

Today in History - May 22

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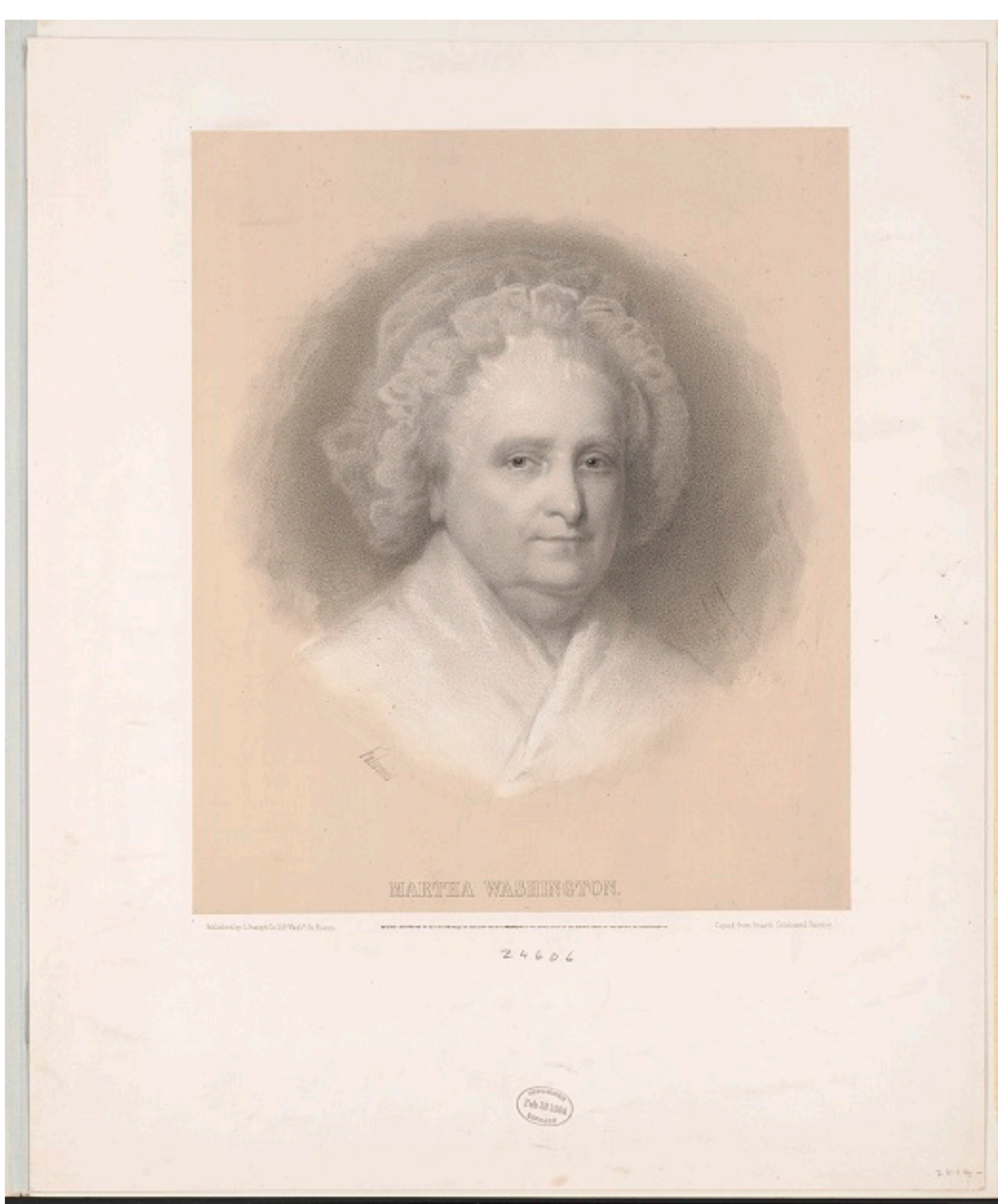
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Death of Martha Washington

On **May 22**, 1802, the first of first ladies, Martha Dandridge Custis Washington died of a severe fever. When she married George Washington in January 1759, she was twenty-seven years old and a widowed mother of two. She was also one of the wealthiest women in Virginia, having inherited some 15,000 acres of farmland from her deceased husband, Daniel Parke Custis.

*I am fond of only what comes from the heart.*Martha Washington, quoted in "[Martha Dandridge Custis Washington](#)". White House Web Site

[Martha Washington...](#) Gilbert Stuart, artist; Dominique C. Fabronius, lithographer; Boston: published by L. Prang, c1864. [Popular Graphic Arts](#). Prints & Photographs Division

A prosperous farmer himself, [George Washington](#) ably took over the Custis estate, but moved Martha and his newly-adopted stepchildren Martha ("Patsy") and John Parke ("Jacky") to his own home, [Mount Vernon](#), outside Alexandria, Virginia. There, the couple delighted in raising their children (though Patsy died of an epileptic seizure in 1773 at the age of seventeen, while Jacky died of camp fever during the Revolution in 1781) and entertaining Virginia society. It is estimated that between 1768 and 1775 over 2,000 guests visited the Washingtons, some staying for extended periods.



[Paintings. Martha Washington in the White House I.](#) [Photograph of Painting] Theodor Horydczak, photographer, ca.1920-ca. 1950. [Horydczak Collection](#). Prints & Photographs Division

After George was elected president in 1789, entertaining became even more prominent in Martha Washington's life. In the temporary U.S. capitals of [New York](#) and [Philadelphia](#), she hosted lavish parties and receptions to match those given by the established governments of Europe. Although the first lady was noted for the generosity and warmth she displayed as the nation's premier hostess, she longed for her private life in Virginia. In a [letter](#) to a niece she confided: *"I think I am more like a state prisoner than anything else, there is certain bounds set for me which I must not depart from."*

The Washingtons returned to their Mount Vernon home in 1797 where George passed away two years later. After her death, Martha was buried beside him in a modest [tomb](#) located on the estate.

Learn More

- To preserve their privacy, Martha Washington burned all but two of the letters she and George exchanged during their forty years together. Still available, however, are the approximately 65,000 documents that comprise the [George Washington Papers](#). Search this collection on [Martha Washington](#) to explore a sample of letters from, and including references to, the first first lady.
- A search on [Martha Washington](#) in [Music for the Nation: American Sheet Music, ca. 1870 to 1885](#), will retrieve a [waltz](#) named in her honor, as well as a [minuet](#) composed for a "Martha Washington Tea Party." A description of this popular form of masquerade can be found in the collection [An American Ballroom Companion: Dance Instruction Manuals, ca.1490 to 1920](#).
- To learn more about the Washingtons, see the three-part [Time Line](#) in the [George Washington Papers](#), or search [Today in History](#) on [George Washington](#).

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