

## Spotlight on Our Nation's Founders

In the nineteenth century, the drama of our nation's creation and the distinctive qualities of our system of government were fresh in the minds of our citizens--and our founders were revered as heroes and models of civic deportment. As the twentieth century progressed, however, the groundbreaking achievements of our early leaders receded in the national consciousness.

One of the goals of the editors of the papers of James Madison and George Washington, both housed at the University of Virginia, is to provide a documentary basis for refurbishing our understanding of these leaders' lives, their times, and their achievements, stripped of both the romantic gloss of the nineteenth century and the benign neglect of the twentieth. "If you want to understand our democratic traditions and history, the kind of information you can find in the papers is essential," says Dorothy Twohig, editor in chief of *The Papers of George Washington*.

These modern editions differ from earlier attempts to assemble the papers of the founders because they include letters and other documents directed to their subjects, as well as those written by them. This more inclusive arrangement provides a context for the thoughts reflected in the founders' own writings as well as in their public and private acts.

Work on both projects began with a worldwide search for documents. This was a massive undertaking, even for an age that predates the large bureaucracies we associate with modern government. The *Washington Papers* project located 135,000 documents, while the *Madison Papers* found 27,000. Because Washington and Madison were both involved in international diplomacy, many relevant papers are held in overseas manuscript collections. Few of any of the manuscript collections are fully indexed, making it necessary for editors to sift through promising collections document by document. "There was no way of knowing how large the paper trail would be when the project began," observes John Stagg, editor in chief of *The Papers of James Madison*.

Once copies of all the papers were assembled, the editors of the papers began making judgments about which papers to include in full, which to summarize, and which to omit altogether. Both editors, for instance, leave out perfunctory replies to commissions. Once these decisions are made, the papers are transcribed, a painstaking and difficult process considering the decaying condition of many of the original documents.

The schedule of these ambitious and enormous undertakings provides a clue to their scale. The *Washington Papers* began in 1969. Currently, with a staff of sixteen,

including seven full-time editors, it produces three to four volumes a year. By the time the last volume is printed in 2015, there will be upwards of 85 volumes in the set.

Support for the work is broad-based. Both projects receive funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, private organizations, and individuals. The Washington Papers also receives assistance from the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union and the Packard Humanities Institute, which is helping to produce a CD-ROM of the papers. Private donations are particularly important because federal funding often comes with matching requirements.

The published volumes of the papers have already produced a more detailed and revealing image of these two complex men. Twohig notes that Washington's papers reveal him as a person who was conscious of the precedent he was creating as the nation's first president and who strove, sometimes unsuccessfully, to present a presidential image above the factionalism of party politics.

Madison also comes into his own, out of the shadow of his friend Thomas Jefferson. "We now have a keener awareness of Madison's decisive role in the creation of the Constitution and his originality as a thinker," Stagg says.

There is almost no facet of life and enterprise in the late colonial and early national periods that is not enhanced by material included in the papers of Washington and Madison. There are hundreds of letters from job seekers, widows, poor soldiers, Native Americans, newspaper publishers, and others. These letters enlarge our understanding of their experiences, while illuminating their expectations of the new government.