



Washington becomes first President 1789

As noon on April 30, 1789 approached, George Washington was preparing to be sworn in as the first President of the United States. As he reviewed his inaugural address, he recalled the great events which had brought him to New York City, then the nation's capital, to become the first Chief Executive.

Beginning in 1775, he had led the fledgling Continental Army through its bitter struggle to victory over the highly trained and well-equipped British troops. In 1787 he had served as President of the Constitutional Convention where he often had acted as mediator during the many heated debates between the delegates. His level-headed decisions had helped hold the convention together.

Now he was waiting to serve his country again, having been unanimously elected President. It is easy to understand why he is described as "First in war, first in peace

and first in the hearts of his countrymen."

On April 16 he had left his beautiful home, Mount Vernon, in Virginia to begin the long journey to New York. He hoped to complete the trip quickly, but he was constantly delayed by well-wishers. In fact, he had traveled only about a mile when the first of many honor guards met him. All along the 300-mile route bands played, cannons saluted and citizens cheered as Washington passed. As each day ended, he was the guest of honor at the town where he stopped for the night.

At Elizabeth, New Jersey he boarded a special barge to cross the bay to New York. Huge shipboard guns barked salutes as he landed at the pier on Wall Street.

At Franklin House where he would live as President, Washington worked on his inaugural address and greeted scores of politicians and dignitaries. He took an occasional break to ride on horseback through

the streets of New York. Comparing the growth and bustle of New York with the war-damaged city he had last seen six years earlier must have prompted good feelings about the future of the country.

This optimism would have been somewhat dampened had he known that in Congress the men chosen to make the laws of the land were arguing among themselves over something as trivial as the proper way to address the new President. Some congressmen favored a high-sounding title such as "His Highness the President of the United States of America and Protector of the Rights of the Same." Others felt that such forms of address were too similar to the titles used by royalty. Finally, it was decided that the most appropriate title was "Mr. President," and this simple, dignified way of addressing the nation's Chief Executive is still used today.

On April 30, Washington joined a delegation from Congress for the short carriage ride to Federal Hall, where he greeted the assembled Congress. Minutes later, Washington and vice-president-elect John Adams walked out on a balcony overlooking some 20,000 cheering people. The crowd fell silent

when Chancellor of New York Robert R. Livingston administered the oath of office. Washington placed his right hand on a crimson leather-bound Bible. "I solemnly swear," his voice rang out, "that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the constitution of the United States. So help me God."

Again the crowd cheered, bells sounded and cannons saluted. Far into the night, the celebration continued as Americans paid tribute to their first President.

Washington realized the significance of being the first to hold this office. "I walk on untrodden ground. There is scarcely any part of my conduct that may not hereafter be drawn into precedent." With this in mind, he devoted his energies to giving the young nation a stable and prosperous start as an emerging world power. In 1793 he was unanimously reelected President. Four years later he declined to run for a third term and retired from public life. His remarkable quarter-century of service to his fellow Americans earned him the title "Father of his Country."