

Teacher of Liberty

Classically trained at his mother's knee, George Wythe would later pass on his knowledge to so many famous Founding Fathers that he came to be called "Teacher of Liberty."

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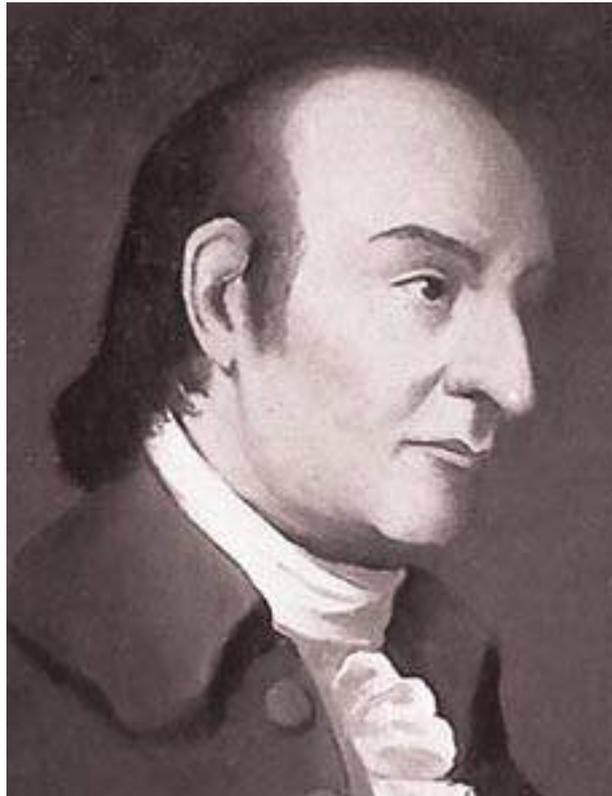
Of all the notable patriots of Virginia whose names are subscribed on the Declaration of Independence, George Wythe's name is first. This probably wouldn't seem to be a remarkable honor except that George Wythe wasn't present at the momentous occasion on August 2, 1776, when the other members of the Second Continental Congress signed their names to the noble resolution passed on July 4, 1776.

George Wythe was so well regarded and respected by his colleagues from Virginia that even though he was unavoidably absent they left space above their own signatures so that Wythe could fill the preeminent spot when he returned later in August. This is an especially high honor considering that one of the names signed below him was the principal author of the document itself, Thomas Jefferson. Of Wythe's devotion to the cause of independence, Jefferson said:

On the first dawn of that [Revolution], instead of higgling on half-way principles as others did who feared to follow their reason, he took his stand on the solid ground, that the only link of political union between us and Great Britain was the identity of our Executive; that that nation and its Parliament had no more authority over us than we had over them.

Scholar and Teacher

Not only was Thomas Jefferson an ardent admirer of George Wythe, Jefferson also learned the first principles of law under Wythe's tutelage. Years later, Jefferson offered the following appraisal of his exceptional mentor:



National Archives & Records Administration

Mentor to the founders: Virginia's George Wythe tutored several of the brightest intellectual luminaries in the early republic, including Thomas Jefferson, John Marshall, and James Monroe.

No man ever left behind him a character more venerated than George Wythe. His virtue was of the purest tint; his integrity inflexible, and his justice exact; of warm patriotism, and devoted as he was to liberty and the natural and equal rights of man, he might truly be called the Cato of his country.

Jefferson refers to Cato, the Roman statesman whose reputation for honesty and integrity was unrivaled among men of the ancient world. Men of Jefferson's day would have recognized such a reference as being high praise. It is to Jefferson that Wythe would bequeath his vast and impressive personal library.

Although Jefferson was perhaps the

brightest star in the constellation of Wythe's pupils, there were many others of similar magnitude. John Marshall, James Monroe, and Henry Clay were all students of George Wythe. That's quite an impressive class roll! The young men who studied at his feet became men of such remarkable renown that the modern historian Forrest McDonald once said of Wythe, "He taught enough other Founding Fathers to populate a small standing army." This fact contributed to his earning the appellation "Teacher of Liberty."

Teaching and learning were of paramount importance to George Wythe. His education began in the same manner as that of many of his contemporaries — at home. He was born to a prosperous planter near the town known today as Hampton, Virginia. Unfortunately, Wythe lost both his parents when he was very young. His mother, a very well-educated woman for her day and granddaughter of the illustrious Quaker George Keith, lived long enough to anchor Wythe's

educational efforts upon a very firm mooring. Before she died, she taught Wythe to read and translate both the fundamental languages of antiquity, Greek and Latin. According to one early biographer, Wythe "had a perfect knowledge of the Greek language taught to him by his mother in the backwoods." The serious and devoted instruction Wythe received at his mother's knee engendered within him a desire for self-improvement that never abated. He evinced his dedication to learning by teaching himself Hebrew at an advanced age.

Student of the Classics

The love for classical training that was instilled in him by his mother propelled Wythe along a course of study that culminated in the garnering of a reputation

as “Virginia’s most famous and classical scholar.” William Munford, one of Wythe’s lesser-known pupils, assessed Wythe’s pedagogical skill and status in this way: “Nothing would advance me faster in the world than the reputation of having been educated by Mr. Wythe, for such a man as he casts a light upon all around him.” In a letter to John Adams, Wythe declared that his purpose for teaching was “to form such characters as may be fit to succeed those which have been ornamental and useful in the national councils of America.”

Wythe’s love of classical learning informed every endeavor of his life. In 1779, William and Mary College hired Wythe as a professor of law, making him the first chair of law at an American college. His work as professor of law earned him the nickname “Dean of Virginia’s lawyers.” Even a cursory perusal of the luminaries listed on the membership roster of the Virginia bar would be sufficient to demonstrate the extraordinary weight of such an appellation.

In 1791, Wythe was named Chancery Judge of Virginia. Wythe’s familiarity

with the classics and his impressive knowledge came through even in his judicial decisions. According to one contemporary analysis of those decisions:

Not only was legal lore exhausted ... but the “approved English poets and prose writers” — as he called them — and the more unfamiliar Latin and Greek authors, and even mathematical and natural sciences were quarries from which in concealed places he dug out his allusions and quotations. In the eight pages of one opinion with its footnotes, Bracton and Justinian, Juvenal’s Satires, and Quintilian, Euclid, Archimedes and Hero, hydrostatic experiments and Coke on Littleton, Tristram Shandy and Petronius, Halley and Price and Prometheus, Don Quixote and Swift’s Tale of a Tub, Locke’s Essay on Human Understanding, and Turkish travellers, chase one another up and down to the

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bewilderment of all but the universal scholar. All contemporaries stood in awe of his erudition, and referred to him as the famous judge.

Chancellor Wythe’s personal morality always informed his decisions, as well. Although himself a slave owner, Wythe viewed the institution as contrary to the gospel of Jesus Christ and worked to end its dominance in Virginia. Wythe used some of his cases to enable a legal end to slavery by interpreting the Virginia Declaration of Rights’ “equality of all men” to

Position of honor: Even though Thomas Jefferson, the principal author of the Declaration of Independence, was a member of Virginia’s delegation to the Second Continental Congress, Wythe was given the distinction of having his signature above those of the other Virginia delegates.



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include blacks. These rulings were always overturned on appeal. Such setbacks did not deter Wythe, nor did they compel him to compromise his unpopular sentiments. His adherence to principles that he believed were divinely wrought and thus beyond the purview of human judges earned him the following praise from the Reverend Charles Goodrich, author of *Lives of the Signers to the Declaration of Independence* (1829):

Superior to popular prejudices, and every corrupting influence, nothing could induce him to swerve from truth and right. In his decisions, he seemed to be a pure intelligence,

untouched by human passions, and settling the disputes of men, according to the dictates of eternal and immutable justice. Other judges have surpassed him in genius, and a certain facility in dispatching causes; but while the vigor of his faculties remained unimpaired, he was seldom surpassed in learning, industry, and judgment.

From Revolution to Constitution

Wythe served the cause of American liberty in the political arena, as well. In 1754, Wythe was elected to the Virginia House of Burgesses. He rapidly ascended in influence and was tapped to pen that House's response to the Stamp Act of 1764. The language in Wythe's remonstrance was too strong for some of his colleagues, and it was ultimately softened in its final form. Although Wythe was a vociferous opponent of British oppression, at the time of the Stamp Act, he disagreed with Patrick Henry's bellicose remarks in May 1765

that "Caesar had his Brutus, Charles the First his Cromwell, and George the Third — *may profit by their example*. If this be treason, make the most of it." Many regarded this as a thinly veiled call for regicide. Wythe thought a peaceful resolution of the Anglo-American crisis was the wisest course to follow.

When warm hostilities gave way to the heat of open war, Wythe stood firmly with his countrymen and volunteered for the army, but was rejected. Wythe's talents on behalf of the cause of liberty would instead be put to great use in the Second Continental Congress, where he served nobly after his election as a representative from Virginia in 1775. After two years of service in Congress, Wythe returned to Virginia as speaker of Virginia's House of Delegates. In this position he helped design Virginia's official state seal, in which Virtue is depicted, sword in hand, her foot on the prostrate form of Tyranny, whose crown lays nearby, above the words *Sic Semper Tyrannis*, or "Thus Ever to Tyrants."

Wythe demonstrated his devotion to the permanent overthrow of tyranny by attending the Constitutional Convention of 1787 in Philadelphia. Wythe's knowledge of the classical world would have been valuable at this critical moment in American history, but his influence was never felt as his wife's illness precipitated his premature departure from Philadelphia on June 4. His wife's health never improved, and Wythe never signed the Constitution. Wythe, did however, work tirelessly to assure the document's ratification in his home state by serving on the Committee of the Whole at the ratification convention, and he offered the resolution recommending acceptance of the document.

Tragic Murder

Ironically, it was George Wythe's remarkable kindness and generosity that indirectly led to his death. Wythe's death was so heinous that Thomas Jefferson remarked, "Such an instance of depravity has been hitherto known to us only in the fables of poets." Jefferson's assessment of the demise of his hero is no exaggeration. George Wythe, the preeminent Virginia lawyer and tutor to the greatest minds of the American Founding era, was murdered by his own grandnephew and namesake, George Wythe Sweeney.



George Wythe's home, a Georgian mansion in Williamsburg, was designed by his son-in-law, Richard Taliferro. Tragically, Wythe was poisoned at his home in 1806 by his wastrel grandnephew, George Wythe Sweeney, who sought to avoid being disinherited. Wythe wrote Sweeney out of his will before dying — but the villain escaped the hangman's noose.

Beginning in April 1806, Sweeney, while living with his illustrious uncle, began forging Wythe's signature to checks written to cover his mounting gambling debts. Sometime in late May, Sweeney's crimes were about to be revealed and he worried that his uncle would disinherit him. In a fit of desperation, Sweeney took a drastic step to prevent losing out on what could amount to a substantial inheritance. On the morning of May 25, 1806, in an act of darkest depravity and indescribable ingratitude, Sweeney laced his uncle's morning coffee with a deadly amount of yellow arsenic.

For two weeks, the beloved chancellor suffered immense and debilitating pain as the arsenic caused his stomach to distend fatally. Finally, on June 8, 1806, precisely two weeks after ingesting the poison, Wythe uttered his last words: "Let me die righteous."

George Wythe was laid to rest at St. John's Episcopal Church in Richmond, an edifice already famous for being the venue for Patrick Henry's "Give me liberty or give me death" speech. The crime was reportedly discovered because Lydia Broadnax, a black servant in Wythe's household, witnessed Sweeney pouring a mysterious substance in Sweeney's coffee pot. Unfortunately for the cause of justice, as a slave, Broadnax was prohibited from giving testimony against a white man, and Sweeney was found not guilty.

A Man Worthy of Praise and Emulation

A few of George Wythe's honorable appellations have been noted above: Cato of his country, Teacher of Liberty, and Dean of Virginia's Lawyers. There was another, however, of equal magnificence — the American Aristides. Aristides was the Athenian statesman and general known for his fairness, justice, and probity in public life. Of the Greek Aristides it was said:

The Aristides lifts his honest front
Spotless of heart; to whom the
unflattering voice
Of Freedom gave the noblest name
of "Just."

The Aristides of the ancient world was worthy of such praise, and so is the American Founding Father, George Wythe. ■