George Washington and the West

By CHRISTOPHER B. COLEMAN

The attitude of George Washington toward the development of the West is a striking manifestation of the clearness of vision and soundness of judgment which made him the leader of his contemporaries and the founder of the American nation. It is also significant as a tie which binds us, of the interior of the continent and of a state formed nearly two decades after his death, to the great Virginian whose career is too often associated solely with the thirteen original states. In the commemoration of the second centennial of the birth of Washington, it is fitting and proper to recall that he not only won independence and founded a nation, but that he saw the path of its destiny and worked effectively to promote its progress therein. "The Winning of the West" was half of the Revolution and the development of the West was to be even a larger part of the task of the new-born nation.

From the time when Jamestown was established, the area of settlement in Virginia moved westward at a rate ordinarily stated as fifty miles a generation. The Washington family was part of the seaboard westward movement. Augustine Washington developed an estate at Wakefield on the lower Potomac, now being carefully restored as one of the historic Washington shrines. There on the 22nd of February, 1732, according to the new style calendar introduced in the English world twenty years afterward, George Washington was born. His boyhood was spent at Fredericksburg about twenty miles farther inland. Lawrence Washington developed Mount Vernon, perhaps fifty miles up the Potomac, and to

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1 This paper was read before the meeting of the Southwestern Indiana Historical Society at Evansville on March 11, 1932.
this his brother George, upon the death of Lawrence, succeeded. Even before the maturity of George Washington, however, occupation of land by more mobile families had proceeded to the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. Here necessarily the westward movement paused, held back by the difficulty of traversing the mountains and by the double menace of the French and Indians beyond the mountains. The breaking down of these barriers was the first great step toward the occupation of the interior of the continent.

In this task, circumstances and Washington’s own character brought him to leadership in his early twenties. He was chosen by Governor Robert Dinwiddie to take a message to the commander of the vanguard of the French that Virginia claimed the land west of the mountains, a warning to the French to keep out of the Ohio Valley. This was Washington’s first trip across the mountains to the West. He secured the services of an experienced woodsman, Christopher Gist, and in the winter of 1753-1754 performed his mission, surmounting difficulties and dangers, the record of which is preserved in one of the journals in which he recorded briefly the bare facts of his career. On the west side of the mountains, he had to go up the Allegheny River to Venango (the present Franklin, Pennsylvania), then up French Creek to its source where stood Fort Le Boeuf (the present Waterford, Pennsylvania). Here he delivered his message to the French commandant, Le Gardeur de St. Pierre. His return overland was even more dangerous and arduous than his trip out. During this ten weeks of anxiety and hardship Washington learned much of the western country, for he observed everything.

Later in 1754 Washington retraced part of the way across the mountains in command of a small force of Virginians sent to forestall the French occupation of the upper Ohio country. His force, however, was too small and arrived too late to accomplish its purpose. Before reaching the Ohio it was compelled to retreat to Great Meadows and there to

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\*Writings of George Washington, edited by Worthington C. Ford, I, 86-88. In succeeding references this work will be cited as Writings of Washington. The Diaries of George Washington, edited by George Fitzpatrick (4 vols., Boston, 1928), cover most of this western trip (45-47), and some of the other western journeys of Washington. Together with the Writings, they still constitute the best source of information for such a study of Washington as that suggested by this paper. The most complete collection of material will undoubtedly be The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1789, now being edited by John C. Fitzpatrick and published under the direction of the United States George Washington Bicentennial Commission by authority of Congress at the Government Printing Office.*
surrender. It is noteworthy that afterward Washington bought Great Meadows, an estate of 234 acres, and left it upon his death as one of his properties. Past it now goes one of the great ocean to ocean roads, carrying the traffic from the interior of the continent which Washington thus early sought to open.

Washington's third trip into the West was as aide-de-camp to the ill-fated Braddock in his expedition against the French at the forks of the Ohio. He was kept out of service by illness during part of the campaign but joined the army in its approach to Fort Du Quesne which the French had built at the junction of the Monongahela and the Allegheny. Within the present industrial district of Pittsburg, Braddock's army was turned back in a rout. The story of Washington's courage, presence of mind, and energy which saved the remnant of Braddock's army and soon made him the foremost military figure in the colonies need not be repeated here.

During the French and Indian War, which began near Great Meadows, Washington was the defender of the Virginia frontier, a most difficult task for his meager forces. He was active in the preparations for Forbes' expedition which at last changed Fort Du Quesne to Fort Pitt, the future Pittsburgh.

After the French and Indian War, Washington made a more extensive trip, this time with a peaceful purpose, to Pittsburgh and down the Ohio as far as the Great Kanawha, setting out on October 5, 1770, and returning to Mount Vernon about the first of December, 1770. He went by way of Little Meadows, Great Crossing, Laurel Hill, Gist's, and Crawford's, where he commented upon a coal mine and the quality of the fuel it yielded.

After the War of the Revolution, Washington planned a far more extensive trip from Virginia through the northern states, thence up the St. Lawrence Valley and the Great Lakes to Detroit, thence to Lake Michigan and over the Chicago portage, down the Illinois and the Mississippi to New Orleans, returning by way of Pensacola. This plan, however, he was not able to carry out. Instead, he made a shorter trip to visit his western lands, starting out in September, 1784, and coming West as far as the lands which he owned between Pitts-
burgh and Wheeling, traversing in all a distance of nearly 700 miles.5

To the knowledge of western land and routes of travel gained by his own trips and personal intercourse with western men, Washington added extensive reading. While not usually regarded as given to study, he was in reality a thorough student of matters in which he was interested. His letters show an acquaintance with the best publications upon the western country. In particular he cites the work of that interesting and important engineer, Thomas Hutchins, who after service in the French and Indian War, left the British Army to join the American Revolutionary forces. A Topographical Description of Virginia, Pennsylvania, Maryland and North Carolina, published by Hutchins in 1778, was a mine of accurate information from which Washington drew to supplement his personal knowledge.

Washington's primary business in life was that of a farmer, more particularly, a Virginia planter. He made his living out of the land. Careful and scientific management made him successful and, like all good farmers, from time to time he extended his holdings, adding to his inheritance and to the estates brought to him by his wife. He became one of the largest landholders in the country. With his interest in the West, it was only natural that he should acquire large tracts of western land. The first opportunity to do this came with the proclamation of Governor Dinwiddie of February 19, 1754, promising to Virginia soldiers and officers a total of two hundred thousand acres as bounty for services against the French and Indians. Each field officer was to get 15,000.6 When it came time to carry out the promises after the War, Washington took the lead in pressing the claims of the officers and the men. He was eager to get his own land as soon as possible and to get as good land as possible. On September 21, 1767, he wrote to William Crawford, who had made a settlement on the other side of the mountains, as follows:

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6 Archer B. Hulbert, Washington and the West (New York, 1905). This volume presents Washington's diary of September, 1784, which he kept while on a journey into the Ohio River basin. He was working in the interest of a commercial union between the Great Lakes and the Potomac River. The book is supplied with maps, illustrations and comments by the editor. The National Geographic Magazine of January, 1932, contains an article, "The Travels of George Washington" by William J. Showalter, accompanied by thirty-four illustrations and a large folding map.

6 Writings of Washington, II, 345-346.
I then desired the favor of you (as I understood rights might now be had for the lands, which have fallen within the Pennsylvania line,) to look me out a tract of about fifteen hundred, two thousand, or more acres somewhere in your neighborhood, meaning only by this that it may be as contiguous to your own settlement, as such a body of good land could be found and about Jacobs Cabins, or somewhere on those waters. I am told this might be done. It will be easy for you to conceive, that ordinary or even middling land would never answer my purpose or expectations, so far from navigation, and under such a load of expenses, as these lands are encumbered with. No; a tract to please me must be rich, (of which no person can be a better judge than yourself,) and, if possible, to be good and level. Could such a piece of land as this be found, you would do me a singular favor in falling upon some method to secure it immediately from the attempts of any other, as nothing is more certain, than that the lands cannot remain long ungranted, when once it is known, that rights are to be had for them."

A great deal had to be done, however, before title could be secured to any land under the Proclamation of 1754. It was understood that the land would be at the forks of the Ohio at Fort Pitt. Instead, however, most of the land granted was lower down in the Ohio Valley. Surveys had to be made, claims had to be assembled, allotments had to be made. Each of these seemingly required the personal supervision of the claimants or their representatives and involved endless difficulties. Washington took the lead in surmounting these difficulties. He secured a surveyor, called meetings of claimants, assessed costs and went to no end of trouble to bring the matter to a successful and satisfactory conclusion. In 1771 he wrote that ten of the largest tracts, containing 60,000 acres, to be given to the officers and soldiers, had been surveyed. The cost of surveying was £200.  

There can be no question that Washington performed a great service to his fellow officers and soldiers by this arduous labor. It was inevitable, however, that many of the possible claimants did not appreciate the value of the western land or were unable to take advantage of the ownership of such land. It was also inevitable that others would be dissatisfied with the shares which fell to them. Both groups have left traces in the records. The evidence, however, is clear that Washington, when he secured a distribution of shares, when he bought the shares of eligible claimants who

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wanted to sell them, and when he selected his own land, was honest as well as public-spirited. His own narrative was perfectly fair. He wrote to one complainant, a Reverend Dr. Thruston:

I did not on the other hand, pick the Surveys that were assigned me, either from the excellency of the Land, or convenience of situation; If I had, I could have avoided the largest Tract I now have (composing a full moiety of my quantum) as every inch of it, from the Surveyors' account, is subject to be overflowed—nor did I, on the other, object to the fifty thousand on account of the Land, for if I had by choice of the whole country, I should have fixed in this Survey, but because I thought (after the Land became patented) if any additional trouble was to be encounter'd (from the strange manner of granting it) it might as well fall upon others, as me; as my shoulders had supported the whole weight heretofore; and in as much as I might add without much arrogance, that if it had not been for by unremitted attention to every favorable circumstance, not a single acre of Land would ever have been obtained.

He followed the claims to western lands down to the out-break of the Revolution. Upon hearing a report that lands further down the Ohio, below the Scioto, might be obtained, he wrote to William Crawford:

I have heard, (the truth of which, if you saw Lord Dunmore in his way to or from Pittsburgh you possibly are better acquainted with than I am,) that his Lordship will grant patents for lands lying below the Scioto, to the officers and soldiers, who claim under the proclamation of October, 1763. If so, I think no time should be lost in having them surveyed, lest some new revolution should happen in our political system. I have, therefore, by this conveyance, written to Captain Bullet, to desire he will have ten thousand acres surveyed for me; five thousand of which I am entitled to in my own right, the other five thousand by purchase from a captain and lieutenant.

I have desired him to get this quantity of land in one tract, if to be had of the first quality; if not, then in two, or even in three, agreeably to the several rights under which I hold, rather than survey bad land for me, or even that which is middling. I have also desired him to get it as near the mouth of the Sciota, that is, to the western bounds of the new colony as may be; but for the sake of better lands, I would go quite down to the Falls, or even below, meaning thereby to get richer and wider bottoms, as it is my desire to have my lands run out upon the banks of the Ohio. If you should go down the river this fall, in order to look out your own quantity under the proclamation, I shall be much obliged to you for your assistance to Captain Bullet, in getting these ten thousand acres for me, of the most valuable land

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* Washington to Thurston, Williamsburg, March 12, 1773, in ibid., II, 971.
you can, and I will endeavor to make you ample amends for your trouble;

Old David Wilper, who was an officer in our regiment, and has been with Bullet running out land for himself and others, tells me, that they have already discovered salt springs in that country, three of which Captain Thompson has included within some surveys he has made; and the other, an exceedingly valuable one, upon the River Kentucky, is in some kind of dispute. I wish I could establish one of my surveys there; I would immediately turn it to an extensive public benefit, as well as private advantage . . . .

An illustration of Washington's efforts to purchase claims and lands is shown in a letter which he wrote to George Mercer in November, 1771, asking him to purchase the right of Stobo and Vanbraam, provided they will take a trifle for them . . .. My only motive for doing this is that the progress of our affairs may be less obstructed, by being more contracted. The whole trouble of late (in this country I mean) has fallen upon me, and a good deal of expence which never has, nor indeed never can be, brought in to account I have been subjected to by my activity in this matter; and, as it is very obvious that the whole work must go on at the expence of a few, or not at all, I am inclined to adventure a little further in order to take the chance of gaining in proportion to my loss; for no problem in Euclid is more clear than that those who do not choose to advance beforehand whilst there is at least a hope of success, will hardly draw their purse strings to reimburse the expences of others when even hope is departed from them . . .. Col. Cresap, whom I have seen since his return from England, gave it to me as his opinion, that some of the shares in the new (charter) government on the Ohio might be bought very cheap from some of the present members. Are you of this opinion? who are they that would sell? and at what price do you think a share could be bought?

Washington kept on acquiring western land by purchase and in payment for services rendered for many years. In 1784, in reply to a question, he sent the following description of land which he owned beyond the mountains:

Upon examination, I find that I have patents under the signature of Lord Dunmore (while he administered the government of this State) for about 30,000 acres; and surveys for about 10,000 more, patents for which were suspended by the disputes with Great Britain, which soon followed the return of the warrants to the land-office.

Ten thousand acres of the above thirty lie upon the Ohio; the

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rest on the Great Kenhawa, a river nearly as large, and quite as easy
in its navigation, as the former. The whole of it is rich bottom land,
beautifully situated on these rivers, and abounding plenteously in fish,
wild-fowl, and game of all kinds.

The uppermost tract upon the Ohio (which I include to lease)
contains 2314 acres, and begins about four miles below the mouth
of the Little Kenhawa (there are two rivers bearing that name, the
uppermost of which is about one hundred and eighty miles below Fort
Pitt by water), and has a front on the water of more than five miles.
The next is eighteen miles lower down, and contains 2448 acres, with a
front on the river, and a large creek which empties into it of four
miles and upwards. Three miles below this again, on the same river,
and just above what is called the Big Bend In Evan's Map, is a third
tract of 4835 acres, with a river front of more than five miles.

Then going to the Great Kenhawa, distant about twelve miles by
land, but thirty odd to follow the meanders of the two rivers, and
beginning within three miles of the mouth, I hold lands on the right
and left of the river, and bounded thereby forty-eight miles and a
half; all of which, being on the margin of the river, and extending
not more than from half a mile to a mile back, are, as has been ob-
served before, rich, low grounds.12

He tried to secure land as far away as the Mississippi in
West Florida, though it seems that he failed to obtain any
in that region:

Herewith you will receive Lord Dunmore's certificates of my
claims (as well in my own rights as by purchase from Captain Posey
and Mr. Thurston) in the location of which in the government of West
Florida I shall rely on your friendship and care.

Unnecessary it is to add that I should choose good land or none
at all. But as many things concur to make land valuable, it is im-
possible for me at this distance, and under my present knowledge
of that country, to be explicit in any direction. Suffice it then to observe,
generally, that I would greatly prefer the land upon the river, to lands
back from it; that I should not like to be in a low, morassy country,
nor yet in that which is hilly and broken; and that, from the idea
I entertain of that country at this time, I should like to be as high
up the Mississippi as the navigation is good, having been informed
that the lands are better and the climate more temperate in the north-
ern parts of the government than below.

If I could get the lands equally good in one survey I should prefer
it. If not, then in one or more as circumstances require. Perhaps
some locations already made upon the river might for a small con-

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12 Washington to John Witherspoon, Mount Vernon, Mar. 10, 1784, in ibid., 362-68.
In his will, Washington enumerated twenty-nine tracts of western land several of
which were as follows: on the Ohio River five tracts, 9744 acres; on the Great Kanawha,
five tracts, 2341 a.; Great Meadows (Pennsylvania), 284 a.; on the Mohawk River, 1000 a.;
on the Little Miami (Northwest Territory) 3051 a.; in Kentucky, 8000 a. For copy of
the will, see Writings, XIV, 271-865.
Washington had faith in the West. He secured land under his own claims and purchased large amounts from others because he thought them a good investment. He was not a land speculator, gambling on speedy sales at an advance. He tried to develop his holdings and kept possession of most of them until his death, but like most Virginia planters, he was constantly in debt and in need of ready money. Profits from the cultivation of plantations in Virginia were at times very small; sometimes, even, there was a loss. On occasion, therefore, Washington converted his holdings into cash. In the main, however, he sought to get settlers and to make improvements. He not only located and purchased tracts for himself but he advised others to go to the western country, where he thought large estates could be developed. To his impertinent neighbor, Captain John Posey, father of the Thomas Posey who was later governor of Indiana Territory, he declared that

there is a large field before you, an opening prospect in the back country for adventurers, where numbers resort to, and where an enterprising man with very little money may lay the foundation of a noble estate in the new settlements upon Monongahela for himself and posterity. The surplus money which you might save after discharging your debts would possible secure you as much land as in the course of twenty years would sell for five times your present estate. For proof of which, only look to Frederick, and see what fortunes were made by the Hite's and first taking up of those lands. Nay, how the greatest estates we have in this colony were made. Was it not by taking up and purchasing at very low rates the rich back lands, which were thought nothing of in those days, but are now the most valuable lands we possess? Undoubtedly it was, and to pursue this plan is the advice I would offer my brother were he in your situation; . . .

He made repeated efforts, mostly unsuccessful, to get settlers for his own land. Among his writings is an advertisement for tenants for more than 20,000 acres of land along the Ohio and the Great Kanawha.

It was probably interest in western lands as much as anything else which led Washington and other Virginians

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14 Washington to John Posey, Mount Vernon, June 24, 1767, in ibid., II, 216-17.
15 ibid., II, 386.
into opposition to the British government, and to the War of the American Revolution and independence. In the face of the movement of settlers beyond the mountains and the efforts of great land owners to develop estates there, the English government tried to close the doors to the western movement. There was a strong tendency in England to preserve the land west of the mountains for the Indians and for the fur trade. At the close of the French and Indian War the Royal Proclamation of 1763 drew a line along the mountains beyond which settlers could not proceed. Machinery was even started for the dispossession of French settlers long established in the valley of the Wabash at Vincennes and in the Illinois country on the Mississippi at Kaskaskia, Cahokia, and other towns.

To men such as Washington, the Royal Proclamation of 1763 was a direct challenge. In spite of the fact that the Governor of Virginia warned settlers to observe it, Washington asserted in 1767 that he was expecting to attempt to obtain lands in the King's country, for I can never look upon that proclamation in any other light (but this I say between ourselves) than as a temporary expedient to quiet the minds of the Indians, and must fall, of course, in a few years, especially when those Indians are consenting to our occupying the lands. But the English policy was not to be lightly ignored. When Lord Hillsborough became colonial secretary, he was bitterly opposed to settlers in the interior. An Order in Council of September 15, 1769, forbade surveys in the West. The Order, however, was disobeyed by the claimants to western lands who held a meeting at Winchester in March, 1771, and decided to proceed.

This was not all. There were constant threats of grants by the king to court favorites of great tracts of land superseding claims of Virginia officers and soldiers. Two such possibilities brought vigorous protests from Washington to the Governor of Virginia:

Being fully persuaded of your Excellency's inclination to render every just and reasonable service to the people you govern, or to anybody or society of...
more particular manner by a letter, which I have just received from Mr. Blair (clerk of the Council), to believe, that your Lordship is desirous of being fully informed how far the grant of land solicited by Mr. Wallpole and others will affect the interest of this country in general, or individuals in particular, I shall take the liberty (being pretty intimately acquainted with the situation of the frontiers of this dominion) to inform your Lordship, that the bounds of that grant, if obtained upon the extensive plan prayed for, will comprehend at least four fifths of the land, for which this government hath lately voted two thousand five hundred pounds sterling, the purchase and survey of and must destroy the well grounded hopes of those, (if no reservation is made in their favor,) who have had the strongest assurances, which government could give, of enjoying a certain portion of the lands, which have cost this country so much blood and treasure to secure.

By the extracts, which your Excellency did me the honor to enclose, I perceive, that the petitioners require to begin opposite to the mouth of Scioto, which is at least seventy or seventy-five miles below the mouth of the Big Kanahwa, (and more than three hundred from Pittsburg,) and to extend from thence in a southwardly direction through the pass of the Ouasiito Mountain, which, (by Evans's map, and the best accounts I have been able to get from persons, who have explored that country,) will bring them near the latitude of North Carolina. From thence they go northeasterly to the Kanahwa, at the junction of New River and Green Briar, upon both of which waters we have many settlers upon lands actually patented. From thence they proceed up the Green Briar to the head of the northeasterly branch thereof, thence easterly to the Alleghany Mountains, thence along these mountains to the line of Lord Fairfax, and thence with his line, and the lines of Maryland and Pennsylvannia, till the west boundary of the latter intersects the Ohio, and finally down the same to the place of beginning.

These, my Lord, are the bounds of a grant prayed for, and if obtained, will give a fatal blow, in my humble opinion, to the interests of this country. But these are my sentiments as a member of the community at large; but I now beg leave to offer myself to your Excellency's notice, in a more interested point of view, as an individual, and as a person, who considers himself in some degree the representative of the officers and soldiers, who claim a right to two hundred thousand acres of this very land, under a solemn act of government, adopted at a very important and critical period to his Majesty's affairs in this part of the world; and shall, therefore, rely on your Lordship's accustomed goodness and candor, whilst I add a few words in support of the equity of our pretensions, ... 20

Five years later, Washington protested to another Governor:

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20 Washington to Lord Botetourt, Governor of Virginia, Mount Vernon, Apr. 15, 1770, in ibid., II, 372-374.
At second hand, I learnt from Captain Floyd, that the Surveys made by Mr. Crawford under the Proclamation of 1754 (expressly agreeable to an order of Council of the 15th of December, 1769), and for which your Lordships Patents under the Seal of the Colony, hath actually been obtained, are now declared null and void.—The information appearing altogether incredible, I gave little attention to it, 'till I saw Mr. Wilper on Friday last, who, in confirmation of the report, added that all the patentees (whom he had seen) under that Proclamation, were exceedingly distressed and at a loss, to know what to think of it . . . . the peculiar hardship of our situation if we are to encounter fresh difficulties in search of lands which in my humble opinion has already involved us in expense and trouble, which ought to have been avoided.21

This conflict between the hunger of Virginians for western lands and the English government's adverse policy of disposing of them is not usually given its due weight in statements of the causes of the American Revolution. Washington's correspondence between 1767 and 1775 is devoted much more largely to the land question than to all other grievances against the English government put together. It is not going too far to see in Washington the revolutionist, the representative of America, ambitious for continental expansion, determined to possess the land, rather than the upholder of abstract "rights of man."

During the Revolution, Washington was not too busy with the conflict on the Atlantic coast to be mindful of the struggle for the West. He was eager for the capture of Detroit; he did what he could, which was not much, to promote expeditions from Pittsburgh; he urged the Governor of Virginia, Thomas Jefferson, in a letter of December, 1780, to further the equipment of George Rogers Clark and gave evidence of full cooperation in the plans of Clark for the reduction of Detroit.22

When Independence was won and the country east of the Mississippi ceded to the United States, Washington's influence was powerfully exerted toward provision for its future government. He showed unusual knowledge of conditions in the West and was one of the first to advocate the ultimate establishment of new states when the country was sufficiently settled. On September 7, 1788, he proposed to a member of Congress a western boundary for a state northwest of

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21 Washington to Lord Dunmore, Mount Vernon, April 8, 1775, in ibid., II, 465-466.
the Ohio, which follows closely that of the present state of Ohio. In a letter to Thomas Jefferson in 1785, he noted the desire of the inhabitants of Kentucky of the creation of such a state, if not at that time, when conditions should demand it.

Of the importance of the Northwest, and of its future possibilities, Washington was keenly aware. In 1784 in a letter to Richard Henry Lee, president of the Continental Congress, he urged the thorough exploration and mapping of the section. Among the notable passages of this letter is the following:

The Assemblies of Virginia and Maryland have now under consideration the extension of the inland navigation of the rivers Potomac and James, and opening a communication between them and the western waters. They seem fully impressed with the political as well as the commercial advantages, which would result from the accomplishment of these great objects, and I hope will embrace the present moment to put them in train for speedy execution. Would it not, at the same time, be worthy of the wisdom and attention of Congress to have the western waters well explored, the navigation of them fully ascertained, accurately laid down, and a complete and perfect map made of the country; at least as far westwardly as the Miamies, running into the Ohio and Lake Erie, and to see how the waters of them communicate with the River St. Joseph, which empties into the Lake Michigan, and with the Wabash. I cannot forbear observing here that the Miami Village, in Hutchins's map, if it and the waters here mentioned are laid down with any degree of accuracy, points to a very important post for the Union. The expense attending the undertaking could not be great, the advantages would be unbounded; for sure I am, nature has made such a display of her bounties in those regions, that the more the country is explored, the more it will rise in estimation, consequently the greater will the revenue be to the Union.

In one detail Washington's judgment was at fault. Himself a surveyor, and used to the Virginia practice of surveying land using natural features to mark the metes and bounds, he did not like the system of surveying of western lands introduced by his more radical and progressive friend, Thomas Jefferson, in the ordinance of 1785, which provided for geometrical division into square townships and sections, without reference to natural features. This system has been such a convenience that it is difficult now to understand how one could prefer the irregularities and inaccuracies of the other method. Yet Washington condemned it:

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The ordinance [1785] is long, and I have none of them by me, or I would send one for your perusal.—They [Congress] seem in this instance, as in almost every other, to be surrendering the little power they have, to the States individually which gave it to them.—Many think the price which they have fixed upon the Lands too high;—and all to the Southward I believe, that disposing of these in Townships, and by square miles alternately, will be a great hindrance to the sale:—but experience, to which there is an appeal, must decide.

It is not surprising that Washington, with his wide experience and vision, sensed the great problem of western settlements, that of communication. How could settlers get their produce to market? Two possibilities were apparent in the last quarter of the eighteenth century: eastward to the Atlantic seaboard, and southward down the Mississippi to New Orleans. The latter had the advantage of navigable waterways reaching far up scores, if not hundreds, of valleys, big and little. It early became the objective of the western pioneers and for more than half a century it bound the valleys of the upper Mississippi and its tributaries to the mouth. But as long as Spain or France held the mouth of the great river this outlet seemed to many to be fraught with danger. There was danger that the West would involve the United States in diplomatic difficulties or even war with Spain. There was also danger that the West might separate itself entirely from the states to the east and link its fortunes with Spain, or, perhaps form a new nation enlarged by the conquest of the lower Mississippi. These were the considerations, which in part at least, led Washington to urge incessantly the improvement of communications between the East and the West. Perhaps the location of his own lands along this line of communication influenced his judgment. But that his public policy was dictated by his private interests, as is sometimes asserted, is a gross exaggeration. Every consideration of public welfare called for the development of practicable routes between East and West; and because Washington saw this clearly he urged the improvement of such routes. His willingness to postpone the opening of the Mississippi to American trade was due, as he himself declared, mostly to political considerations.

88 Washington to the Marquis de LaFayette, Mount Vernon, July 25, 1788, in ibid., X, 478-479.
His own utterances make his position clear. At one time he said:

There is nothing which binds one country or one State to another, but interest. Without this cement the Western inhabitants, who more than probably will be composed in a great degree of foreigners, can have no predilection for us, and a commercial connexion is the only tie we can have upon them. It is clear to me, that the trade of the Lakes, and of the River Ohio, as low as the Great Kanhawa if not to the Falls, may be brought to the Atlantic ports easier and cheaper, taking the whole voyage together, than it can be carried to New Orleans; but, once open the door to the latter before the obstructions are removed from the former, let commercial connexions, which lead to others, be formed, and the habit of that trade well established, and it will be found to be no easy matter to divert it, and vice versa. When the settlements are stronger and more extended to the westward, the navigation of the Mississippi will be an object of importance, and we shall then be able, (reserving our claims) to speak a more efficacious language, than policy, I think, dictates at present.

In another statement, he expressed himself clearly: "I may be singular in my ideas, but they are these: that, to open a door to, and make easy the way for those settlers to the westward (who ought to advance regularly and compactly), before we make any stir about the navigation of the Mississippi, and before our settlements are far advanced towards that river, would be our true line of policy." Again he wrote: "However singular the opinion may be, I cannot divest myself of it, that the navigation of the Mississippi, at this time [1785], ought to be no object with us. On the contrary, until we have a little time allowed to open and make easy the ways between the Atlantic States and the western territory, the obstructions had better remain."

One of his favorite proposals was that of a canal to connect the Potomac with the Ohio River system. While he spoke in general terms of routes between the East and the West, it was natural that, as a Virginian and as the holder of large tracts of land on and between the Potomac and the Ohio, he should be anxious to establish a connection along this line. In his writings he discusses different possibilities and the practicability of connecting by a canal different streams in the two river systems. In 1785 he wrote to La-Fayette:

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Footnotes:
This prospect, if it succeeds, and of which I have no doubt, will bring the Atlantic States and the Western Territory into close connexion, and be productive of very extensive commercial and political consequences; the last of which gave the spur to my exertions, as I could foresee many, and great mischiefs which would naturally result from a separation—and that a separation would inevitably take place, if the obstructions between the two countries remained, and the navigation of the Mississippi should be made free.30

Washington's anticipations were not realized. The Potomac-Ohio canal was never built, and the Cumberland Road or National Road was not improved for nearly a generation. Before it was finished through Ohio, New York had won the prize which was sought for Virginia, the Erie Canal making New York City the great port for the products of the Northwest. Meanwhile the Mississippi, while Washington was President, was opened to the West without the disastrous consequences earlier feared by him. The purchase of Louisiana removed all possibility of international difficulties and of western secession. The future, however, showed the wisdom of Washington's constructive proposals even though developments came along lines different from those which he advocated and anticipated.

Before Washington was inaugurated president of the United States, the Territory Northwest of the Ohio River had been organized. The region immediately south of the Ohio was admitted to the Union as the State of Kentucky during his first term, an evolution to which he had greatly contributed. One of the principal tasks of his presidency was the breaking down of the Indian resistance to the settlement of the Northwest territory. Under his orders the Secretary of War sent detailed instructions to Major General Arthur St. Clair, the first governor of the Northwest Territory, in which was developed the plan of action which Washington expected would open the Northwest to settlers.

The instructions included the following passages:

While you are making such use of desultory operations as in your judgment the occasion may require, you will proceed vigorously, in every preparation in your power, for the purpose of the main expedition; and having assembled your force, and all things being in readiness, if no decisive indication of peace should have been produced, either by the messengers, or by the desultory operations, you will

30 Washington to LaFayette, Mount Vernon, July 26, 1785, in Writings, 1, 417.
commence your march for the Miami village [where Fort Wayne now stands], in order to establish a strong and permanent military post at that place...

The establishment of said post is considered as an important object of the campaign, and is to take place in all events.81

Governor St. Clair's defeat was a bitter disappointment to President Washington. In Anthony Wayne, however, he found a man capable of welding the refractory soldiers of the frontier into a disciplined army and of using it to the best advantage. Wayne's advance to the Maumee River and his defeat of the Indians under the redoubtable Little Turtle in the battle of the Fallen Timbers opened the way to the object at which Washington had aimed for at least ten years, the planting of a fort and trading post at the head of the Maumee, where the St. Joseph and St. Marys rivers unite.82

"The army will proceed to the Miami village," wrote Wayne after his victory, "in order to accomplish the object of the campaign."83 The army reached Miami Town on September 17, the construction of Fort Wayne was begun on the twenty-fourth of September and was dedicated on the twenty-second of October.84 The next year, 1795, the treaty of Greenville with the Indians and Jay's Treaty between the United States and England assured some sixteen years of uninterrupted peace for the real beginnings of the settlement of the Old Northwest.

This was, in many respects, the dramatic climax of General Washington's two administrations. He had been the protagonist of western expansion long before he dreamed of independence. When the latter had been won

the thought that engaged his mind most was of the best means to give room for expansion, and to open up the unconquered continent to the forerunners of a mighty army of settlers. For this purpose all his projects for roads, canals, and surveys were formed and forced into public notice. He looked beyond the limits of the Atlantic colonies. His vision went far over the barriers of the Alleghanies; and where others saw thirteen infant States backed by the wilderness, he beheld the germs of a great empire.85

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81 Instructions to Major General Arthur St. Clair by General Henry Knox, Secretary of War, May 21, 1791, in American State Papers, Indian Affairs, I, 172, 197.
82 Knox to St. Clair, Sept. 12, 1790, in ibid., 100. Knox says in this communication: "this opinion was given to me by the President in 1789." See Washington's reference to this in his last quoted statements above.
83 General Wayne to the Secretary of War, August 28, 1794, in American State Papers, Indian Affairs, I, 491.
84 Bert Griswold, Fort Wayne, the Gateway of the West (Indianapolis, 1927), 14-15.
85 Lodge, Washington, II, 221-222.