

A “Royal Gift” from Spain to George Washington, 1784

Introduction

George Washington, as a landowner, was an agricultural scientist anxious to improve production on his plantations. His political experiences brought him into contact with agriculturalists from around the world and his military experiences included the challenge of moving troops and equipment long distances. All of this explains why the cosmopolitan gentleman who was America’s first president also knew a lot about donkeys.

Bringing donkeys to the newly founded United States would have been considered innovative. Eighteenth-century American farmers relied on horses and oxen to plow fields and haul heavy loads. The reason for this was historical: Donkeys were not common or necessary in England, where the terrain was relatively level, and most colonial-era farmers were English. However, Washington understood that donkeys would be perfect for working the hilly lands in the US. He planned on importing male donkeys (known as jacks) to breed with his best mare and produce high-quality mules (which are a cross between donkeys and horses). But where could he obtain the male donkeys?

The best donkeys in the world came from Spain. Spain recognized the superiority of its animals and made it illegal to export them out of the country; donkeys were a protected national resource. Washington would therefore need permission from the Spanish king, Carlos III, to get Spanish donkeys for Mount Vernon.

Washington made his first attempt to acquire a donkey during the Revolutionary War. Unfortunately, Juan de Miralles, the Spanish agent with whom he worked, died in April 1780 before Washington could obtain the animal. After the war, Washington returned to Mount Vernon and renewed his efforts to bring Spanish donkeys to the US. In July 1784, he wrote to Robert T. Hooe for assistance:

I am convinced that a good Jack would be a public benefit to this part of the Country, as well as private convenience to myself. . . . An ordinary Jack I do not desire; I will describe therefore such an one as I must have, if I get any. He must be at least fifteen hands high; well formed; in his prime; and one whose abilities for getting Colts can be ensured.

This was something more than a personal request from Washington. It quickly evolved to include government officials from the US and Spain. Hooe asked Richard Harrison, the consul for the United States in Cadiz, and William Carmichael, the US chargé d’affaires at the Spanish court, for assistance. Carmichael contacted the Spanish foreign minister, José Moñino y Redondo, Conde de Floridablanca, who obtained King Carlos’s permission in November 1784.

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Carmichael reported the good news back to Washington, but worried about Washington accepting a favor from the Spanish king. “I must confess sincerely that I shall be uneasy until I have your Approbation. The glory that you have acquired needs not the attention of a Monarch to augment it. But you are now a Citizen of the United States and as such will interest yourself in the Smallest circumstance that can contribute to its prosperity.” Washington could be grateful but must give no impression of being bribable.

Thomas Cushing, the lieutenant governor of Massachusetts, informed Washington that the jacks arrived in Boston on October 7, 1785. King Carlos III’s foresight in sending two animals proved accurate. One of the donkeys died during the voyage. Washington sent his overseer, John Fairfax, to escort the aptly named Royal Gift and his Spanish caretaker back to Mount Vernon.

Washington began breeding Royal Gift with horses on his own plantation and horses throughout the South. Royal Gift became the progenitor of the modern American Mammoth Jackstock. In 1785, there were 199 horses at Mount Vernon. By 1799, there were twenty-seven horses, twenty mules, and sixty-three donkeys. Washington’s experiment established the donkey’s viability and utility. According to the American Mule Museum, “By 1808, the U.S. had an estimated 855,000 mules worth an estimated \$66 million.”

The documents featured here highlight Washington’s passion for improving Mount Vernon and revolutionizing farming. They also substantiate Washington’s international reputation and illuminate Spain’s respect for and friendship with the United States.

Excerpt

The King has not only condescended with pleasure to permit the extraction of the Jack Ass which you sollicit on acct of General Washington But further his Majesty desirous that this Commission should be executed to the entire Satisfaction of so distinguished a personage, has ordered me to look out for & place at your orders two of the best of those Animals, in case that an accident should happen to one on the passage. I shall advise you when they are ready. . . .

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Questions for Discussion

1. What was King Carlos III’s reason for providing two jacks (male donkeys) to George Washington, instead of just one?
2. What words in the excerpt suggest the importance or lack of importance of the donkeys?
3. What was it about American farmland that explains why George Washington thought that jacks would be more useful than horses?
4. Why did Washington’s purchase require special permission from King Carlos III? How could you find out why King Carlos III made an exception for Washington’s purchase?
5. What complications could arise when a prominent American like Washington accepted a gift from a foreign monarch?

Making Connections across Learning Resources

To help answer these questions, visit the issue of the Gilder Lehrman Institute’s online journal [History Now](#) on the role of Spain in the American Revolution and the resources in our special initiative on [Spanish Influence on the American Revolution](#).

1. How did the governmental relationship between the United States and Spain evolve during in teh 1780’s? Mention two Spanish cities where US diplomats were stationed.
2. The donkeys were accompanied on their overseas journey by a Spanish caretaker, who moved to Mount Vernon. What is the significance of José Moñino y Redondo’s silence about this caretaker in his correspondence?

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Image



“His Catholick Majesty has sent, by Capt. Knights, in the ship Ranger, the largest Jack-Afs I ever saw, of a peculiar species, as a present to his Excellency General Washington, with a farrier to attend him. He cost 300 dollars in Madrid; and what enhances the present is, that this kind of Afs is prohibited being exported from any part of Spain, on the severest penalty. This is the fourth sent to his Excellency, to stock his farm with Mules, as is supposed.”

The Salem (MA) Gazette, October 4, 1785

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"General Washington's Jack Ass" in *Weatherwise's Town and Country Almanack, for the Year of Our Lord, 1786*.
([Eighteenth Century Collections Online](#))

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Transcript

William Carmichael to George Washington, December 3, 1784, *Founders Online*, National Archives, founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/04-02-02-0134-0001.

Madrid 3d Decr 1784

Sir

In the course of the last month I reed a letter from Mr Richard Harrison established at Cadiz requesting me to use my endeavours to procure the permission to extract a Jack Ass of the best breed, which you wished to import into America. In consequence of this application, I mentioned in a Conversation with his Excy the Ct de Florida Blanca the Minister of State, my desire to render you this Little Service. The Abovementioned Minister seemed pleased to have this occasion of proving his esteem for a character which is not less dear to his Countrymen, than it is revered by Foreigners. Actuated by this Sentiment he wrote me the note of which I have now the honor to transmit you the Copy & the Translation. I must confess sincerely that I shall be uneasy until I have your Approbation. The glory that you have acquired needs not the attention of a Monarch to augment it. But you are now a Citizen of the United States and as such will interest yourself in the Smallest circumstance that can contribute to its prosperity. This Mark of Attention to the Late Cheif of the Union, considered in this point of view, will while it adds another proof to the Many you have recd of General approbation, evince the desire of the head of a Nation, of which we are the Neighbour, to cultivate their good will, by paying that attention, (which his own fellow Citizens accord) to the Person whose services rendered their Country Independant. I inclose this Letter to the Marquis de la Fayette[.] The Share that I had in making him known to you is a much better claim to interest a heart like yours in my favor, than any assurances that I can make you of the high respect & affection with which I have the honor to be Sir Your Most Obedt & Most Humble Sert

Wm Carmichael

Enclosure

Floridablanca to William Carmichael

S[a]n Lorenzo 24th Novr 1784

Sir

The King has not only condescended with pleasure to permit the extraction of the Jack Ass which you sollicit on acct of General Washington But further his Majesty, desirous that this Commission should be executed to the entire Satisfaction of so distinguished a personage, has ordered me to look out for & place at your orders two of the best of those Animals, in case that an accident should happen to one on the passage. I shall advise you when they are ready, & in the mean time I renew my Desires to be of use to you & pray God to preserve you many years. I am & &c.

Count of Florida Blanca

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Transcript

George Washington to Diego Maria de Gardoqui, 30 August 1786, *Founders Online*, National Archives, founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/04-04-02-0222.

Mount Vernon 30th Augt 1786.

Sir,

The day before yesterday gave me the honor of your Excellency's favor, written on the 12th of June, with a postscript thereto of the 22d of July. It was accompanied by the cloth made of the wool of the Vicuna, which indeed is of a softness & richness which I have never seen before, & is truly worthy of being called his Majesty's true manufactured cloth. For your Excellency's goodness in presenting me with this specimen of it, I pray you to accept my best acknowledgements. I received it Sir, as a mark of your polite attention to me, & shall wear it with much pleasure as a memento thereof. The color is really beautiful, & being natural can never fade.

I feel myself much indebted to your Excellency for communicating the testimonies of my gratitude to the King, thro' the medium of His Excellency Count de Florida Blanca, for his royal present of the Jack Asses; one of which arrived very safe, & promises to be a most valuable animal. I am endeavouring to provide a female, that the advantages which are to be derived from this Jack may not end with his life.

I can omit no occasion of assuring your Excellency of the high sense I entertain of the many marks of polite attention I have received from you; nor of the pleasure I should feel in the honor of expressing it at this seat of my retirement from public life, if you should ever feel an inclination to make an excursion into the middle States. I have the honor to be &c.

G: Washington