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In Memoriam

W. W. Abbot (1922–2009)

Making Something of Life

Philander D. Chase

George Washington, Bill Abbot wrote in his 1989 essay “An Uncommon Awareness of Self,” “saw life as something a person must make something of.” Several years of patiently editing Washington’s pre-Revolutionary papers had left Bill “with the impression of a man driven to master every aspect of his life and to make the most of what life offered.” Anyone who had the privilege of working with Bill Abbot, particularly during his long and distinguished documentary editing career spanning the last third of his life, is left with a similar impression of Bill himself.

Having graduated from the University of Georgia in 1943 and having served during the latter part of World War II as a young naval officer in the Pacific Ocean and the Mediterranean and Adriatic seas, Bill returned to his beloved hometown of Louisville, Georgia, at the end of the war and began teaching a variety of subjects and coaching basketball at the small local high school. As satisfying as he found that experience, Bill realized that he needed and wanted more from life. In 1947 at the age of twenty-five, Bill enrolled at Duke University, and soon he was studying with and assisting one of the leading early American historians of the day, Charles Sydnor, who was then writing *Gentlemen Freeholders*. “Six years in graduate school set me free,” Bill said in “How It Happened,” the sketch of his career that he wrote in 1995 for the *William and Mary Quarterly*. “I learned that the point was for me, not others, to judge the value of what I did.”

Over a period of three decades—the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s—Bill constructed for himself a reputation as a superb college teacher and an academic good citizen *par excellence*. He taught at the College of William and Mary for several years and briefly at Northwestern and Rice universities. He edited the *Journal of Southern History* for a time and then the *William and Mary Quarterly*. In 1966 he became the James Madison Professor of History at the University of Virginia. Remarkably enough, however, Bill felt compelled to make something even more of life. His projected history of South Carolina, Bill admitted in “How It Happened,” was languishing. He had dutifully served twice as history depart-

ment chair, but academic administration held no charms for him. The prospect of turning out graduate students for a weak job market drove him back to his first love, undergraduate teaching. Nor was he enticed by the retirement alternatives of “building houses for the poor” or “playing golf with the retired rich.” Then Bill found exactly what he was seeking, or rather, it found him. When Don Jackson, the first editor of the Papers of George Washington, decided to retire at the end of 1976, the position was offered to Bill. Encouraged by his wife Eleanor, Bill promptly accepted, and at the age of fifty-five, he became a documentary editor.

Bill’s involvement with the Washington Papers project actually began a decade earlier in 1967 when he chaired a committee to study the need and feasibility of establishing such a project at the University of Virginia. Bill wrote the committee’s report supporting that course of action, and he and Merrill Peterson served as the search committee that chose Don Jackson to be the first editor. By the time that Bill succeeded Don in 1977, Don and Associate Editor Dorothy Twohig had gathered photocopies of over 100,000 Washington documents and had started editing Washington’s diaries in six volumes. While the staff under Dorothy’s direction completed the editing and publication of the diaries, Bill began planning how to deal with the extensive correspondence that constitutes the heart of the Washington Papers. The most vexing problem facing the editors, he soon saw, was the collection’s massiveness which threatened to bog the project down in a Vietnam-like quagmire from which it might never emerge. Bill remembered that NHPRC director Oliver Wendell Holmes once had suggested that such a fate might be averted by breaking the Washington Papers up into three separate projects corresponding to the three parts into which Washington’s life naturally fell: the Virginia planter before 1775, the Revolutionary War general, and the first President. Finding that the editors’ expertise and interests broke down in similar fashion, Bill decided that Washington’s correspondence should be edited not in separate projects, but in separate chronological series to be edited simultaneously under the umbrella of a single unified project. “I had become convinced,” Bill wrote in an unpublished paper that he delivered at a Monticello symposium in 2005, “that each of us should be doing what he or she was best qualified to do, and that we would all be better editors for taking public responsibility and receiving proper credit for what each of us did.” Equally important, users of the edition would benefit by not having to wait for the editors to work their way through thousands of complex Revolutionary War letters, orders, council proceedings, enclosures, and enclosures to enclosures before gaining access to modern edited versions of Washington’s post-war papers.

The editing of the first correspondence series—the Colonial Series covering Washington’s early life—began in 1979 with all of the editors working on the first two volumes of that series in order to master together the project’s basic editorial procedures. The Revolutionary War and Presidential series were begun in

the early 1980s, and in the 1990s series were added for the Confederation years, 1784–1788, and Washington’s retirement years, 1797–1799. Working closely with Assistant Editor Beverly Runge and other staff members, Bill edited the Colonial, Confederation, and Retirement series, a total of twenty volumes in his twenty-one years of active editing, including six years as a volunteer editor after he officially retired as editor in chief in 1992. In the process, Bill said in his 1999 University of Virginia lecture on “The Young George Washington and His Papers,” “my colleagues and I have become better *acquainted* with [Washington] the private man than almost anyone else. Not that I can recall most of the details of his youth or middle years any more than I can remember those of my own. Nor do I claim to understand him better than others do. I just know him when I see him. I can recognize him from afar as I would a relative or an old friend. When someone gets him right, I know it. I know it, too, when anyone gets him wrong. That is my reward for the years with the documents.”

Bill never attempted to write a comprehensive scholarly study of Washington’s life and character. Like Washington, who declined to write an autobiography or memoir, Bill was content to let Washington’s papers speak for themselves. “The job of the textual editor,” Bill said in his “Young George Washington” lecture, “is to take things apart, not put them together. He [or she] never lets the big picture get in the way of the little detail. Forget the forest; watch the trees.” Bill not only watched the trees; he closely examined the bark, the leaves, and the roots. Of the many somethings that Bill Abbot made of life during his long academic career, the something that he made of the Washington Papers was his greatest achievement.

Sources

“An Uncommon Awareness of Self” was published in *Prologue: Quarterly Journal of the National Archives and Records Administration*, 29 (1989): 7–19, and was republished in Don Higginbotham, ed., *George Washington Reconsidered* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), pp. 275–86. “How It Happened” appeared in the *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 52 (1995): 454–56. “The Young George Washington and His Papers,” a lecture presented in the Dome Room of the Rotunda at the University of Virginia on 11 February 1999, was published in a keepsake booklet by the Washington Papers staff in 1999. In 2002 the Washington Papers staff published another keepsake booklet containing Abbot’s lecture “George Washington in Retirement,” which he presented at the Museum of Our National Heritage, Lexington, Mass., on 5 December 1999. A copy of Abbot’s paper “Why a Retirement Series?” given at a symposium at Monticello’s Jefferson Library in March 2005 is in the author’s files. Also of special interest is Abbot’s preface to the first volume of the *Colonial Series*, pp. xiii–xx.