Company.²¹ Within a week of leaving Richmond he was in Annapolis where, as he reported to Madison on December 3 after his return to Mount Vernon, he found "opportunities of conversing with some of the leading characters in the different branches of the Legislature of Maryland, on the subject of inland navigation, and the benefits which might arise from a commercial intercourse with the Western Territory." He suggested to Madison that to save time and to "prevent dissimilar proceedings," which would be "as unproductive as no bill" at all, the two legislatures should "depute one or more members to meet at some intermediate place, and agree . . . upon an adequate bill to be adopted by both States." The two legislatures were agreeable, and Washington was named one of three Virginia commissioners to meet with the Marylanders.²² By December 3 he was back in Annapolis where he acted as the sole Virginia commissioner. Working with a joint committee of the Maryland legislature, he secured a draft of a Potomac River bill that met his wishes. The Maryland legislature passed the bill on December 28 with only nine dissenting votes.²³ Washington im-

²¹ On November 18 Henry Lee wrote from Alexandria a letter to Washington in Richmond in which he reported that the Alexandria meeting had completed its business and that he had enclosed a copy of the bill it had drafted for Washington to peruse and then place "in proper hands." Washington had left Richmond before the bill could get to him, and it did not reach him at Mount Vernon until November 28, when he immediately forwarded it to Madison. See Washington to Henry Lee, November 24, and to Madison, November 28, 1784. No Washington diaries exist for this period, but Washington's movements may be pieced together from his correspondence.

²² Beverley Randolph to Washington, December 15, 1784; Washington to Randolph, December 20, 1784.

²³ See Washington to Thomas Blackburn, December 19, Washington to William Paca, December 19, Blackburn to Washington, December 20, Horatio Gates to Washington, December 24, Washington to Madison, December 28, Washington to Virginia legislature, December 28, 1784. See also Washington to Henry Knox, January 5, 1785, and the journals of the legislatures of both states.

mediately sent it to Madison with the admonishment that "to alter the Act now . . . will not do." At Washington's urging and under Madison's management, the Virginia legislature ten days later adopted the Maryland act unaltered.²⁴ Washington had his Potomac River Company, and on May 17, 1785, he became its first president, a position he held until he became president of the United States. Before he was done with that job, he had put to use all he had learned about the West since 1748.

No attempt has been made in this discussion of George Washington, the West, and the Union to define where Washington's activities in the fall of 1784 fit into the genealogy of the federal union formed in 1789, though clearly they do fit. Even less has the impact of Washington's ideas and deeds on the Old Northwest been measured, though, again, they were not without influence. The evidence presented does suggest, however, that Washington's long experience with the West and his strongly held views about its importance, leading in 1784 to his active participation in measures to bind it to the newly confederated states, more than anything else, except the war itself, served to prepare him for the role of nation builder. The West made the Virginia farmer lift his eyes to prospects beyond his own fields and his native Virginia. In his brief years of retirement after the war, it stretched his mind, stirred his imagination, enlisted his energies, and nourished his hopes for the future. It kept the old hero in trim for the demands of 1787 and 1789. As Madison put it when giving Jefferson an account of Washington's role in the establishment of the Potomac River Company, "The earnestness with which he espouses the undertaking is hardly to be described, and shews that a mind like his, capable of great views & which has long been occupied with them, cannot bear a vacancy; and surely he could not have chosen an occupation more worthy of succeeding to that of establishing the political rights of his Country."²⁵

²⁴ See particularly Madison to Washington, January 9, 1785.

²⁵ Madison to Jefferson, January 9, 1785, in *The Papers of James Madison*, ed. Robert A. Rutland and William M. E. Rachal (Chicago, 1973), VIII, 222-34.