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The Strange Saga of George Washington's Bedpan

Even the most mundane of objects associated with the Founding Father have a story



George Washington's bedpan (George Washington's Mount Vernon.)

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America's first president had achieved a mythic status by the time of his death in late 1799, and the prized possessions of George and Martha Custis Washington were treated akin to sacred relics. His furniture, swords, clothing, tableware and more were passed down through his family and proudly displayed in their homes for visitors. But it was not only the attractive, decorative pieces that his descendants treasured: as mundane an object as George Washington's bedpan stayed in the family for over a century.

An 18th-century bedpan isn't all that different from one today. Then, it was round and made of pewter with a handle. In an era before plumbing and bathrooms, the bedpan could be gently heated and slipped under the covers of a sickbed. The elderly, ill, and women recovering from childbirth could use the bedpan without having to risk further injury by leaving their bed. While healthy adults could use a chamberpot, which might be kept in a cabinet or attached beneath a hole in a chair seat, the bedpan was designed for the immobile.

This particular bedpan was made by a New York pewterer named Frederick Bassett in the late 18th century. It was most likely used by either or both George and Martha Washington at the end of their lives. Because of the meticulous records kept by the family, we can trace the journey of this lowly item through the 19th century and up to its return to Mount Vernon in 1936. Why was it kept, and who could possibly have wanted it?

When Martha died in 1802, all of the objects at Mount Vernon not specifically designated in George and Martha's wills were sold (their wills dealt with slave property separately). Everything from a famous bust of George Washington (\$250) to a tea caddy (\$3.25) was recorded in the sales records. The bedpan was likely in the "1 lot sundries" purchased for \$29 (and thus probably a pretty large lot of random pieces) by Thomas Peter, husband of Martha's granddaughter Martha Custis Peter.

George Washington never had any children of his own, but he was quite close with Martha Washington's four grandchildren (from her first marriage), and Martha Custis Peter was the second-oldest of these. The young Martha had married Thomas Peter in 1795, and the couple eventually built a mansion atop a hill in Georgetown.

The Peters were still in the process of setting up their household when they visited Mount Vernon for the sale of the contents of the house, from valuable furniture to kitchen tools to bedpans. The sale was technically open to the public, but only family members and close friends purchased items. They bought blankets, carpets, mirrors, chairs and dishes, not as famous relics but as useful housewares. The bedpan may have been acquired for the next time Martha gave birth or in case of family illness, or it may have simply been thrown in with the "sundries." Martha, like her siblings, spoke reverentially of her illustrious grandparents and showed off decorative objects from Mount Vernon, but it is unlikely the bedpan was ever on display.

Martha and Thomas passed down the Mount Vernon objects, bedpan and all, to their daughter, whose name was (not kidding) Britannia Wellington Peter Kennon. Britannia, too, enjoyed sharing stories about the Washingtons and kept careful records of the objects she inherited. She left provisions in her will that her grandchildren would split up all of the "Mount Vernon Heirlooms" evenly and, if possible, keep them in the family. As Adam Erby, associate curator at Mount Vernon, explains, "The Peter family elevated many of Mount Vernon's utilitarian objects to the status of almost religious relics."

In the late 19th or early 20th century, the Peters did a thorough inventory of the heirlooms, placing a numbered label on each one to correspond to a list of some 529 pieces. By this time, now an era of indoor plumbing for wealthy families in an age of improved medical treatments, the descendants were confused as to the purpose of this mysterious pewter pan. It is listed in the inventory as "pewter dish (?) with handle." It seems to have been confused with a kitchen item.

By this time, even the most ordinary objects Washington had owned had taken on great value. Buttons, pieces of cloth, and kitchen implements were donated to or purchased by the Mount Vernon Ladies Association to put on display in Washington's home after the group took over the estate in 1860. In the late 1930s, Britannia's granddaughter Agnes Peter Mott sold "interesting kitchen utensils originally at Mount Vernon" which quite likely included the mislabeled bed pan, to the Ladies Association. It entered the records as a "plate warmer."

A handwritten letter on faded paper in Mount Vernon's files, written around the time of the acquisition from Mott by an apparent pewter expert, finally set the record straight: "I think we must identify this as a 'bed pan.'" For nearly 80 years, then, the humble bed pan of George and Martha Washington has received careful treatment as a treasured museum object, and even went on public display in Mount Vernon's museum in 2010. The bedpan provides "tangible connections not only with the Washingtons," Erby points out, "but also with the enslaved house servants who were responsible for emptying the bedpan."

Moreover, this simple object testifies to the Washington descendants' careful—and perhaps quirky—stewardship of anything and everything George Washington owned.

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