

# OUR FOUNDING FATHERS - LIFE BEYOND THE REVOLUTION

*Submitted by Village of Richfield Springs Historian Harriett Geywits*

Hundreds of people could be called 'founding fathers and mothers' of America, but scholars and historians highlight political leaders and statesmen who led the Colonies through the American Revolution, securing our independence and establishing our United States government. All were considered 'regular' people with flaws and family issues but were unique contributors. Let's take a brief look into the lives of some of these 'regular' people in the years following the Revolution - those who proved to be 'extraordinary'.

**GEORGE WASHINGTON:** Regarded as the "Father of the Country" he was forty-three when he accepted commandment of the Continental Army. After the Treaty of Paris in 1783, he resigned his military commission and retired to Mt. Vernon, his estate in Virginia. He was called back to public life to preside over the Constitutional Convention in 1787 and served as our first President from 1789-1797. Born in 1732, he married widowed Martha Dandridge Curtis in 1759. Although they had no children of their own, Washington adopted Martha's four surviving children. During his Presidency, he respected and voiced his opposition to slavery but didn't make abolition a cause. When he was eleven, following his father's death, he inherited enslaved people and continued to hold them to run his vast estate. His first career was as a surveyor, that knowledge being invaluable in his future role in service to the country and as a gentleman farmer as he experimented with new practices such as crop rotation to make Mt. Vernon more efficient and profitable. His final two years were spent on his plantation - death coming on December 14, 1799 at the age of sixty-seven.

*(In honor of America 250th and Richfield Springs 165th Anniversary, the Richfield Springs Lions Club has planted a sycamore tree in Spring Park in memory of past members. Known as a George Washington tree, it grew on the Mt. Vernon estate.)*

**ALEXANDER HAMILTON:** Credited with being a key framer of the Constitution and founder of the American financial system, he was from an illegitimate birth on a Caribbean Island, born with skills to succeed. He served as the first Treasury Secretary at the age of thirty-three. An ongoing disagreement with John Adams existed for many years with Hamilton stating that 'it was the fault of the President if he did not surround himself with men in whom he had confidence, integrity and ability'. The construction of his home, 'The Grange', in upper Manhattan was completed in 1802 where his wife, Elizabeth Schuyler, daughter of General Philip Schuyler, and their eight children lived. He had returned to the practice of law in New York city although he remained on the political scene where he often alienated colleagues, especially during the 1800 election between Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr. Hamilton used his capital to support Jefferson even though he disagreed with him, feeling that Burr was entirely without principles. His insults became too much for Burr who challenged him to a duel on July 11, 1804. The result was that Burr killed Hamilton who died the next day at the age of forty-seven. He had only lived at The Grange for two years and Elizabeth sold the property in 1833.

**BENJAMIN FRANKLIN:** He acquired many admirers, especially in France where he used his talent to win support for the American Revolution. He was a polymath whose expertise spanned multiple, diverse subjects and, at times, was considered very eccentric. Franklin signed both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Born in Boston in 1706, the tenth living son of a soap and candlemaker, he was called to the printing industry in his younger years, publishing the Pennsylvania Gazette (1730-48) and Poor Richard's Almanac (1733-58). In 1730, his common-law wife, Deborah Read, joined him and they had a son and daughter. She never saw all of his accomplishments as she died prior to the Revolution in 1774. By 1740, Franklin had achieved financial independence. 1753-1754 found him serving as Deputy Postmaster General of the Colonies. He, John Jay and John Adams negotiated the Treaty of Paris in 1783 which ended the War of Independence. Franklin spent his twilight years doing his autobiography while remaining involved in civic activities. 1787 found him elected as first president of the Pennsylvania Society for promoting the Abolition of Slavery. His final act was signing a proposal to Congress that recommended the dissolution of the slavery system. Franklin died at the age of eighty-four in 1790. His original family home was demolished in 1812 but a museum has been erected on the site.

**THOMAS JEFFERSON:** As the principal author of the Declaration of Independence and the third President of the United States, words came easily to him through his writing but not through actual speaking when he seemed to be tongue-tied. During his time in Congress, he seldom spoke in public. He married Martha Wayles Skelton (1748-1782) who was highly educated. They had six children together but only two daughters survived to adulthood. Martha died at the age of thirty-three and she extracted a promise from Jefferson that he would never marry again. It was thought

this was mainly so that her children would never be raised by a stepmother. He kept this promise although it is noted that he fathered several children with Sally Hemmings, an enslaved servant. In his later years, a form of friendship through correspondence was established between himself and John Adams, developing a tolerance for each others opinions. After his presidency in 1809, he retreated to his plantation and his

passion for architecture. His lavish lifestyle forced him to sell his extensive personal library to the government. This became the basis of the Library of Congress. He died on July 4, 1826 at Monticello at the age of eighty-three. He chose that his epitaph would not include mention of his Presidency of the United States but would include that he was the author of the Declaration, the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom and the Father of the University of Virginia.

**JAMES MADISON:** Born in 1751 in Port Conway, Orange County Virginia, the oldest of twelve children, James was home schooled, later entering Princeton University. For his role in drafting the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, introducing the first ten amendments in 1789 to protect individual liberties and limiting government powers, he became known as the 'Father of the Constitution'. He always insisted, however, that 'everyone' was the author, not just one person. He served as Jefferson's Secretary of State and followed him as the fourth President in 1809. His wife, Dolly Mayne Todd (1768-1849) helped to define the public image of American womanhood. She was widowed and lost a son, but Madison chose her and her second son, John Payne Todd, as his family. Unfortunately, it was mainly due to John's being a gambler and alcoholic that caused Madison to be in debt. After his father's death in 1801, Madison inherited Montpelier where he retired in 1817 to apply the results of his research to raise wheat and tobacco. He became the president of the Agricultural Society of Albemarle which advocated progressive farming and conservation. Madison worked with Jefferson to build the University of Virginia with Madison succeeding Jefferson as rector. During his retirement years, he edited his notes from the Constitutional Convention and other papers. The sale of these helped to support Dolly after his death at the age of eighty-five in 1836, having outlived all the founding fathers.

**JOHN ADAMS:** Quincy, Massachusetts was his home from birth in 1735 to death. At the age of sixteen, he entered Harvard. His father, who had participated in local politics, expected him to be a minister, but Adams decided that by becoming a lawyer, he could make more noble and gallant achievements. In 1765 he came to realize that the Colonists were not represented in Parliament so Parliament had no authority over them and no right to tax them. He moved to Boston in 1768, becoming one of the most recognized, gifted, and vocal lawyers. Selected to represent Massachusetts at the first Continental Congress in 1776, he organized the Committee of Five which was charged with writing an official Declaration of Independence. He persuaded others to elect Thomas Jefferson as primary author, thinking it would give the document a greater chance of support. In 1761, following his father's death, Adams inherited a farm which he called 'Peacefield'. He and Abigail Smith were married in 1764. She was to become his confidant and advisor. They had six children. Adams served as President from 1797-1801. He loved to write on a wide variety of topics and after his retirement, he tended to avoid public affairs for the next twenty-six years, seldom leaving his home which was now filled with family and laughter. With his extensive writing and managing his estate, he considered his life was full, especially when, in 1824, he saw his eldest son, John Quincy, elected as the sixth President. Unfortunately, Abigail had died in 1818 of typhoid. His problems with Jefferson did not ease until later years when he began a correspondence with him that lasted until his death on July 4, 1826, at the age of 90. Ironically, Thomas Jefferson died that same day - the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.

These were among the 'regular' people whose contributions were to form the beginning of our nation. As Jefferson had said, the Declaration was to be an expression of the American mind, not the invention of new ideas but the use of common sense - a vision for the future.

