

Father's Day with the Founding Fathers

By Lewis E. Lehrman
Connecticut Post
June 21, 2009

Proper education and conduct was a repeated theme of letters from the Founders to their favorite relatives. Alexander Hamilton's advice to his 9-year-old daughter Angelica could easily have been written by rival Thomas Jefferson: "I was very glad to learn, my dear daughter, that you were going to begin the study of the French language. We hope you will in every respect behave in such a manner as will secure to you the goodwill and regard of all those with whom you are associated."

Not all the Founders' offspring were models of scholarship. George Washington's step-son, John Parke Custis, was obsessed with "guns, horses, dogs, and equipage." He was sent off to Fredericksburg to study under an Anglican minister, who was admonished by Washington: "I rather wish that he [John Parke] might le[a]d a life of as little indulgence and dissipation as should be thought necessary to relax and keep his spirits...[and] restrained from the practice of those follies and vices which youth and inexperience but too naturally lead into."

Washington himself had no natural offspring to impart fatherly advice, but he was the father figure to numerous step-children, step-grandchildren, nieces and nephews. Two of Washington's favorite nephews were little better disciplined than his step-son. The two unruly and disobedient boys were too much for their widowed mother to handle. In order to instill some discipline, they had been sent to school in nearby Alexandria.

Uncle George wrote them in 1788: "If you comply with the advise herein given to pay a diligent attention to your studies, and employ your time of relaxation in proper company, you will find but few opportunities and little inclination, while you continue at an Academy, to enter into those scenes of vice and dissipation which too often present themselves to youth in every place, and particularly in towns. If you are determined to neglect your books, and plunge into extravagance and dissipation nothing I could now say would prevent it -- for you must be employed, and if it is not in pursuit of those things which are profitable[,] it must be in pursuit of those which are destructive."

A year later, shortly before he left Mount Vernon for New York to assume the nation's presidency, Washington wrote nephew George Steptoe Washington: "I think it incumbent on me as your uncle and friend, to give you some advisory hints, which, if properly attended to, will, I conceive, be found very useful to you in regulating your conduct and giving you respectability, not only at present, but thro' every period of life. You have now arrived to that age when you must quit the trifling amusements of a boy, and assume the more dignified manners of a man."

The president-elect worried about the reputation of the extended First Family: "At this crisis your conduct will attract the notice of those who are about you, and as the first impressions are generally the most lasting, your doings now may mark the leading traits of your character through life. It is therefore absolutely necessary if you mean to make any figure upon the stage, that you should take the first steps right."

Washington, who regretted his own lack of formal education, urged his nephew not to forego the opportunity in front of him: "The first and great object with you at present is to acquire, by industry, and application, such knowledge as your situation enables you to obtain, as will be useful to you in life. In doing this two other important advantages will be gained besides the acquisition of knowledge: namely, a habit of industry, and a disrelish of that profusion of money and dissipation of time which are ever attendant upon idleness."

Washington's vice president, John Adams, gave strict guidance to his own oldest son. When John Quincy Adams was admitted to Harvard College in 1786, his father clearly hoped he would enjoy the experience -- but benefit from it as well: "You are now at a university where many of the greatest men have received their education." Adams wrote his son: "You are breathing now in the Atmosphere of Science and Litterature, on floating Particles of which will mix with your whole Mass of Blood and Juices. Every Visit you make to the Chamber or study of a Schollar, you learn something." (Harvard could not assure that a graduate could spell.)

Adams' son must have liked Harvard because he later returned there to teach as the "Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory." But John Quincy didn't like Harvard as a student. When John Quincy complained about the quality of Harvard's instruction, his mother replied: "Your whole time has been spent in the company of men of literature and science. How unpardonable would it have been in you, to have been a blockhead."

His father had similar high expectations. When John Quincy showed little interest in his profession of the law, Adams wrote him in 1790: "You come into life with advantages which will disgrace you if your success is mediocre. And if you do not rise to the head not only of your profession, but of your country, it will be owing to your own Laziness, Slovenliness, and Obstinacy."

The Founders had high expectations for their country and their children.

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