

Parson Weems

Mason Locke Weems, the first biographer of George Washington, parson, author, book-seller, fiddler, and raconteur par excellence, was born on October 11, 1759, at Marshes Seat, Herring Bay, Anne Arundel County, Maryland. After completing his early schooling in Maryland, he made numerous voyages on the trading vessels owned by his brothers. It is believed that he studied medicine or surgery at Edinburgh, Scotland, between 1777-1779, and he may have been impressed as a ship surgeon on a British-man-of-war. In 1779, he returned to Maryland, where, following the death of his father, he freed the slaves bequeathed to him. He studied for the ministry between 1780 and 1784 in England.

He was made a deacon by the Bishop of Chester on September 5, 1784, and was ordained as a priest on September 12, 1784, by the Archbishop of Canterbury. He and his companion, Edward Gantt, also of Maryland, were the first Americans to be ordained following the Revolutionary War. Between 1784 and 1793, he served as Rector of All Hallows, Anne Arundel County and later at St. Margaret's, Westminster, Maryland.

In 1791, he began his publishing career. In 1793, he severed his formal connection with a settled rectorship, although he filled the pulpit at Pohick Church, Truro Parish, Fairfax County, Virginia at various times, particularly in 1801-1802, and preached on numerous occasions in other churches.

In July, 1795, he was married to Frances Ewell, daughter of Col. Jesse Ewell of Bel Air, and settled at Dumfries. He and his wife had ten children, eight of whom survived infancy.

In 1800, he published the first edition of the *Life of Washington*. This was quickly followed by new and revised editions to satisfy the tremendous demands. The fifth edition, published in 1806, contained for the first time the famous cherry-tree anecdote. The story of Friend Potts discovering the Commander-in-Chief in prayer at Valley Forge appeared in a newspaper version in 1804 and was incorporated for the first time in the sixth edition, published in 1808. The biography has appeared in more than 80 editions, the last in 1927.