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## Governor Thomas Posey: The Son of George Washington?

John Thornton Posey\*

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A biographical sketch published in 1906 in the *National Cyclopaedia of American Biography* opens as follows:

POSEY, Thomas, soldier and last territorial governor of Indiana (1813–16), was born on the Potomac, in Virginia, July 9, 1750. His mother was Elizabeth Lloyd, of a family of high social standing, but except that little is known of his origin. He is said to have been the natural son of George Washington.<sup>1</sup>

Such claims or inferences that George Washington was the father of Indiana Territorial Governor Thomas Posey began to appear in print as early as 1871 and have been repeated in many biographical sketches and newspaper articles as recently as 1984.<sup>2</sup> During the first half of the twentieth century at least three leading biographies of George Washington raised the issue.<sup>3</sup> Where did these reports originate, and what, if any, evidence has been produced to support their allegations?

Posey was a distinguished officer of the American Revolution. After serving as commissary general to Andrew Lewis in the battle of Point Pleasant in Lord Dunmore's Shawnee expedition of 1774, he raised a company of frontiersmen, was commissioned a captain in the 7th Virginia Regiment of the continental line, and participated in the ousting of Dunmore from Gwynn's Island in 1776. Selected as one of eight company commanders in Colonel Daniel Morgan's famed Rifle Regiment, Posey fought in New Jersey and then in the two battles leading to General John Burgoyne's surren-

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\* John Thornton Posey is a retired insurance attorney. He is currently working on a biography of his forebear, Governor Thomas Posey.

<sup>1</sup> *National Cyclopaedia of American Biography* (New York, 1906), XIII, 265.

<sup>2</sup> *Cincinnati Daily Commercial*, March 28, 1871; Thomas A. McMullen and David Walker, *Biographical Directory of American Territorial Governors* (Westport, Conn., 1984), 152.

<sup>3</sup> John C. Fitzpatrick, *George Washington Himself* (Indianapolis, 1933), 155; Rupert Hughes, *George Washington: Vol. II, The Rebel and the Patriot, 1762–1777* (New York, 1927), appendix II, "The Poseys," 651–56; Nathaniel Wright Stephenson and Waldo Hilary Dunn, *George Washington: Vol. I, 1732–1777* (New York, 1940), 269n; see also Louis Martin Sears, *George Washington* (New York, 1932), 70–71.

der at Saratoga. After commanding the regiment while it was posted between the main army at Valley Forge and the British in Philadelphia, Posey led three rifle companies against Indian-Tory incursions at Cherry Valley and Wyoming in upstate New York.<sup>4</sup> As a major in General Anthony Wayne's elite Light Infantry Corps, Posey was the second field officer over the ramparts at the storming of Stony Point, New York, in 1779, receiving Wayne's special, if begrudging, commendation. Eluding capture when most of the Virginia line under General Benjamin Lincoln surrendered at Charleston in 1780, he helped raise a new regiment in western Virginia and participated with it in the siege and surrender of Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown. As a lieutenant colonel, Posey in 1782 led a battalion under Wayne in the southern sector, beating off a fierce night attack in hand-to-hand combat with Creek Indians led by Gueristersigo outside Savannah. As brigadier general in the United States Legion, he again served under his old commander, Wayne, in the northwest expedition of 1793.<sup>5</sup>

Posey's civilian record was equally exemplary. After raising a large family in Spotsylvania County, Virginia, he removed to Kentucky in 1802 and was there elected speaker of the state Senate. He also served as lieutenant governor from 1804 to 1807 and thereafter as major general and commander of the state militia. After moving to Louisiana in 1810, Posey was appointed a United States senator from that state and served in the Senate in Washington until 1813, when President James Madison named him governor of Indiana Territory. After Indiana attained statehood in 1816, Posey served as United States agent for Indian Affairs in the Illinois Territory until his death in Shawneetown, Illinois, in 1818. Numbered among his children were a lawyer, a doctor, an educator, a colonel in the United States Army, merchants, and others who became leaders in their communities.<sup>6</sup>

During his lifetime Posey made no claim to being the son of Washington, nor did his family after his death. Posey's own autobiography dismissed his origin and the first nineteen years of his life with these few words: "He was born of respectable parentage near the Potomack in Virginia in the year 1750 9th of July. In the

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<sup>4</sup> Francis B. Heitman, *Historical Register of Officers of the Continental Army during the War of the Revolution, April, 1775, to December, 1783* (Washington, D. C., 1893), 333-34.

<sup>5</sup> Posey did not participate in the climactic Battle of Fallen Timbers on August 20, 1794, having taken home leave during the winter of 1793-1794 and resigned his commission on February 28, 1794. *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> For detailed accounts of Posey's military and civilian record see biographical sketches in William Wesley Woollen, *Biographical and Historical Sketches of Early Indiana* (Indianapolis, 1883), 21-28; Charles J. Oval, *Governors of Indiana Illustrated* (Indianapolis, 1916), 16-17; *Dictionary of American Biography*, see under "Posey, Thomas."

year 1769 being a young man without fortune, but of tolerable english education he set out in quest of a situation in life that would better his fortune, and settled in the back parts of Virginia near the frontiers.”<sup>7</sup> Two early biographical sketches, which appeared in the *Port Folio* in 1827 and in Jared Sparks’s *Library of American Biography* in 1846, simply adopted Posey’s own phrase, “born of respectable parentage,” in referring to his origins. Both sketches were probably written by Judge James E. Hall, husband of Posey’s granddaughter, who presumably had access to the governor’s papers and surviving family; this fact might have been all that they knew, or at least wanted the world to know, of Posey’s ancestry. Hall drew a strikingly vivid word picture of his grandfather-in-law:

In his person, General Posey was tall, athletic, and finely formed. His appearance united dignity and gracefulness, and in his manners were blended in a remarkable degree the stately and gallant bearing of a soldier, with the ease and suavity of the polished gentleman. His face was remarkably handsome, his features high, fine and prominent, and if at times they assumed the sternness of command, there was a softness in his fine blue eyes, a spirit and intelligence singled with a calm and benevolent expression which pervaded the whole countenance, that at once attracted the admiration and won the affections of the beholder.<sup>8</sup>

The second sketch added the following meaningful comment, “We should not allude to a subject so apparently unimportant, if it were not that the personal appearance of this distinguished gentleman, both as to form and feature, was so attractive as to be a subject of general remark wherever he was known.”<sup>9</sup>

In 1871, more than fifty years after Posey’s death, the first published report linking Posey to George Washington appeared in the Cincinnati *Daily Commercial*. The *Commercial*’s Indianapolis correspondent, in commenting on the oil portrait of Governor Posey that had recently been hung in the Indiana statehouse, flatly stated, “none who are acquainted with the evidence . . . doubts the assertion that Posey was the son of George Washington.” Citing no authority or sources, the article related the tale of a couple named

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<sup>7</sup> This quotation was taken from a manuscript copy of the original document, “A Short Biography of the Life of Governor Thomas Posey,” Thomas Posey Collection (Indiana Historical Society Library, Indianapolis, Indiana).

<sup>8</sup> This quotation first appeared in a sketch of Posey that was published by the *Port Folio* in a series entitled *Memoirs of Eminent Persons* (Philadelphia, 1827). A copy of the sketch was presented to the Henderson County, Kentucky, Historical Society in 1933 and is currently held in the Thomas Posey File (Henderson County Public Library, Henderson, Kentucky). The quotation appears on pages 17-18 of this copy. James E. Hall, who authored the Posey sketch in the Sparks anthology cited in note 9 below, edited the *Port Folio* from 1816 to 1825 and contributed many articles to it. As a grandson-in-law of Posey, it is therefore more than probable that he wrote the sketch published by the *Port Folio*.

<sup>9</sup> James E. Hall, “Memoir of Thomas Posey, Major-General, and Governor of Indiana,” *Library of American Biography*, ed. Jared Sparks (Boston, 1846), ser. 2, vol. IX, p. 403.

Posey who were tenants on Washington's Mount Vernon estate. After the husband's death in 1754, Washington was reported to have been seen frequently visiting the widow's home, and Thomas Posey was said to have been the product of this liaison, which the correspondent stressed had occurred well before Washington's marriage in 1759.<sup>10</sup>

This article, widely copied in other journals, apparently raised quite a furor, which prompted the Cincinnati newspaper to send another correspondent to Indiana to investigate the allegations. In a front-page follow-up story, the second reporter, after extensive interviews in Indianapolis and Corydon (the first state capital), verified that the reported Washington-Posey tradition had been widely known and accepted by the older generation, especially at "the social gatherings of the old-time lawyers, when riding the rounds of the circuit, at log-rollings and at the farm-house firesides." The resemblance of Governor Posey's son, Colonel Thomas Posey of Corydon, to portraits of Washington was said to be "so noticeable that a stranger who had never seen him before would observe it; the likeness was so striking as to be absolutely startling . . . ." Colonel Posey was said at one time to have held letters written to his father by Washington, who addressed the senior Posey as "My dear Son," but these were reputedly destroyed in a fire shortly after the younger Posey's death in 1863.<sup>11</sup> The correspondent, in short, had identified in Indiana in 1871 a widespread oral tradition of the supposed relationship between Posey and Washington but had produced no documentary evidence either proving or disproving the legend. Curiously, the most obvious flaw in the original article was not even mentioned: Thomas Posey's known birth date in 1750 had preceded by at least four years the alleged affair between the widow Posey and her Mount Vernon landlord.

A biographical sketch of Governor Posey published in 1883 referred to the story in the Cincinnati *Daily Commercial* as a "romance" that "did not take root."<sup>12</sup> Three years later, however, the St. Louis *Globe-Democrat* ran a long feature article by "WBS," datelined Washington, D. C., detailing a widely held local tradition in Shawneetown, Illinois, Posey's last home and burial place, that the general was Washington's son. Sources cited included an old doctor who numbered several members of the Posey family among his patients. The doctor verified that the story was widespread and that it was tacitly acknowledged among the ladies of the family but was never openly discussed by or with the men, who felt it

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<sup>10</sup> "Was Geo. Washington a Father?" Cincinnati *Daily Commercial*, March 28, 1871.

<sup>11</sup> "The Paternity of Governor Posey, of Indiana: A Man Who Looked Wonderfully Like George Washington," *ibid.*, April 10, 1871.

<sup>12</sup> Woollen, *Biographical and Historical Sketches*, 28.



THOMAS POSEY  
c. 1795

Miniature attributed to James Peale.  
Courtesy Indiana Division, Indiana State Library,  
Indianapolis.



GEORGE WASHINGTON  
1772

Portrait by Charles Willson Peale.  
Courtesy Washington Custis Lee Collection,  
Washington and Lee University, Lexington, Virginia

sullied the general's name. The identity of Posey's mother was not speculated upon, but other key elements underlying the story included Washington's frontier surveying trip in 1749 and his later voyage to Barbados. The article also cited a claimed similarity between a portrait of Washington and one of Posey, both done on ivory in miniature by the noted painter James Peale.<sup>13</sup>

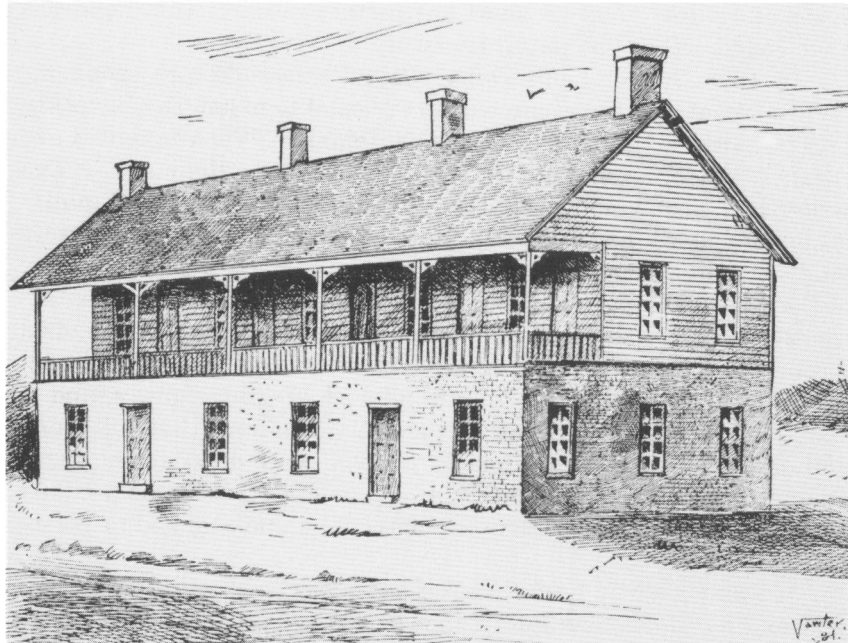
A follow-up story in the same paper ten days later featured a lengthy interview by another correspondent with one George Wilson, a banker of Lexington, Missouri, who was a great-grandson and an avid researcher of General Posey. Wilson stated unequivocally that he had found no support for the paternity claim from his examination of the available evidence after the 1871 stories appeared. His own mother, a granddaughter of the general, had disclaimed knowledge of any such family tradition; and Wilson, an amateur artist, questioned the supposed similarity of the two Peale miniatures. He attributed the reported Shawneetown tradition to confusion over the kinship to the Washington family of some of General Posey's local descendants. This confusion arose through the marriage of Posey's son John to Lucy Frances Thornton, a cousin of George Washington. Further, Wilson's research had disclosed no evidence that Thomas Posey was born or raised anywhere near Mount Vernon, although he did find traces of a Posey family's having lived near that estate.<sup>14</sup> Surprisingly, within twenty years Wilson was to emerge as a dedicated drummer in support of the Washington-Posey legend.

Meanwhile, however, other researchers and scholars were taking the story more seriously. An early history of Posey County, Indiana, in identifying the territorial governor in whose honor the county was named, stated, "Tradition tells us that he was a son of George Washington, born out of wedlock, and several circumstances seem to indicate the probability of such a story being true." The work cited a close physical resemblance between the two men and Washington's alleged political favoritism toward Posey, including the general's once intervening to prevent a duel that Thomas was about to fight with an unnamed opponent.<sup>15</sup> In 1895

<sup>13</sup> "The Son of Washington—Shawneetown's Remarkable Tradition and What It Rests Upon—The Secret of Gen. Thos. Posey's Parentage—His Striking Personal Appearance and Wonderful Career—A Story Which the Early Biographers Ignored," *St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat*, April 11, 1886.

<sup>14</sup> "The Son of Washington—Investigating the Tradition Regarding Gen. Thomas Posey's Paternity—The Poseys and the Washingtons—The Pride of Colonial Days—Interview with Gen. Posey's Great Grandson," *ibid.*, April 21, 1886.

<sup>15</sup> Goodspeed Publishing Co., pubs., *History of Posey County, Indiana* . . . (Chicago, 1886), 329-30. Posey County was formed by the Indiana territorial legislature in September, 1814; interestingly, the Ohio River settlement of McFaddin's Bluff was renamed Mount Vernon two years later although it did not become the county seat of Posey County until February 12, 1825. *Ibid.*, 339, 377; see also W. P. Leonard, *History and Directory of Posey County* (Evansville, Ind., 1882), 54; Ernest V. Shockley, "County Seats and County Seat Wars in Indiana," *Indiana Magazine of History*, X (March, 1914), 6-7.



GOVERNOR THOMAS POSEY'S RESIDENCE AT JEFFERSONVILLE

Reproduced from William H. English, *Conquest of the Country Northwest of the River Ohio, 1778-1783* . . . (2 vols., Indianapolis, 1896), II, 864.

respected Indiana historian William H. English described Posey as “a man who acted well his part in both war and peace, and about whose life lingers much interesting romance, which will probably never be fully unveiled.”<sup>16</sup> Sometime before his death on September 6, 1896, Dr. George Brown Goode, the Hoosier-born director of the Smithsonian Institution, apparently drafted a paper entitled “Reasons For Believing That Gen. Thomas Posey Was The Son Of George Washington.” The manuscript was circulated among scholars and historical researchers in Washington but was never published and is not among Goode’s papers now held by the Smithsonian. Goode’s interest in Posey stemmed from his boyhood in New Albany, which is located near Corydon, and from his father’s discussions of the Washington legend.<sup>17</sup> Goode’s untimely

<sup>16</sup> William H. English, *Conquest of the Country Northwest of the River Ohio, 1778-1783* . . . (2 vols., Indianapolis, 1896), II, 865.

<sup>17</sup> “Washington’s Love Affair,” *St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat*, October 9, 1898.



death at age forty-five cut short any further research that he might have conducted on the paternity issue.

In 1898 the St. Louis *Daily Globe-Democrat's* correspondent, "WBS," reentered the scene with a series of four lengthy biweekly articles entitled "Thomas Posey, Gentleman," "Washington's Love Affair," "Washington and Posey," and "The Posey Romance."<sup>18</sup> The writer had clearly obtained access to Wilson's research and family documents as well as to Goode's unpublished paper and had closely studied related Washington manuscripts and papers in the Library of Congress. This series of articles is the single most complete account supporting the claimed Washington paternity. The unnamed mother in WBS's scenario, described as having died in childbirth, was said to have been of a distinguished Virginia family, and it was to protect *her* name rather than Washington's that a lifelong veil of silence was maintained by all who were privy to the facts. One branch of the Posey family, the article reported, was actually considering filing a court action to have its name changed to Washington.<sup>19</sup>

It was not until 1905 that the name of Elizabeth Lloyd as the real mother of Thomas Posey appeared in a feature article in the *Indianapolis News*. Datelined Vincennes, the article consisted of a long interview with the once-skeptical Wilson, who had now become a true believer in the Washington-Posey legend.

George Wilson . . . has found in the archives of the old courthouse here what he regards as conclusive proof that General Posey was the son of George Washington. Mr. Wilson has spent several interesting years gathering the scattered fragments of his family tree. . . .

. . . Mr. Wilson has brought together all the facts obtainable developing the beautiful story of Washington and his first love, Elizabeth Lloyd. They were betrothed, but family objections ran rampant on both sides, because young George Washington was without means. . . . His heart was almost broken when the word passed over Fairfax county, Virginia, that Elizabeth Lloyd was dead.<sup>20</sup>

According to Wilson's script, after Elizabeth Lloyd's death the infant Thomas was taken and subsequently raised by a Huguenot widow Posey, a tenant at Mount Vernon, described as "a woman of culture and well fitted to care for and teach a motherless boy." It was her home that Washington frequently visited in the years that followed—but only to see his growing son. Wilson seemed particularly anxious to disassociate Thomas from a nearby family headed by one Captain John Posey who lived on property adjacent to

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, September 25, October 9, 23, November 6, 1898.

<sup>19</sup> No record of any such proceeding has been found.

<sup>20</sup> "General Posey, Son of Washington; Conclusion After Search of Records," *Indianapolis News*, February 25, 1905. The "proof" found by Wilson was Posey's will which, other than identifying a son Lloyd and a daughter Eliza, lends no apparent support to Wilson's George Washington-Elizabeth Lloyd account. Will Record A, p. 96, Knox County Circuit Court, Vincennes, Indiana.

Mount Vernon and whom Wilson appears to have regarded with some disdain.<sup>21</sup> Regrettably, soon after this interview appeared, Wilson died without having published his research and findings. His influence, however, can clearly be seen in many later biographical articles and sketches that mention the putative Washington paternity either expressly or inferentially in identifying Elizabeth Lloyd as Posey's mother.<sup>22</sup> Two years later, in 1907, a Milwaukee newspaper, in a feature article on Posey's son-in-law, General Joseph Montfort Street, referred to Street's numerous children as "direct descendants, through their mother, of President George Washington." The article identified Street's wife as "Eliza Maria, daughter of Gen. Thomas Posey, a natural son of George Washington, one of the most faithful and meritorious officers of the Revolution."<sup>23</sup>

It is doubtful that the authors and publishers of these sketches and articles had any intention of casting aspersions on Washington's character or reputation. In the president's own time malicious stories of alleged licentious behavior were deliberately circulated by his enemies but were quickly disproved, as were several early claims made by or on behalf of supposed illegitimate offspring.<sup>24</sup> The Thomas Posey story, which seems to have had its origins in midwestern folklore and to have become deeply rooted in the area's oral tradition, did not appear in print until seventy-one years after Washington died and well after the deaths of Posey and all of his children. The story's persistence may be due, in part, to the fact that Posey's character and achievements were everything that might have been expected of an actual son of Washington.

After the Posey paternity scenario became widely circulated, formidable scholars sprang to Washington's defense. In 1927 John C. Fitzpatrick, director of the Library of Congress's Manuscript Division and a leading Washington expert, published in *Scribner's Magazine* a rebuttal to this and other such paternity claims. Without once mentioning Posey's name—"it is that of a worthy man, a firm patriot, and an officer of the Continental Army, with an honorable record both during and after the war"—Fitzpatrick discounted

<sup>21</sup> Indianapolis *News*, February 25, 1905.

<sup>22</sup> *National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, XIII, 265-66; G. Glenn Clift, *Governors of Kentucky, 1792-1942* (Louisville, 1942), 148-52; John W. Allen, *Legends & Lore of Southern Illinois* (Carbondale, Ill., 1963), 5-6; Harriet J. Walker, *Revolutionary Soldiers Buried In Illinois* (Los Angeles, 1917), 44-45; Wilbur D. Peat, *Portraits and Painters of the Governors of Indiana, 1800-1943* (Indiana Historical Society Publications, Vol. XIV; Indianapolis, 1944), 393-94; McMullen and Walker, *Biographical Directory of Territorial Governors*, 152.

<sup>23</sup> Milwaukee *Sentinel*, May 15, 1907.

<sup>24</sup> Washington's grandnephew, Colonel John A. Washington, informed Wilson that he had investigated the claims of at least a dozen alleged sons of George Washington and had found all of them to be fabrications. St. Louis *Daily Globe-Democrat*, April 21, 1886.

the alleged physical resemblance and graphically demonstrated that a letter from Washington to Posey, seemingly headed "My dear Son," actually read "My dear Sir."<sup>25</sup> In a revised 1929 reprint of his *Scribner's* article, Fitzpatrick cited as "final evidence in rebuttal" a genealogical account of the Washington family recently acquired by the Library of Congress. This report identified an illegitimate son of Lund Washington, the president's cousin and farm manager; and, Fitzpatrick stated, it paralleled "with exact detail, geographically and chronologically, the inexcusable charge against George Washington. . . . It is entirely evident that this is the fact which was, later, seized upon by ignorant scandalmongers and ascribed, with twittering sensationalism to the Master of Mount Vernon."<sup>26</sup>

According to the account referred to by Fitzpatrick, Lund Washington "had a son by a young woman who was House Keeper at Mt. Vernon, born about the year 1770, now living near Conallsville in Pennsylvania. His son came to Fairfax County in 1791 to see him. But he being then entirely blind . . . turned his child away abruptly as an Imposter" and did not name or acknowledge him in his (Lund's) will. This son, using the name John Washington, was said to have "been recognized as a Washington from his remarkable likeness to the family."<sup>27</sup> While there are clearly some similarities to the Washington-Posey paternity story, there is a twenty-year disparity in the dates of birth (1750 and 1770), and the earliest newspaper and biographical articles on Posey's paternity appeared several decades before the Library of Congress's acquisition of the Washington family genealogical account.

In his later biography of Washington, Fitzpatrick, who had become editor of the United States Bicentennial Edition of *The Writings of George Washington*, again confronted the paternity issue. Stating that Lawrence, John, and Price, three sons of Washington's neighbor Captain John Posey, had received educational assistance from Washington, Fitzpatrick deplored "an irony of fate that one of these boys should have been pitched upon by erotic-minded scandalmongers, as evidence of a Washington philandering."<sup>28</sup> Since one of Captain Posey's sons was named John Price,<sup>29</sup> it seems plau-

<sup>25</sup> John C. Fitzpatrick, "The George Washington Scandals," *Scribner's Magazine*, LXXXI (April, 1927), 393-94.

<sup>26</sup> John C. Fitzpatrick, *The George Washington Scandals* (Alexandria, Va., 1929), 5.

<sup>27</sup> Genealogical account, pencil transcription, Container Four, 27-32, Washington Family Papers (Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.).

<sup>28</sup> Fitzpatrick, *George Washington Himself*, 155.

<sup>29</sup> John Price Posey was publicly hanged on the gallows in Richmond, Virginia, on January 25, 1788, after burning down the New Kent County, Virginia, jail and clerk's office. Malcolm H. Harris, comp., *Old New Kent County: Some Account of the Planters, Plantations, and Places in New Kent County* (2 vols., Richmond, 1977), I, 97-99.

sible that, in not expressly identifying Thomas as the third son, Fitzpatrick was still seeking to protect Thomas's name from dishonor, as he had done in his earlier article. The same motivation may perhaps explain Fitzpatrick's failure to assert the most compelling rebuttal to the educational assistance issue—the fact that there is no documentary evidence that Washington actually *did* help educate Thomas Posey although his favors to St. Lawrence, John Price, and Milly Posey are a matter of record.<sup>30</sup> In any event as Fitzpatrick so aptly observed, “George Washington can hardly be made responsible for the paternity of the entire Posey family.”<sup>31</sup>

Rupert Hughes's trail-blazing biography of Washington also appeared in 1927, the year of Fitzpatrick's article. Hughes effectively debunked many myths that had been invented by Parson Weems and others and that had tended to dehumanize and deify the real Washington. Hughes, however, would have no part of the Washington-Posey gossip. He devoted a lengthy appendix in his book to the Posey family which resided near Mount Vernon and had this to say about the Thomas Posey story:

This might be the last of [John] Posey except for a tradition that will not down. Captain John had a son, Thomas, who is described as having been six feet, two inches high, with light brown hair and blue eyes, and so powerfully built that he killed several men with his own sword in battles.

This striking resemblance to Washington and the closeness of the families are doubtless to blame for the persistent fable that he was the natural son of Washington, who would have been only eighteen at the time of the child's birth.

A discussion of such a story seems to be justified by the fact that it is whispered everywhere.<sup>32</sup>

Assuming (as did Fitzpatrick) that Captain John Posey's wife, Martha, was Thomas's mother, Hughes cited the close social ties that existed for many years between the Washington and Posey families, which association would have been unthinkable had Washington actually fathered one of Martha Posey's children. He concluded: “Rejecting utterly the blight on his name and Washington's, it may be noted that Thomas Posey had a brilliant life and atoned for his father's [John Posey's] shiftlessness. He was so good a colonel in the Revolution that Washington put him at the head of the troops nearest the enemy in the lines about Valley

<sup>30</sup> George Washington's *Ledger B*, Folio 125, George Washington Papers (Library of Congress); Stanislaus M. Hamilton, *Letters to Washington and Accompanying Papers* (5 vols., Boston, 1898–1902), IV, 65; Charles W. Stetson, *Washington and His Neighbors* (Richmond, 1956), 143.

<sup>31</sup> After identifying several youths outside the Posey family who were helped by Washington, Fitzpatrick caustically commented, “If every child whose education was assisted by Washington were to be stigmatized, in consequence, as his natural offspring, the distinction of being the Father of His Country might take on a new meaning.” Fitzpatrick, “The George Washington Scandals,” *Scribner's Magazine*, 393.

<sup>32</sup> Hughes, *George Washington*, II, 655.

Forge . . . .”<sup>33</sup> Hughes’s point, while cogent, would be irrelevant if Thomas had been an adopted or foster child rather than the natural son of Martha Posey. Neither Hughes nor Fitzpatrick considered a scenario casting Elizabeth Lloyd in the mother’s role; and the Huguenot widow Posey, either as the natural or foster mother of Thomas, appears to have disappeared from the script by the time these two eminent commentators addressed the issue in the 1920s.

Despite Fitzpatrick’s and Hughes’s arguments, elements of the Washington-Posey connection have continued to surface. As recently as 1941 Dixon Wecter, in *The Hero In America*, discussed—then discounted—the story. While emphasizing that Washington loved dancing, cardplaying, horse races, flirting with the ladies, and an occasional ribald joke, Wecter labeled all such paternity claims “canards without the smallest benefit of proof,” including a story that Washington fled to Barbados because he was in trouble and that “in his absence a neighbor girl bore his child, a boy whose surname was Posey.”<sup>34</sup> Still more recently, however, the editors of *The Papers of Henry Clay* described Thomas Posey in a biographical footnote as “reputedly the natural son of George Washington.”<sup>35</sup>

Probably no figure in American history has been more exhaustively researched and studied than Washington; and, by association, the family of Captain John Posey, who maintained a twenty-five-year personal, social, and financial relationship with the squire of Mount Vernon, is also well known. It is the consensus of many Washington scholars, biographers, and genealogists that Governor Thomas Posey was a member of the captain’s family. Dr. Joseph M. Toner, whose early transcription and annotation of Washington manuscripts provided a reliable source for later scholarly research, stated in his annotation of Washington’s diaries, “He [Captain Posey] was the father of Col. Thomas Posey of the Revolution.”<sup>36</sup> In 1932 William Campbell Posey, a physician from Pennsylvania, authored an article in which he traced his ancestry to William Posey, described as the youngest child of Captain John and Martha Posey of Fairfax County, Virginia. Thomas Posey is depicted in the article as the oldest child of this family. Dr. Posey’s conclusions were largely based upon research in the Library of Congress by Kate S. Curry, a noted genealogist of Washington, D. C.<sup>37</sup> Fitzpatrick and Hughes, as noted, placed Thomas Posey sol-

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 656.

<sup>34</sup> Dixon Wecter, “President Washington and Parson Weems,” *George Washington: A Profile*, ed. James Morton Smith (New York, 1969), 21.

<sup>35</sup> James F. Hopkins, ed., *The Papers of Henry Clay* (9 vols. to date, Lexington, Ky., 1959– ), I, 138n.

<sup>36</sup> Joseph M. Toner, “Diary of Col. George Washington for August, September and October, 1774,” *Annual Report of the American Historical Society for the Year 1892* (Washington, D. C., 1893), 122n.

<sup>37</sup> Dr. William Churchill Posey, “Posey,” *Colonial and Revolutionary Families of Pennsylvania: Genealogical and Personal Memoirs*, ed. Wilfred Jordan (New Series, Vol. IV; New York, 1932), 494-97.

idly within the captain's family, as did Elswyth Thane in her less scholarly, yet charming, *Potomac Squire*. Nathaniel W. Stephenson and Waldo H. Dunn's *George Washington*, Charles W. Stetson's *Washington and His Neighbors*, and James T. Flexner's *George Washington* also accepted Thomas Posey's presence as a sibling in the household of Washington's neighbor.<sup>38</sup>

None of these authorities, however, cites mention of Thomas Posey in any writings or public records of the period 1750 to 1769. Curry's voluminous papers and notes, now held by the University of North Carolina Library in Chapel Hill, do not, for example, reveal any direct source for her attribution of either Thomas or William to the family of Captain John Posey.<sup>39</sup> The Washington diaries, letters, and ledgers that cover the decades of the 1750s and 1760s contain numerous references to Captain John Posey; his wife, Martha; and their children, John Price, Amelia (Milly), Hanson, and St. Lawrence. Thomas Posey's name does not appear anywhere, not does it appear in any of the captain's letters or in those of other prominent residents of the immediate area—including George Mason. In addition, no reference to Thomas Posey has been found in the correspondence of Washington's and John Posey's contemporaries for these two decades.

Proponents of the Washington-Posey legend might construe the silence surrounding Thomas Posey's birth and upbringing as a conspiracy perpetrated to protect the reputations of the Washington and Posey families. The silence would, of course, be equally consistent with Thomas's having belonged to another family or household far removed from Mount Vernon and its environs—although there is no known record of any other Posey family's having lived "near the Potomack in Virginia" from 1750 to 1769. Maryland, where John originated, had many contemporary Posey families; but there is no trace of any such household, other than the captain's, on the Virginia side of the Potomac River valley.

Given these circumstances, the authorities' placement of Thomas Posey within the household of Mount Vernon's Posey neighbor is highly persuasive. Further, it could be considered more than mere coincidence that in 1769, the year that Thomas left home to seek his fortune on the frontier, Captain John Posey (having earlier rejected Washington's advice to do the same) was forced to sell most of his Fairfax County lands and property at public

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<sup>38</sup> Elswyth Thane, *Potomac Squire* (Mount Vernon, Va., 1963), 83; Stephenson and Dunn, *George Washington*, 269n; Stetson, *Washington and His Neighbors*, 143; James Thomas Flexner, *George Washington: The Forge of Experience, 1732-1775* (Boston, 1965), 252-53. Flexner mistakenly refers to Captain John Posey as "that prince of scapegraces, Captain Thomas Posey." See also Kate Mason Rowland, *The Life of George Mason, 1725-1792* . . . (2 vols., New York, 1892), I, 118-19.

<sup>39</sup> Kate S. Curry Papers, folder 854 (Posey folder), Southern Historical Collection (University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill, North Carolina).

auction.<sup>40</sup> The chronology of available records, however, raises a serious question as to whether John and Martha were the natural parents of Thomas Posey. The captain's earliest recorded presence in Fairfax County was in 1751 (a year after Thomas's birth) when he received his first appointment as proccessioner of Truro Parish. Martha was the widow of George Harrison, a substantial Fairfax landholder, who died on March 21, 1749. As late as June 26, 1750, just two weeks before Thomas was born, she is referred to in court records as "Martha Harrison, widow and relict of George Harrison." The first record confirming her marriage to John Posey is an indenture deed that she witnessed as "Martha Posey" on June 17, 1752, by which instrument the dying Lawrence Washington conveyed three lots in Fredericksburg to his brother George.<sup>41</sup>

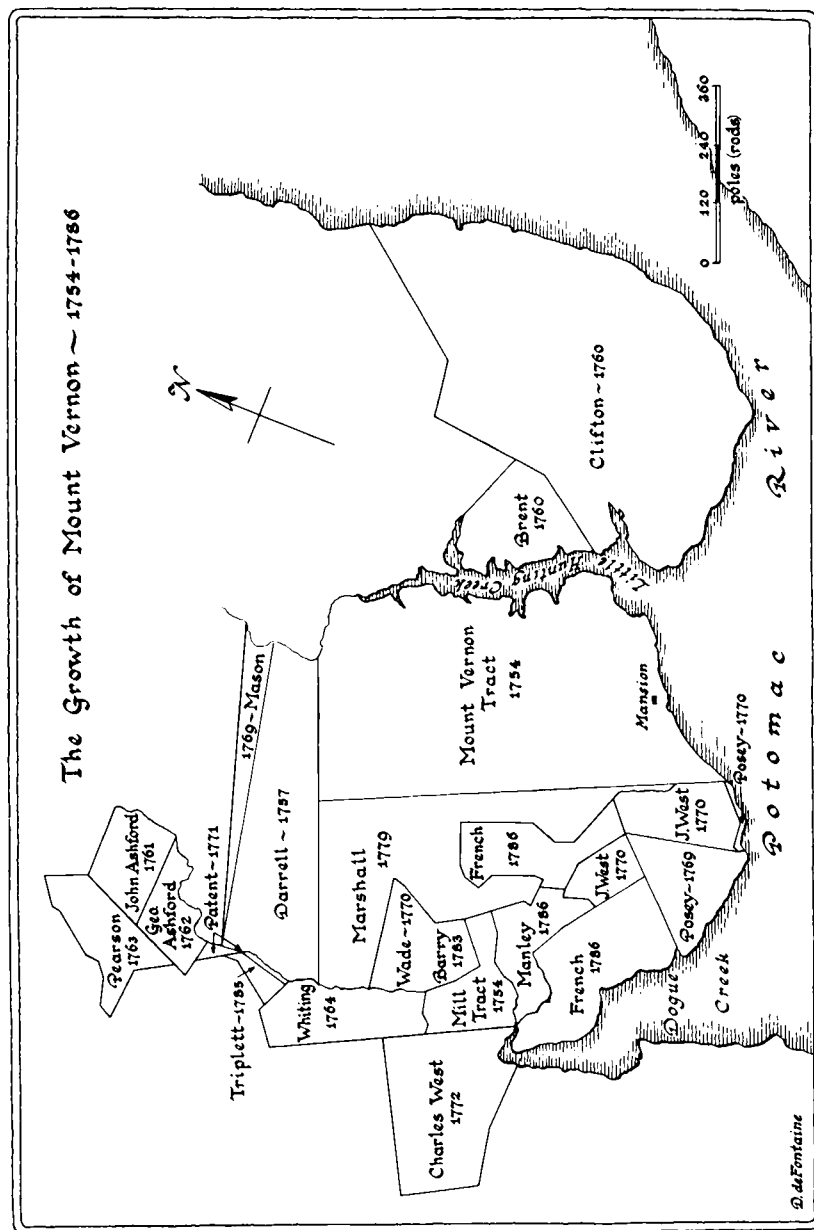
Who, then, was Thomas Posey's mother? In the absence of any relevant birth, marriage, or death records, her identity can only be surmised. Posey family researcher George Wilson was the first to cast Elizabeth Lloyd in that role. Any evidence of that claim—or, indeed, of her very existence—unfortunately died with Wilson. As was true of the Poseys, there were few, if any, Lloyds in Virginia at this time—certainly none of the prominence stipulated in the Wilson scenario.

Names given by General Thomas Posey to his own children provide some interesting clues. It was an almost unvarying custom of the time to pass along to newborn children the given names or surnames of cherished family members. Thomas's first son was called John—the namesake, it could be assumed, of Captain John Posey; his second son, Fayette, honored his father's revered commander, the marquis, and was an exception to the rule. Thomas and his wife, Mary Alexander Thornton Posey, called their next son Lloyd—a name not previously found anywhere in the Posey/Harrison families nor in Mary's Alexander/Thornton ancestry. Their first daughter was named Eliza Maria, arguably derivative tributes to Thomas's wife Mary, and his mother, Elizabeth.<sup>42</sup> Thomas Posey thus could be said to have held the name Elizabeth Lloyd in high esteem. Did he choose to honor, in this traditional way, a woman of whom he had no personal remembrance and

<sup>40</sup> John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington* (39 vols., Washington, D. C., 1931–1944), II, 455–60, 525–27.

<sup>41</sup> Philip Slaughter, *History of Truro Parish in Virginia*, ed. Edward L. Goodwin (Philadelphia 1908), 28–29; Will Book "A," pp. 260–62, Fairfax County Court Archives, Judicial Center, Fairfax County, Fairfax, Virginia; Court Order Book, 1749, pp. 78–79, Fairfax County Court Archives; W. W. Abbot, ed., *The Papers of George Washington*, Colonial Series (6 vols. to date, Charlottesville, Va., 1983– ), I, 51–52.

<sup>42</sup> All of Thomas and Mary Posey's other children bear recognizable family or ancestral names. Thornton and Posey Bible (Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches Library, Montreat, North Carolina).



Map originally prepared for Donald Jackson and Dorothy Twohig, eds., *The Diaries of George Washington* 16 vols., Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, in sponsorship with the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union, 1976-1979, I, 240. Reproduced courtesy University Press of Virginia.



whom, for reasons known only to himself, he could not name in his autobiography or otherwise publicly acknowledge? The names Lloyd and Eliza were passed down to grandchildren and beyond; obviously Posey's wife and his children were comfortable with the names and with his explanation of their origin.<sup>43</sup>

The late James Wade Emison of Vincennes, Indiana, a highly respected genealogical researcher, in earlier editions of his *The Emison Families* identified General Thomas Posey as the son of Captain John and Martha Posey. In his final edition, however, he amended his listings to show General Thomas Lloyd Posey as the son of Captain John Posey by a first wife, Elizabeth Lloyd, married circa 1749; the captain's second marriage, to Martha Harrison, is then shown as having occurred circa 1752.<sup>44</sup> In postulating a Posey-Lloyd marriage in 1749, Emison might have been discreetly skirting the possibility that Thomas Posey was illegitimate. Emison comments in a private letter:

This generation doesn't know, a century and more ago, it was bandied about that Gen. Thomas was actually the son of WASHINGTON (by a young LLOYD girl of good family, whom this John Posey married to save the situation. After her death in childbirth or soon after, John Posey married MARTHA (PRICE) HARRISON. . . . That is why I spent many weeks, months and years, among original records at FAIRFAX CO COURTHOUSE and elsewhere . . . I had hoped to disprove the above rumor, but ended up the otherway.<sup>45</sup>

Had there been a marriage, arranged or otherwise, between Captain John Posey and Elizabeth Lloyd before Thomas Posey was born, there would seemingly have been no dishonor in Thomas's naming them as his parents in his autobiography. Posey chose instead to use the term "of respectable parentage." The reason for Posey's failure to specify his parents' names in his "Short Biography" remains a matter for speculation, however, since the governor's phrase was commonly used during the eighteenth century, especially in obituaries.

If Elizabeth Lloyd is hypothesized as Thomas Posey's mother, how does a possible Washington-Posey paternity scenario fit into known historical fact? Thomas, born on July 9, 1750, must have been conceived between October and December of the prior year. George Washington was then only seventeen years old—albeit a mature seventeen. He was already the duly licensed public surveyor of Culpeper County, owner of five hundred acres of frontier land

<sup>43</sup> Governor Posey's oldest son, John, named his first son Thomas Lloyd Posey and his seventh son Lloyd Posey. *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> James Wade Emison, Jr., *The Emison Families, Revised* (Vincennes, Ind., 1954), 179; Emison, *The Emison Families, Final Supplement* (Vincennes, Ind., 1969), 220.

<sup>45</sup> James Wade Emison, Jr., to James Edwin Cox, Chicago, Illinois, February 27, 1957. A carbon copy of the original letter is held by Emison's family in Vincennes.

bought with his earnings, and draftsman of a plat of the new town of Alexandria. His older brother and mentor, Lawrence, who was then owner of Mount Vernon and who had taken care of George since their father's death in 1743, was at this time away on a visit to England for his health. In October, after a brief bout with malaria, George was out surveying in Fairfax and adjoining counties. In early November he went to the western frontier to survey some of Lord Fairfax's lands.<sup>46</sup> In his field book of this period are copies of three letters, all with a single theme—love. Whether composed as exercises in letter writing, as was a frequent practice of the time, or actually sent to friends from this remote area, they depict an unmistakably smitten young man.

Dear Friend John

... was my affections disengaged I might perhaps form some pleasures in the conversations of an agreeable young Lady as there[is] one now Lives in the same house with me but as thats only nourishment to my former Affa<ir> for by often seeing her brings the other into my remembrance where as perhaps was she not often (unavoidable) presenting herself to my view I might in some measure elivate my sorrows by burrying the other in the grave of Oblivion ...<sup>47</sup>

Dear Friend Robin

... I might was my heart disengag'd pass my time very pleasantly as theres a very agreeable Young Lady Lives in the same house ... but as thats only adding Fuel to fire it makes me the more uneasy for by often and unavoidably being in Company with her revives my former Passion for your Low Land Beauty ...<sup>48</sup>

After a ten-day surveying trip in the West, young George returned to eastern Virginia, the area which, at the time, was called the "low land" and which is today referred to as the Tidewater. On the day of Thomas Posey's birth, Lawrence Washington, back from England, was at Mount Vernon with George, who had just returned from visiting relatives below Fairfax County. Sixteen days later, on July 25, the two brothers left for the warm springs at Berkeley on the frontier. Their long voyage to Barbados did not begin until September 28, 1751, more than a year after Thomas was born.<sup>49</sup>

If Elizabeth Lloyd was the idolized "other" of young George's letters—the famed and (as yet) unidentified "Low Land Beauty"—and if Thomas Posey was arguably the product of her love affair with Washington, what circumstances might have brought the infant into the household of Captain John Posey? Would Lawrence Washington and his wife (a Fairfax) have turned to this young new-

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<sup>46</sup> For a detailed account of Washington's movements during this period, see Douglas Southall Freeman, *George Washington, A Biography: Vol. I, Young Washington* (New York, 1948), 234-41.

<sup>47</sup> Abbot, *Papers of George Washington*, Colonial Series, I, 42.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 40-41.

<sup>49</sup> Freeman, *George Washington*, I, 235-48.

comer, who had a respectable Maryland pedigree, to save their proud families—as well as that of the unfortunate young mother—the embarrassment arising from George's youthful indiscretion? Such a hypothesis would support either of two possibilities—an arranged, prenatal Posey-Lloyd marriage or a child born out of wedlock, deprived of his mother at or shortly after birth and entrusted to the care and custody of Captain John Posey, possibly around the time of his approaching marriage to the well-regarded and propertied widow, Martha Price Harrison. Either course would have assured the child a good name, a family, and a decent and secure upbringing not far from the watchful eyes of the Washingtons. Such an arrangement, not uncommon in those times, would have preserved the honor and satisfied the duty of all concerned as long as it was never formally recognized or publicly acknowledged. If indeed there was such a pact, it was faithfully observed in all known writings of the Washingtons and the Poseys, including those of Thomas himself in his lifetime and his children thereafter.

Although it is quite possible that neither of these conjectures is accurate, Captain John Posey was the repeated and, at times, seemingly undeserving recipient of George Washington's extraordinary generosity and friendship. Posey's Fairfax holdings soon included two hundred acres of prime farmland acquired from George's brother Charles; Posey built a fine house on a bluff overlooking the Potomac and often went fox hunting with Washington; and he and his family were frequent guests at Mount Vernon. Washington's servants built a large barn and other structures on his land, and the two men served together as vestrymen of Truro Parish.<sup>50</sup> Starting in 1755 Posey turned increasingly to Washington for financial support, and by 1767 his indebtedness had grown to a sizable £750, plus a £300 bond to George Mason guaranteeing a loan that the captain had wangled from the master of nearby Gunston Hall. In 1769, the year John Posey was forced to put up for public sale most of his land, slaves, livestock, and possessions, largely to satisfy Washington's claims, Thomas left his birthplace and moved to the western frontier to make his own way in life.<sup>51</sup> For another five years, however, Washington continued to befriend the destitute Captain Posey. He bailed him out of a Maryland debt-

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<sup>50</sup> Donald Jackson and Dorothy Twohig, eds., *The Diaries of George Washington*, in *Papers of George Washington*, ed. W. W. Abbot (6 vols., Charlottesville, Va., 1976–1979), II, 211, 235–36, 291, 295, *passim*.

<sup>51</sup> George Washington's *Ledger A*, Folio 256, George Washington Papers (Library of Congress); Washington's *Ledger B*; Hughes, *George Washington*, II, 651–56; Douglas Southall Freeman, *George Washington, A Biography*: Vol. III, *Planter and Patriot* (New York, 1950), 99–100, 184–86, 191–92, 230–34, 278–79, 293–94; Thane, *Potomac Squire*, 53, 55–56, 78–83, 87, 94, 100, 107, 137, 152, 173, 180, 187, 193, 195, 199; Stetson, *Washington and His Neighbors*, 123, 139–44, 147, 158, 301; Jackson and Twohig, *Diaries of George Washington*, I, II, III, *passim*.

or's prison, took his daughter to live at Mount Vernon, paid for the education of one of his sons, and helped another get a job as an apprentice, while continuing to welcome him in his home and at his dinner table.<sup>52</sup> The improbable bond between the improvident captain and the more frugal colonel seems to have extended beyond the affection that they obviously held for one another.<sup>53</sup> Yet, in the quarter century of their close relationship, the name of Thomas Posey never once appears in their extended, and often agitated, correspondence. Whether this silence is attributable to some blemish in Thomas's birth—possibly arising from an indiscretion on the part of Washington or Captain Posey himself—merely to some random historical happenstance, or to the fact that Thomas was never a member of the John Posey household can only be surmised.

During Thomas Posey's later military and civilian career, his infrequent exchanges of correspondence with Washington reflect only the formal, arms-length relationship of a revered commander/political leader and a respectful subordinate. Thomas's only recorded visit to Mount Vernon was shortly after he received his commission as brigadier general in 1793, when President Washington wrote of "Genl. Posey, who is now with me . . ."<sup>54</sup> It is interesting to conjecture what words might have passed between the two men as they sat on the back portico of the lovely old mansion looking down in the fading light of dusk at the broad Potomac River below.

One further point deserves discussion. It is widely believed that Washington was incapable of fathering children. Often cited is his childless marriage to Martha Dandridge Custis Washington, whose two Custis children by her first husband were visible proof of her fertility. Those who advanced early, discredited claims of descent from Washington argued that Washington's case of smallpox, contracted in Barbados in 1751–1752, might have rendered him sterile in his mature years but did not rule out youthful indiscretions. There is evidence, however, that Washington himself, only thirteen years before his death, believed that he was still fully capable of conceiving children. Writing to his nephew about land near Mount Vernon that he planned to will to him, Washington discussed the possibility of remarrying if his wife, Martha, prede-

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<sup>52</sup> For a detailed account of Washington's involvement with Captain John Posey and his family, see John Thornton Posey, "The Improvident Ferryman of Mount Vernon: The Trials of Captain John Posey," *Virginia Cavalcade*, XXXIX (Summer, 1989), 36–47.

<sup>53</sup> While Washington was indeed a patient benefactor and creditor to John Posey, it must be noted that so was he to many of his other neighbors and during the French and Indian War to a couple of his officers. Indeed, some of Washington's financial problems were linked to his willingness to help people that he liked, as he evidently did Posey.

<sup>54</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Writings of George Washington*, XXXII, 408.

ceased him. He assured his nephew that, in such event, it was most unlikely that children would result: "for 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."<sup>55</sup> Thomas Posey's birth in 1750, prior to Washington's bout with smallpox, could, of course, arguably place him among possible "youthful indiscretions." Obviously, however, the fifty-four-year-old general, in his twenty-seventh year of a childless marriage, still considered himself capable of fathering children.

If contemporary accounts are to be believed, there do appear to have been some similarities between George Washington and Thomas Posey aside from any real or perceived physical resemblance. The characters of both were motivated by an almost obsessive sense of public duty and patriotism. Both were largely self-educated, displayed personal courage and leadership in early military careers, and spent their middle years, after marrying well-to-do widows, as gentlemen planters. Both crowned their life's work with distinguished service in public office. Both died at age sixty-seven from similar causes.

If Posey really was Washington's son, he probably would have known it, as surely as he knew the place and exact date of his birth. Under those assumed circumstances his apparent reticence to identify or otherwise refer to his family in his autobiography or other writings would have been consistent with what is known of his character. Thomas Posey would have been likely to choose silence over dissimulation in a situation in which he felt himself bound by honor or discretion to withhold the facts as he knew them. As General Robert E. Lee later said of him, "the veracity of Posey was as unquestioned as his courage . . . ."<sup>56</sup>

But the burden of proof falls, necessarily and rightly, on the proponents of the alleged Washington-Posey paternity scenario, and after decades of gossip at Hoosier firesides and log rollings, followed by a century of printed argument and speculation, the evidence at hand simply does not bear out their contentions. Conversely, it must be admitted, nothing definitive has been produced to refute or reject the hypothesis. What emerges is, perhaps, enough circumstantial evidence to make believers only of those

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<sup>55</sup> Quotation is from Fitzpatrick, *Writings of George Washington*, XXIX, 29; see also Douglas Southall Freeman, *George Washington, A Biography*: Vol. VI, *Patriot and President* (New York, 1954), 63. In reference to Washington's letter of October 25, 1786, to George Augustine Washington, Freeman comments, "Needless to say, this letter indicates clearly that Washington did not think his failure to beget children by Martha was due to sterility on his part." Freeman, *George Washington*, VI, 63n.

<sup>56</sup> Henry Lee, *Memoirs of the War in the Southern Department of the United States*, ed. Robert E. Lee (new ed., New York, 1870), 558n.

who want to believe. Clearly, the true parentage of Governor Posey cannot now, and probably never will, be established with absolute historical certitude. William Wesley Woollen, a respected student of early Indiana history, wrote of Thomas Posey, “Had he been Washington’s son . . . he would have honored his father’s name.”<sup>57</sup> In fact, Posey, throughout his exemplary life, truly did honor his father’s name—whether or not that name was Washington.

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<sup>57</sup> Woollen, *Biographical and Historical Sketches*, 28.