

RATIONALE for WILLIAM LEE

While selecting a new name for the high school is a challenge, it also presents a unique opportunity to boldly recognize what current scholars identify as one of George Washington's greatest legacies. By freeing his slaves in his will, Washington tried to set a significant example for our new nation about the absolute necessity of resolving the issue of slavery and racial discrimination. While Washington was a privileged slave holder, he eventually came to realize that slavery was morally wrong, economically inefficient and a threat to the unity of the country he helped to found. He came to understand that African Americans were entitled to the same natural rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness that were stated in the Declaration of Independence. Given his standing in the nation, he hoped that his emancipation decision would influence others of his class, but unfortunately Washington was the only one of our slave holding presidents to free his slaves.

As a Southerner, Washington was initially against including blacks, both free and slave, in the Continental Army. By the war's end he was the leader of an army that was more integrated than any American military force up until the Vietnam war. By Yorktown, it is estimated that 1 in 4 American soldiers were African Americans. The role of free blacks and slaves in the American cause was crucial, because it is estimated that over 20,000 slaves sought their freedom by joining the British ranks. Based on his experience on the Revolutionary War battlefields, Washington's attitudes about African Americans and slavery began to evolve. Unable to move forward with several national emancipation plans during his presidency, Washington struggled with resolving the paradox of slavery and racism in a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men (and women) were created equal.

In his last months, Washington took the radical step of revising his will to stipulate that his slaves were to be freed upon the death of his wife. His revised will expressly forbid any attempt by his heirs to sell or exile any of the 124 slaves that he owned outright or to break up any slave families. In addition, he directed that any orphans or elderly in his slave community be fully supported. Finally, in his most revolutionary directive, he called for the education of his slaves to assure that they could control their futures and prosper as a free people. Long considered to be just a benign final gesture, Washington's will is now recognized by historians as a revolutionary last testament that acknowledged the inherent humanity of blacks and their right to be considered fully American.

Moreover, in the final section of the will's emancipation clause, Washington singled out one slave for immediate freedom, providing him with a lifetime pension, land and housing: William Lee.

“And to my Mulatto man William (calling himself William Lee) ... I give him (his freedom) as a testament of my sense of his attachment to me, and for his faithful services during the Revolutionary War.”

In this statement, Washington clearly acknowledged his comradeship with William Lee and praised his meritorious service in the war. Even more notably, Washington recognized that Lee had asserted his right to that most American of rights – the right to self identification -- by calling him by his chosen name.

He was known as Billy Lee when Washington purchased him in 1768 in Westmoreland County, VA at the estate sale held by the widow of Col. Thomas Lee. Purchased for a premium price, because of his skills as a horseman and his light-colored skin, Billy spent decades as Washington's manservant and huntsman. Spending the war in close proximity appears to have made Washington and Lee especially close. Despite numerous opportunities to escape to freedom while in the North, Lee served as Washington's trusted valet and aide from the siege of Boston to Yorktown and was hailed for coming to Washington's rescue with a fresh horse in the heat of the Battle of Monmouth. Post war he accompanied Washington to the Constitutional Convention and to his presidency. In his letters Washington regarded him highly for following all of his “fortunes with fidelity.” As a result, William Lee was one of the most celebrated African American veterans of the war and was included in many of the most famous Revolutionary War paintings of Washington. While many factors influenced

Washington's evolving abhorrence of slavery, his long relationship with William Lee has been identified by historians as influencing our preeminent founder's gradual realization that blacks had a rightful place in America as free men and women.

By selecting William Lee as the “Lee” in Washington-Lee High School, the Arlington School Board can fulfill the vision espoused by George Washington: equality, education, and freedom for all. Recognizing William Lee as a patriotic, African American Virginian, enslaved because he was the son of a white father and a black slave mother, who stood with George Washington through all of the perils of our founding, acknowledges, as well, the key APS values of excellence, equity, integrity, inclusivity, collaboration, innovation, and stewardship. William Lee shared George Washington's long journey of moral awakening and influenced his gradual acceptance of racial equality. He also represents the significant, but often overlooked, role that blacks played in the eventual success of the American cause.

In his will, George Washington fully recognized William Lee's important contributions to both himself and to the nation. By renaming the school after these two closely linked individuals, Arlington will be celebrating the journey to equality that their two intertwined lives represent. By making this choice, Arlington can continue on the path to freedom and justice represented by the lives of George Washington and William Lee. This choice will honor both the school's significant and historic role in desegregation and its long history of ensuring a high level of achievement for all of its students.

For Further Information About William Lee and George Washington:

Books:

- Fergus M. Bordewich, Washington: The Making of the American Capital
- Richard Brookheiser, Founding Father: Rediscovering George Washington
- Ron Chernow, Washington: A Life
- Kenneth C. Davis, In The Shadow of Liberty: The Hidden History of Slavery, Four Presidents, and Five Black Lives
- Joseph J. Ellis, His Excellency: George Washington
- Jeffrey E. Finnegan, Colonel Washington and Me: George Washington, His Slave William Lee and Their Incredible Journey Together
- David Hackett Fischer, Washington's Crossing
- Jonathan Horn, The Man Who Would Not Be Washington: Robert E. Lee's Civil War and His Decision That Changed American History
- James Thompson, George Washington's Mulatto Man: Who Was Billy Lee?
- Henry Wiencek, An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves and the Creation of America

Online:

- “William (Billy) Lee,” George Washington's Mount Vernon website
- “William Lee (Valet),” Wikipedia
- “William 'Billy' Lee,” American Battlefield Trust-
- “Washington's Crossing as Docudrama,” Wall Street Journal, Patrick J. Walsh,

Paintings:

William Lee was the most frequently depicted African American of his time due to his well-known connection to George Washington

- Charles Wilson Peale, “George Washington at Princeton,” (1779) U.S. Senate.
(Regarded as the most accurate depiction of Lee since Peale knew him from the Continental Army)
- Thomas Sully, “Passage of the Delaware,”(1819) Boston Museum of Fine Arts.
(William Lee on horseback alongside Generals Washington, Knox, Greene and Sullivan)
- John Trumbull, “George Washington,” (1780) Metropolitan Museum of Art.
(William Lee commonly identified as standing behind Washington, but Trumbull represented him in caricature to sell the painting to the prejudices of a European audience according to art historians)

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