

# George Washington's Vision, Valley Forge, Winter of 1777

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## Conditions at Valley Forge in the Winter of 1777

In the winter of 1777 during the American Revolution, prior to General Washington's Vision at Valley Forge, the [continental army](#) had suffered defeats in the battles of [Brandywine](#) and [Germantown](#). The British forces occupied the capitol of the colonies at that time, which was Philadelphia, Pa. A brutal winter, unknown to the troops, was coming and food, as well as clothing, was scarce. The situation grew desperate as winter set in on the plains of Pennsylvania.

There was near famine and temperatures fell far below freezing. Winds blew with Gale force. Some soldiers had no shoes and wrapped their feet in rags. Trails of blood could be seen on the snow where they would walk. Amputations were common. Disease set in and as many as 3,000 troops died. Defeat and surrender seemed inevitable.

British forces could have destroyed the continental army before winter but chose not to; a grave mistake. They instead decided to wait out the winter and prepare to take care of the colonists in the spring.

## General Washington's Vision, Winter 1777

National Tribune Volume 4, No. 12

The story of General Washington's Vision of the Virgin Mary was published from the account given to Wesley Bradshaw in 1859 by Anthony Sherman. A link to the [National Tribune, Vol. 4, No. 12](#), is a copy of the actual paper printed in 1880 and contains the story given in 1859.

A portion of the description from Wesley Bradshaw uses the phrase “**singularly beautiful female**” that George Washington saw in the vision. Be aware that some content on Washington's vision that is available to the public, do not use the phrase “singularly beautiful female” that Bradshaw himself used in 1880. By Bradshaw's account, it was a female.

## The Vision from Print in 1859

The last time I ever saw Anthony Sherman was on the fourth of July 1859, in Independence Square. He was then ninety-nine years old, and becoming very feeble. But though so old, his dimming eyes rekindled as he gazed upon Independence Hall, which he came to visit once more. “Let us go into the hall,” he said. “I want to tell you of an incident of Washington’s life—one which no one alive knows of except myself; and, if you live you will before long, see it verified.”



Independence Hall - Ferdinand Richardt - 1858-1863

George Washington would hardly have been the type of man that one would expect to be seeking visionary manifestations or to be easily taken in by them.

“From the opening of the Revolution we experienced all phases of fortune, now good and now ill, one time victorious and another conquered. The darkest period we had, I think, was when Washington after several reverses, retreated to Valley Forge, where he resolved to pass the winter of 1777.

“Ah! I have often seen the tears coursing down our dear commander’s care-worn cheeks, as he would be conversing with a confidential officer about the condition of his poor soldiers. You have doubtless heard the story of Washington’s going into the thicket to pray. Well, it was not only true, but he used often to pray in secret for aid and comfort from God, the interposition of whose Divine Providence brought us safely through the darkest days of tribulation.

## An Uninvited Guest

“One day, I remember it well, the chilly winds whistled through the leafless trees, though the sky was cloudless and the sun shone brightly, he remained in his quarters nearly all the afternoon alone. “When he came out I noticed that his face was a shade paler than usual, and there seemed to be something on his mind of more than ordinary importance. Returning just after dusk, he dispatched an orderly to the quarters of the officer I mention who was presently in attendance.

“After a preliminary conversation of about half an hour, Washington, gazing upon his companion with that strange look of dignity which he alone could command, said to the latter: “I do not know whether it is owing to the anxiety of my mind, or what, but this afternoon as I was sitting at this table engaged in preparing a dispatch, something seemed to disturb me. **Looking up, I beheld standing opposite me a singularly beautiful female.**

So astonished was I, for I had given strict orders not to be disturbed that it was some moments before I found language to inquire into the cause of her presence. A second, a third, and even a fourth time did I repeat my question, but received no answer from my mysterious visitor except a slight raising of her eyes.

By this time, I felt strange sensations spreading through me. I would have risen but the riveted gaze of the being before me rendered volition impossible. I assayed once more to address her, but my tongue had become useless. Even thought itself had become paralyzed. A new influence, mysterious, potent, irresistible, took possession of me. All I could do was to gaze steadily, vacantly at my unknown visitant.

Gradually the surrounding atmosphere seemed as though becoming filled with sensations, and luminous. Everything about me seemed to rarify, the mysterious visitor herself becoming more airy and yet more distinct to my sight than before. Now I began to feel as one dying, or rather to experience the sensations which I have sometimes imagined accompany dissolution. I did not think, I did not reason, I did not move; all were alike impossible. I was only conscious of gazing fixedly, vacantly at my companion.

## First Threat - Revolutionary War

Presently I heard a voice saying, “Son of the Republic, look and learn,” while at the same time my visitor extended her arm eastwardly. I now beheld a heavy white vapor at some distance rising fold upon fold. This gradually dissipated, and I looked upon a strange scene.

Before me lay spread out in one vast plain all the countries of the world—Europe, Asia, Africa and America. I saw rolling and tossing between Europe and America the billows of the Atlantic, and between Asia and America lay the Pacific. “Son of the Republic,” said the same mysterious

voice as before, “look and learn.”

At that moment I beheld a dark, shadowy being, like an angel, standing, or rather floating in mid-air, between Europe and America, dipping water out of the ocean in the hollow of each hand, he sprinkled some upon America with his right hand, while with his left hand he cast some on Europe. Immediately a cloud raised from these countries, and joined in mid-ocean.

For a while it remained stationary, and then moved slowly westward, until it enveloped America in its murky folds. Sharp flashes of lightning gleamed through it at intervals, and I heard the smothered groans and cries of the American people. A second time the angel dipped water from the ocean, and sprinkled it out as before. The dark cloud was then drawn back to the ocean, in whose heaving billows it sank from view.

## **Second Threat - American Civil War**

A third time I heard the mysterious voice saying, “Son of the Republic, look and learn,” I cast my eyes upon America and beheld villages and towns and cities springing up one after another until the whole land from the Atlantic to the Pacific was dotted with them. Again, I heard the mysterious voice say, “Son of the Republic, the end of the century cometh, look and learn.”

“At this the dark shadowy angel turned his face southward, and from Africa I saw an ill-omened spectre approach our land. It flitted slowly over every town and city of the latter. The inhabitants presently set themselves in battle array against each other. As I continued looking I saw a bright angel, on whose brow rested a crown of light, on which was traced the word “Union,” bearing the American flag which he placed between the divided nation, and said, “Remember ye are brethren.” Instantly, the inhabitants, casting from them their weapons became friends once more, and united around the National Standard.

## **Third Threat - War Yet to Occur**

“And again, I heard the mysterious voice saying, “Son of the Republic, look and learn.” At this the dark, shadowy angel placed a trumpet to his mouth, and blew three distinct blasts; and taking water from the ocean, he sprinkled it upon Europe, Asia and Africa.

Then my eyes beheld a fearful scene: from each of these countries arose thick, black clouds that were soon joined into one. And throughout this mass there gleamed a dark red light by which I saw hordes of armed men, who, moving with the cloud, marched by land and sailed by sea to America, which country was enveloped in the volume of cloud.

And I dimly saw these vast armies devastate the whole country and burn the villages, towns and cities that I beheld springing up. As my ears listened to the thundering of the cannon, clashing of

swords, and the shouts and cries of millions in mortal combat, I heard again the mysterious voice saying, "Son of the Republic, look and learn." When the voice had ceased, the dark shadowy angel placed his trumpet once more to his mouth, and blew a long and fearful blast.

## **Heaven Intervenes**

"Instantly a light as of a thousand suns shone down from above me, and pierced and broke into fragments the dark cloud which enveloped America. At the same moment the angel upon whose head still shone the word Union, and who bore our national flag in one hand and a sword in the other, descended from the heavens attended by legions of white spirits. These immediately joined the inhabitants of America, who I perceived were well-nigh overcome, but who immediately taking courage again, closed up their broken ranks and renewed the battle.

Again, amid the fearful noise of the conflict, I heard the mysterious voice saying, "Son of the Republic, look and learn." As the voice ceased, the shadowy angel for the last time dipped water from the ocean and sprinkled it upon America. Instantly the dark cloud rolled back, together with the armies it had brought, leaving the inhabitants of the land victorious.

"Then once more I beheld the villages, towns and cities springing up where I had seen them before, while the bright angel, planting the azure standard he had brought in the midst of them, cried with a loud voice: "While the stars remain, and the heavens send down dew upon the earth, so long shall the Union last." And taking from his brow the crown on which blazoned the word "Union," he placed it upon the Standard while the people, kneeling down, said, "Amen."

## **Interpretation**

The scene instantly began to fade and dissolve, and I at last saw nothing but the rising, curling vapor I at first beheld. This also disappearing, I found myself once more gazing upon the mysterious visitor, who, in the same voice I had heard before, said, "Son of the Republic, what you have seen is thus interpreted: Three great perils will come upon the Republic. The most fearful is the third, but in this greatest conflict the whole world united shall not prevail against her. Let every child of the Republic learn to live for his God, his land and the Union." With these words the vision vanished, and I started from my seat and felt that I had seen a vision wherein had been shown to me the birth, progress, and destiny of the United States.

# George Washington's Spiritual Habits

## Nelly Custis

Nelly Custis was ten years old when General Washington was called to the Presidency, and she grew to maturity during his two terms. During that time, she traveled with General Washington and walked amidst the day's great foreign and domestic names. After the retirement of President Washington, she returned with the family to Mount Vernon. Nelly was energetic, spry, and lively and was the joy of George Washington's life. She served as a gracious hostess and entertained the frequent guests at Mount Vernon who visited the former President.

Nelly knew the private and public life of her "father" very well. Therefore, Jared Sparks, searching for information on Washington's religious habits, dispatched a letter to Nelly, asking if she knew whether George Washington indeed was a Christian. Within a week, she had replied to Sparks, and Sparks included her letter in Volume XII of Washington's writings in the lengthy section on Washington's religious habits. In that specific letter, Jared Sparks explained:

I shall here insert a letter on this subject, written to me by a lady who lived twenty years in Washington's family and who was his adopted daughter, and the granddaughter of Mrs. Washington. The testimony it affords, and the hints it contains respecting the domestic habits of Washington, are interesting and valuable.

## The Letter Concerning Washington's Spiritual Practices

*Woodlawn, 26 February 1833*

*Sir,*

*I received your favor of the 20th instant last evening, and hasten to give you the information, which you desire.*

*Truro Parish [Episcopal] is the one in which Mount Vernon, Pohick Church [the church where George Washington served as a vestryman], and Woodlawn [the home of Nelly and Lawrence Lewis] are situated. Fairfax Parish is now Alexandria. Before the Federal District was ceded to Congress, Alexandria was in Fairfax County. General Washington had a pew in Pohick Church, and one in Christ Church at Alexandria. He was very instrumental in establishing Pohick Church, and I believe subscribed [supported and contributed to] largely. His pew was near the pulpit. I have a perfect recollection of being there, before his election to the presidency, with him and my grandmother...*

*He attended the church at Alexandria when the weather and roads permitted a ride of ten miles [a one-way journey of 2-3 hours by horse or carriage]. In New York and Philadelphia he never omitted attendance at church in the morning, unless detained by indisposition [sickness]. The afternoon was spent in his own room at home; the evening with his family, and without company.*

*Sometimes an old and intimate friend called to see us for an hour or two; but visiting and visitors were prohibited for that day [Sunday].*

*No one in church attended to the services with more reverential respect. My grandmother, who was eminently pious, never deviated from her early habits. She always knelt. The General, as was then the custom, stood during the devotional parts of the service. On communion Sundays, he left the church with me, after the blessing, and returned home, and we sent the carriage back for my grandmother.*

*It was his custom to retire to his library at nine or ten o'clock where he remained an hour before he went to his chamber. He always rose before the sun and remained in his library until called to breakfast. I never witnessed his private devotions. Never did I inquire about them. I should have thought it the greatest heresy to doubt his firm belief in Christianity. His life, his writings, prove that he was a Christian. He was not one of those who act or pray, "that they may be seen of men" [Matthew 6:5]. He communed with his God in secret [Matthew 6:6].*

*My mother [Eleanor Calvert-Lewis] resided two years at Mount Vernon after her marriage [in 1774] with John Parke Custis, the only son of Mrs. Washington. I have heard her say that General Washington always received the sacrament with my grandmother before the revolution. (The king of England was the head of the church and apparently Washington would not recognize him as such after the war). When my aunt, Miss Custis [Martha's daughter] died suddenly at Mount Vernon, before they could realize the event [before they understood she was dead], he [General Washington] knelt by her and prayed most fervently, most affectingly, for her recovery. Of this I was assured by Judge [Bushrod] Washington's mother and other witnesses. He was a silent, thoughtful man. He spoke little generally; never of himself. I never heard him relate a single act of his life during the war. Often I have seen him perfectly abstracted, his lips moving, but no sound was perceptible. I have sometimes made him laugh most heartily from sympathy with my joyous and extravagant spirits.*

*I was, probably, one of the last persons on earth to whom he would have addressed serious conversation, particularly when he knew that I had the most perfect model of female excellence [Martha Washington] ever with me as my monitress, who acted the part of a tender and devoted parent, loving me as only a mother can love, and never extenuating [tolerating] or approving in me what she disapproved of others. She never omitted her private devotions, or her public duties; and she and her husband were so perfectly united and happy that he must have been a Christian. She had no doubts, no fears for him. After forty years of devoted affection and uninterrupted happiness, she resigned him without a murmur into the arms of his Savior and his God, with the assured hope of his eternal felicity [happiness in Heaven].*

*Is it necessary that any one should certify, "General Washington avowed himself to me a believer in Christianity?" As well may we question his patriotism, his heroic, disinterested devotion to his country. His mottos were, "Deeds, not Words"; and, "For God and my Country."*

*With sentiments of esteem,  
I am, Nelly Custis-Lewis*

### [About the Author](#)

Charles Rogers is a resident of South Carolina and a retired computer programmer by trade. Raised in various Christian denominations, he always believed in Jesus Christ.