

Eras Journal - Stanislav Sýkora

Abstract of "George Washington and the Classical Virtues"

This article illustrates how George Washington personified the classical virtues of ancient Rome and Greece, as recorded in the widely read classical works of his times. Washington was introduced to classical thoughts by his contemporaries as well as through literature - he owned Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, Seneca's *Morals*, Cicero's *De Officiis*, and attended a performance of Addison's tragedy *Cato*.

Emulating Fabius' temperament, as recorded in *Parallel Lives*, Washington exemplified the Stoic calm by a firm constitution of mind and rare equanimity in the greatest of perils. First-hand accounts report that Washington was able to conceal the fiercest of passions behind his statue-like solidity. His ability to harness emotional insurrections within himself made him an indispensable leader in unifying the American colonies of diverse interests and customs. Seneca's *Morals* contain a plethora of classical virtues that Washington espoused, but perhaps the most intriguing was his ability to shun the greatest of human vices, the love of money.

At the time of the Revolutionary War, Washington determined with an almost religious zeal that his service in any public office would be rendered without monetary recompense. Washington believed that separating public service from private interest was necessary for a virtuous life free of corruption and he felt embarrassed when he was offered pecuniary rewards for his civil service.

In harmony with Cicero's *De Officiis*, Washington was convinced that serving his country was not only his civic duty, but also his moral obligation. To this end, he was willing to sacrifice everything, even his beloved retirement at his Mount Vernon home. Addison's *Cato* taught him, however, that the post of honour is a private station, not a public office.

Having fulfilled his public duties, Washington retired from public life and took pleasure in tranquil enjoyments of his agricultural pursuits.