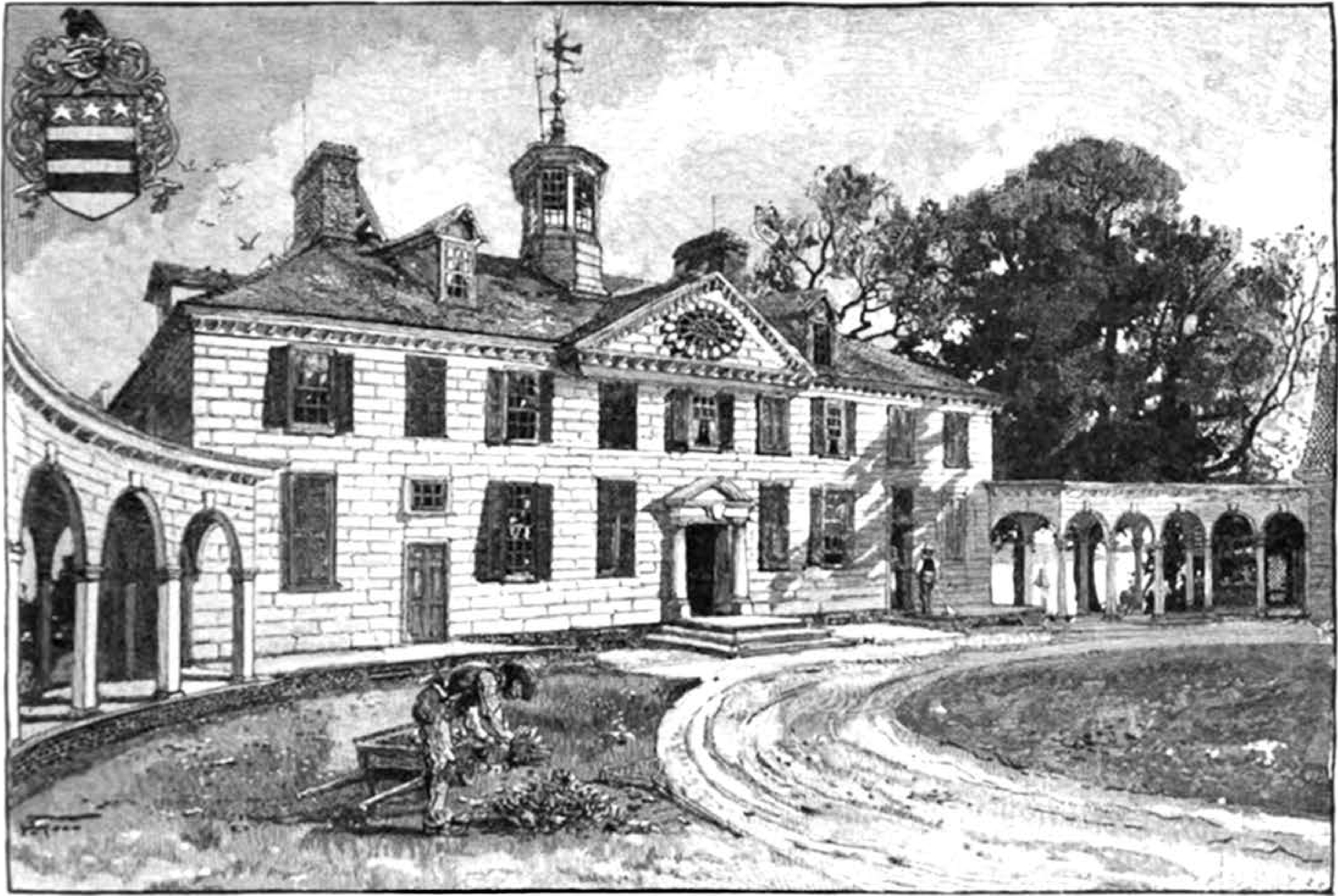

The north front of Mount Vernon

Our Nation in the Building

The Romance of American Union

By HELEN NICOLAY

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CHAPTER I

AN IDOL'S SUCCESSOR

THE Articles of Confederation, under which the Revolution was fought, appear in retrospect more like a travesty on government than the deliberate, earnest work of reasoning men. The patriots of that day were too deeply moved by principles to see the absurdity of the means by which they sought to enforce them. Congress, the central authority during the Revolution, was allowed to impose taxes, but was forbidden to collect them. It could declare war, but was powerless to enlist a soldier. And being made thoroughly helpless and penniless, it was required to pay armies it had no right to call into being. Comic operas, but not nations, flourish upon such foundations.

War's overshadowing concern held the different parts of the country together while it lasted, but true to the law which decrees that virtue shall ebb and flow in nations as in men, nature saw to it that peace was followed by speedy reaction. Intent upon reaping local benefits, the sections became quarrelsome neighbors, each clamoring in a different tongue for its own rights and privileges. The East talked of fisheries and timber; the South of tobacco and cotton; the opening West had needs and interests to which the others were deaf and blind. A few years of such discord brought the new country to a pass where it was equally difficult to keep order at home or treaties abroad. National finances, long precarious, reached the vanishing point, then disappeared. The army withered to a skeleton of fewer than a hun-

dred men. Legislators, elected to the shadowy honor of seats in a Congress without real power, showed small interest in its meetings. It had been difficult to get together a quorum to ratify the treaty of peace with Great Britain. The attendance grew less and less; then only two members appeared; finally only one met with the clerk. That faithful officer wrote his last entry in the journal, closed the book, and without being formally adjourned, the Continental Congress also faded from sight.

The new nation seemed doomed to die of its own vital principle—liberty; but fear of disunion, or, rather, of the consequences of disunion, roused the States to their folly. Disunion meant almost certain reconquest by England, with the sacrifice of everything for which they had fought. Even before the shadowy Congress vanished into the land of ghosts, Virginia, leader among the States, asked that delegates be sent to a convention called to revise these Articles of Confederation under which time had proved that Americans could fight, but could not live peaceably together. With the exception of small, but truculent, Rhode Island, all responded, sending their best men, some of whom were already members of the old Congress. And this, it is only fair to say, accounted in part for its deserted halls and dwindling numbers.

As the delegates rode toward Philadelphia through the young green of mid-May, 1787, the country looked very fair—altogether too fair to be given up without further struggle. They had three alternatives: disunion, more amiable and brotherly efforts at popular government, or an American monarchy. Europe, watching eagerly, would welcome this last as a confession of failure only less absolute than disunion itself. England and France stood ready to offer candidates from the house of Hanover and the house of Bourbon, their greed thinly veiled in assurances of friendship that were insults in disguise.

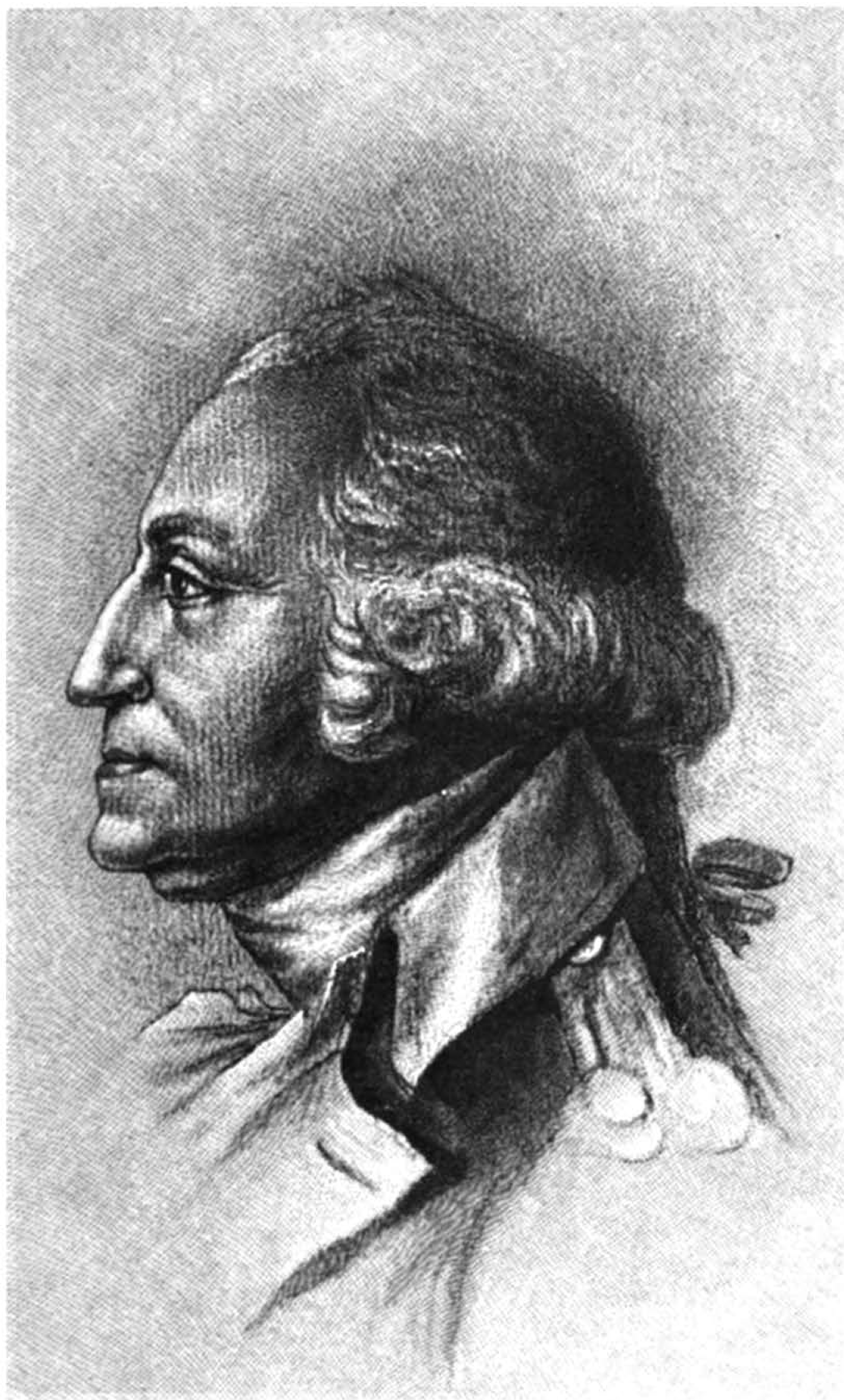
Of one thing these Americans were sure: if it came to an American monarchy, they need not cross the sea to find a king. A man of their own number had been tested in temper and strength for more than a decade through war and the more quarrelsome years of peace. It was his tact and common sense that had saved them time and again while they tried to live under the opera-bouffe provisions of the Articles of Confederation. Like themselves, he was now riding soberly toward Philadelphia. A crowd met him and escorted him into the city with public honors, and he was made chairman of the convention.

After the country decided that it was not yet ready to give up the experiment of popular government, he was elected President, and in due time, clad in his dark-brown suit of home manufacture, he took the oath of office, while prayers ascended and bells rang, and the budding Government put forth all the pomp and ceremony it could muster to make his inauguration impressive.

Then came eight years during which everything had to be determined, from homeliest details of government to questions of gravest moment. "I walk as it were on untrodden ground," the new President wrote, and being humble-minded as well as earnest, he asked help and advice from many, even from men much younger than himself, with the winning apology: "I am troublesome. You must excuse me; ascribe it to friendship and confidence."

The problems of his administration foreshadowed almost every issue that has since arisen to trouble an executive pillow. There were relations to be reëstablished with the outside world; for though the States had boastfully cast off the yoke of Europe, they found themselves bound to it, now that war was over, by ties of memory no war could break, and dependent upon it, moreover, for tangible necessary supplies, like bricks to build into their houses, and dishes from which to eat their food.

There were boundaries to be adjusted to the north and to the south. On the west was the vexed question of navigation of the Mississippi River. There was con-



General Washington

stant, nagging anxiety about expenses of government; there was among the people an unrest that did not stop short of actual rebellion; there were humiliating scandals in the President's official family; and there was jealousy in all the various departments of government.

States were jealous of encroachments upon their sovereign power; municipalities were fearful of losing one jot of local authority. The newly inaugurated Federal Government was tenacious of its dignity as representing all these collective units; but among themselves the three subdivisions of the Federal Government manœuvered for place and power. The

judiciary was busy establishing its functions and its new code of laws; Congress and the executive experimented upon ways in which they could work together. The Senate showed no enthusiasm when the President and his secretary of war knocked at its door, expecting to take part in an executive session, and Washington went home vowing he would never place himself in that position again. The House, still less minded than the Senate to brook what it termed "interference," flatly refused to receive the popular Hamilton, secretary of the treasury, and hear his report on the public credit.

Washington's Presidency saw the shaking together and adjustment of the whole complicated system; and how much its final success was due to his unemotional persistence in well-doing, we, his political descendants, can never know. He brought no whirlwind enthusiasm to the task, he was not over-sanguine; but convinced that the new system was "well worth a full and fair experiment," he enlisted in this, as he had in the Revolution, with all his heart and "for the war."

Gifted above his fellows, it was with an endowment of endurance and calm common sense rather than with the fiery touch of genius. He must have had a very broad and impartial mind; for even the impatience of those who differed with him testifies to this. He had a way most trying to men of quicker mental habits, like Jefferson, of never expressing approval on first hearing a plan, but of reserving judgment until he had thought it over. He had a capacity for continuous, grinding hard work, and this he in turn exacted from his subordinates; but he had also enough sympathy and imagination to understand that they might find such uninterrupted devotion to duty hard and trying.

The training of his entire life had been toward self-mastery. Lessons of obedience in early military life, the loneliness of supreme command, and the great stake for which he played—all tended to that end. He had been born with no talent for the trivialities of life, no grace of wit or social ease, and he was occupied with engrossing cares. His deafness, moreover, made it impossible for him to take part in general conversation even at his own table, a circumstance that has unfortunately added to the gloom of the mental portrait bequeathed to posterity. We think of him as a man of stately presence, a little slow in his mental processes, but very just and very sure; a man almost dull in the monotony of his virtue, who lived on a plane of conscious benevolence, holding resentments and kindly impulses alike in leash, ready to turn them in the direction of his country's good.

Yet there are hints that under this chilling calm glowed a furnace of emotions. In the intimacy of a portrait sitting he confessed to Gilbert Stuart that he was "passionate by nature," and he was really the person best fitted to know. The little girl who lived opposite, and saw him daily with his two aides, all very correct in their laced hats and well-brushed coats, cross the street and start on their customary constitutional, wondered if the great man ever spoke or smiled; but Senator Ross, blundering upon a domestic scene soon after Edmund Randolph was dismissed from the cabinet in disgrace, found Nelly Custis cowering "like a partridge" in a corner and the President's wife "awe-struck," while he thundered, in answer to the question whether he had yet seen Randolph's pamphlet of vindication: "Yes, sir; I have read every word, every letter, of it, and a —er scoundrel God Almighty never permitted to disgrace humanity!"

In writing home about one of the depressing Presidential dinners, which were indeed rather terrifying festivals, owing to the host's deafness and the demeanor of most of the guests, who seemed to feel that they were assisting at some sort of national funeral, Mrs. Adams showed a gentler side of his nature. She told how Washington, with awkward and unavailing kindness, tried to dispel the gloom for her at least by asking minutely after the health of members of her family; and then, picking the plums from a cake, sent them with his compliments to "Master John."

Martha Washington

The stately ceremonies of birthday, New-year, and Fourth of July celebrations, the formality of his levees, and the way congregations lined up on Sundays outside the church to make a lane through which he and his wife entered the sanctuary ahead of all the rest, grew partly out of the people's respect for him, partly out of what seemed to him and his advisers fitting to the high office of President of the United States. Dignity, not ostentation or display, was the aim. That neither

ostentation nor display resulted, Chateaubriand, in America on his way to discover the Northwest Passage, amply testified. His romantic conception of the American Cincinnatus had been shaken by his first sight of Washington, flashing by in a coach and four; but it was completely restored when he went to present his letter of introduction, and saw the simplicity of his dwelling, and that, far from being guarded by soldier or lackey, its door was opened by a decent serving-woman, who inquired his name, and, finding that she could not pronounce it, trustingly bade him enter and be seated while she went in search of her master.

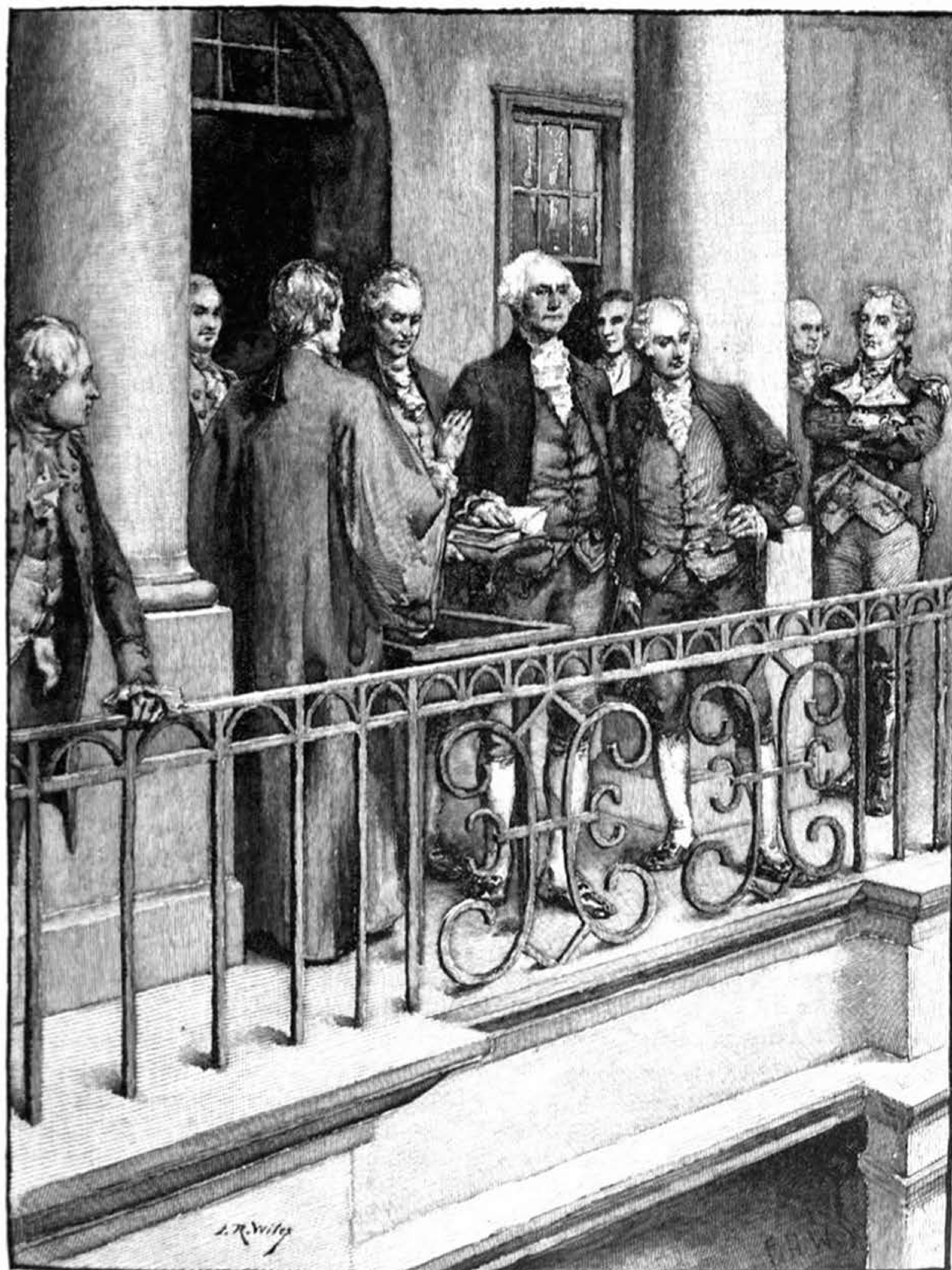
The President's cream-colored coach, with four, and on occasion even six, horses to it, and attendant servants in livery, was nothing uncommon. That was still the custom among the well-to-do. Indeed, the wretched state of the roads, "marked out rather than made," rendered such turnouts a matter of prudence instead of pride. Like every other Virginian, Washington was fond of horses; but the fleeting glimpses we have of his coach, and of his own figure on horseback, grave and composed even when some misguided admirer had dropped a laurel wreath upon his brow, indicate that the same handsome white animals served thriftily alike for saddle and draft.

That laurel wreath must have been more vexing than pleasant to his sober tastes, and in the almost royal progress of his longer journeys he doubtless welcomed an occasional greeting like the old Quaker's, "Friend Washington, we are pleased to see thee," as a relief from the customary adulation. On the other hand, when the Governor of Massachusetts, jealous for the rights of the commonwealth, developed a sudden "indisposition" to make the first call of ceremony upon a mere President of the United States, Washington stood upon his dignity, and brought the governor to his feet, albeit enveloped "in red baize" and protesting that he came at the risk of his life.

Washington, in short, was a conscientious, earnest gentleman, striving with businesslike thoroughness to fulfil the will of God and the wishes of the majority. Every one of the sixty-nine electoral votes had been cast for him; and both from desire and the sense of duty he set himself the hard task, unfulfilled by him or any of his successors, of being President of the whole country, regardless of party.

Already factions were showing themselves. To represent these fairly, he chose for his cabinet four men who could not have differed more in character had he summoned them from the ends of the earth. For secretary of state he chose Jefferson, the ardent theorist who had done his country the service of formulating the Declaration of Independence, and was perhaps better known abroad than any American save the aged Franklin. For secretary of the treasury he called to him the phenomenal Hamilton, with the frame of a lad and the intellect of a giant, to whom it was given to perform miracles with an empty exchequer. The secretary of war was General Knox, large and showy, but, despite his pompous speech and grandly flourishing cane, a man of experience not only in battle, but in administering this same office under the Continental Congress. The attorney-general was Edmund Randolph, who proved of weaker moral fiber than the others.

Since the first duty of the new Government was to bring the States into line after years of pulling asunder, the measures of Washington's administration were of necessity centralizing in their effect. Little things and large, from the ordering of his daily life to sending troops to crush the Whisky Insurrection in Pennsylvania —without a battle, it is true, but at the cost of "invading" a sovereign State and imposing outside authority upon it—stamped him a Federalist, roused the ire of the Republicans, and forever put an end to his dream of being President without distinction of party. Jefferson, naturally enough, became spokesman for the faction the mission of which was to point out the difference between acts of the Federalists and theories of the Declaration of Independence.



Washington taking the oath as President, April 30, 1789, on the site of the Treasury Building, Wall Street, New York

Jefferson, indeed, was the strong opposing personality of the administration. He had little patience with General Knox, whom he called "a man of parade," and he and Hamilton quarreled almost daily upon every conceivable topic; for Hamilton, Federalist to the core by instinct and conviction, became as inevitably spokesman for the party in power. Even Washington could not preserve harmony in such a cabinet, and before the end of his first term both Hamilton and Jefferson resigned. Afterward the President had still greater difficulty with his council. His

critics taunted him with being able to get only second-rate men to fill their places; and Vice-President Adams asserted that it was this, not high devotion to principle, that caused him to refuse a third term. But Adams was neither generous nor always just in his estimate of others.

Party differences grew until the bitterness of politics invaded social life, and men who had been friends for years crossed the street to avoid meeting, looking in any direction except into each other's eyes. Washington was accused of loving arbitrary power, of longing for the substance as well as the forms of monarchy, of lining his nest at public expense, to choose only three from a long list of political and moral crimes it is thankless to repeat. As one of his supporters justly said, constant reiteration of such charges "would tend to debase an angel." Yet when it was definitely learned that he would not again be a candidate, his critics awoke to the fact that they had trusted even while they vilified him.

They were suddenly aware that the country was to be put to a new test. "His secession from the administration will probably, within no distant period, ascertain whether our present system and Union can be preserved," was a clumsy and wondering admission that the American experiment could never be thoroughly tried so long as Washington remained President. Because, despite all machinery of ballots and election, the relation between him and the voters was more that of loyal subjects and a beloved monarch than the colder one of constituents choosing a public servant to do their bidding. Washington's Farewell Address, with its wealth of warning and suggestion, showed that he, too, felt this personal relation.

He retired gladly to the country life at Mount Vernon, busied himself in its affairs, riding over his fields daily, and dismounting, perhaps, at the bars to receive a former aide with courteous civility; within doors, happy in renewed ties, his wife looked well to her household, and chatted about the public life of her husband and herself, which she called her "lost days."

But this was not to last. Within two years menace of foreign war caused the new President to call the old President from retirement. And what Washington considered the new President's injustice in appointing officers to the new army caused him to dictate redress as the price of his services. War did not come; but the people knew from this that as long as Washington lived he was at his country's call, as ready to respond as ever.

So the months went by until in the dark closing days of December, 1799, news came that his life was at an end. Europe bowed in acknowledgment of the passing of a great soul. England's channel fleet lowered its flags to half-mast; France draped her standards in black, and Napoleon, soldier of the centuries, who craved power as ardently as Washington had desired peace, paid his tribute to "the warrior, the legislator, the citizen without reproach."

In the dead man's own country personal grief was overshadowed by deep national apprehension. The guiding, steadying influence of more than twenty years had been removed. Friends and critics alike expressed one thought. "America has lost her savior," Hamilton exclaimed. It was only afterward, as memories of intimate personal years pressed hard upon him, that he added brokenly, "And I, a father!"

In the towns bells tolled and grief-laden prayers ascended from church and hearthstone. In remote and lonely clearings, beyond the sound of bells, grief found its own expression. At night, after the few animals had been folded close to the cabin to protect them from wolves and prowling savages, little children lay wakeful, looking through chinks in the log walls at some star twinkling in the sky, and, oppressed with a strange sadness, fell asleep at last to the sound of their elders singing the lament for Washington:

Where shall our country turn its eye?
What help remains beneath the sky?
Our friend, protector, strength, and trust
Lies low mouldering in the dust.