

Spring History & Heritage -- #7 (May 13)

First, *Almanac* entries on the legendary St. George, the Northwest Ordinance, and “The City on a Hill” in American mythology; then, more on the U.S. Constitution.

St. George --- (*Christian Almanac*; Grant/Wilbur; April 23)

Martyred, probably by Emperor Diocletian in 303 AD, **this Roman soldier** is the patron saint of men-in-arms and several cities and countries including England? Long a tempting subject for artists and poets, his legendary encounter with a dragon appears in both Irish mythology and the hagiography of the medieval English historian, Bede. It is said the dragon made claim to the children of a Libyan town, but the soldier/saint subdued him when the townsfolk received the gospel and consented to baptism.

Northwest Ordinance --- (*Christian Almanac*; Grant/Wilbur; April 23)

Cited below is Article III of **this 1787 congressional statute** dealing with the early American frontier bounded by the Ohio River, land ceded to the U.S. by the States? The Article affirms that, “Religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.” The statute also mandated freedom of religion, prohibited most forms of slavery, and sought just relations with the Indians.

The City on a Hill --- (*Christian Almanac*; Grant/Wilbur; April 25)

This Biblical Image, in its original context in Christ’s teachings, refers to the gospel witness and “good works” of the Savior’s followers made visible to all the world? In American annals, the trope was first recalled by Puritan lawyer John Winthrop in a lay sermon delivered aboard a ship headed for Massachusetts in 1630. Winthrop’s use, stressing godly obedience, was similar to the Bible’s, but the image would later be given a secular twist with America’s democracy serving as new beacon for the nations.

Not A Plural, but A Single Executive --- (*Founding Fathers’ Guide*; pp. 96-97)

“William Richardson Davie,” writes historian Brion McClanahan, “provided the best summary explanation of the single executive during the First North Carolina Ratifying Convention. He said, ‘With respect to the unity of the executive, the superior energy and secrecy wherewith one person can act, was one of the principles on which the Convention went. But a more predominant principle was, the more obvious responsibility of one person. It was observed that, if there were a plurality of persons, and a crime should be committed, when their conduct came to be examined, it would be impossible to fix the fact on any one of them.’ The founding generation generally considered a single executive to be the best and most efficient means of enforcing the laws of the Union, and the most secure way of ensuring transparency and accountability in the executive branch. Yet, perhaps George Mason was the most perceptive when he opined that the executive would be controlled by his ‘Minions & Favorites.’ And, while not a king, each successive president has over time arrogated tremendous power to the executive branch. That was not supposed to happen under the Constitution *as ratified*.”

The Case Against Presidential Re-eligibility (more than one term in office)
(Founding Fathers' Guide to the Constitution; McClanahan; pp. 98-100)

Opponents of the Constitution (again, the so-called Anti-federalists) pounced not only on the proposed singularity of the chief executive but his re-eligibility: he could be reelected to multiple 4-year terms. In a nutshell, they argued that the Constitution was making way for a "King of the United States," only we'd call him a president. Americans, they said, were being urged to approve a general or central authority more monarchical and aristocratic than republican.

Since the Fathers were agreed on the desirability of independence in the executive (he should be a tool or agent of neither Congress nor the Court), the question was how best to bring it about. Gouverneur Morris (NY) saw no other way to do it but to give a man the presidency for life or "make him eligible [electable] by the people." However, there wasn't much support in the Philadelphia Convention for either of those alternatives.

Edmund Randolph (VA), on the other hand, said a truly independent executive "should not be left under a temptation to court a re-appointment." The pleasant prospect of multiple terms of office (re-eligibility) would quite naturally incline a president to seek the favor and blessing of other high officials (likely, U.S. Senators & Representatives) who would have his fate in their hands. Thus re-eligibility, the real enemy of executive independence, said Randolph, must be barred by the Constitution.

Chiming in with Randolph in opposition to multiple presidential terms was his senior colleague, the inimitable George Mason. At the Virginia Ratifying Convention, Mason declared, "there is not a more important article in the Constitution than this. The great fundamental principle of responsibility in republicanism is here sapped. The President is elected without rotation. It may be said that a new election may remove him, and place another in his stead. If we judge from the experience of all other countries, and even our own, we may conclude that, as the President of the United States may be reelected, so he will. How is it in every government where rotation is not required? Is there a single instance of a great man not being reelected? Our governor is obliged to return, after a given period, to a private station. It is so in most of the states. This President will be elected time after time: he will be continued in office for life. If we wish to change him, the great powers in Europe will not allow us."