

When George Washington visited Charleston in 1791, the citizens welcomed him as the hero of the Revolution and the Father of our Country. He thanked them, but insisted that all Americans are responsible for the well-being of the nation. **“It is the peculiar boast of our country, ”** he said to the people of Charleston, **“that her happiness is alone dependent on the collective wisdom and virtue of her citizens , and rests not on the exertions of any individual. ”** [George Washington to the Officials of Charleston, May 3, 1791]

Few people ever exerted themselves more for our country. George Washington risked his life and fortune to command an army that fought to secure the liberty and independence of the United States. It was an army of ordinary men – farmers and tradesmen, young and old, from every part of the new country. He forged them into an army of free men.

After eight years of war, they won the independence of the United States – the first great republic of modern times. It was a nation dedicated to the interests of ordinary people. Nothing like it had ever existed.

As president, George Washington visited every part of the new nation, met with its leaders and talked to its people. He knew that it was an imperfect nation, but he worked tirelessly to perfect it. When he climbed the steeple of St. Michael’s Church, he paused to reflect that the city contained **“about 1,600 dwelling houses and nearly 16,000 Souls.”** About half of those, he noted in his diary, were free people. The rest were enslaved.

With General Moutrie, he rowed out to see the remains of Fort Sullivan, where the people of Charleston defeated the British navy in 1776. He also visited the siege lines, where the Continental Army had fought to defend the city in 1780. They were forced to surrender, he wrote, but **“the defense was noble and honorable. ”**

George Washington was not perfect, but he worked to create a free and just society. It is our job to carry on that work. **“It should be the highest ambition of every American, ” he challenged us , “to extend his views beyond himself, and to bear in mind that his conduct will not only affect himself, his country, and his immediate posterity; but that its influence may be co-extensive with the world, and stamp political happiness or misery on ages yet unborn. ”**