

November 17, 1937

[Address to President of Ford Grant Colleges]

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FOR THE PRESS

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The following address was prepared by the President for delivery at Mt. Vernon, Virginia, today upon the occasion of the meeting there of the Presidents of the Land Grant Colleges and Universities of the United States.

The address will be delivered by Henry A. Wallace, Secretary of Agriculture, in the absence of the President.

CAUTION: Release upon delivery.

Today, here at Mount Vernon, we are paying tribute to George Washington -- not as the general who won the war for independence, not as the statesman who welded the former colonies into one strong nation, but as the outstanding farmer and farm leader of his time.

When the call of duty came, Washington was glad to give himself for years on end to the service of his country; yet his heart turned always homeward toward his beloved plantation. While he was leading the American army in the Revolutionary War, he could seldom visit his home. But during the years he was president, he returned to it as often as he could from the capital at New York. ^{for Philadelphia} Over a span of 40 years, from 1759 until his death in 1799, the farm at Mount Vernon was the center of his interest.

For him, farming was both a business and a hobby. To farming as a business he brought the talents of a great executive. To farming as a hobby he brought the adventurous mind of a pioneer.

His 8,000-acre estate at Mount Vernon was divided into five separate units. His methods of management and his careful keeping of accounts are an inspiration to farmers of the present. He knew how to merchandise his products so as to get a premium price -- for example, the wheat he shipped under his special brand to the

West Indies was rated as the best to be had.

But more striking was the pioneering he did in the arts of husbandry. He was not satisfied to do things as they always had been done. When he found that one-crop tobacco farming was wearing out his land, he cut down his output of tobacco from 35,000 to 5,000 pounds and replaced it with wheat, English clover and a variety of other crops. He took measures to stop gullying and erosion. He continually tried to improve his strains of livestock and from his sheep got more than twice as much wool per fleece as his neighbors got from theirs. He made a tour through the Carolinas to exhibit one of his mules so as to popularize the use of mules. He tried out a threshing machine invented in Scotland.

He was constantly exchanging ideas by mail with others in this and foreign countries who were interested in better farming.)

To what extent he foresaw the evolution that would take place in agriculture in the next century and a half, we do not know. But we do know that he himself sold some of his own farm products in interstate and foreign commerce. We know that he was active in the building of canals that would connect the seaboard with the great regions to the West. He must have sensed that the development of transportation, together with more productive farming methods, would bring a sweeping change. He must have sensed that farm workers would be released to engage in the manufacture and distribution of many useful things and thus raise the standard of living for all.

Sensing this, it was natural that he should urge Congress to create a national board to promote the interests of agriculture. In his eighth annual message to Congress he said:

"It will not be doubted that with reference either to individual or national welfare agriculture is of primary importance. In proportion as nations advance in population and other circumstances of maturity this truth becomes more apparent, and renders the cultivation of the soil more and more an object of public patronage. Institutions for promoting it grow up, supported by the public purse; and to what object can it be dedicated with greater propriety?"

George Washington's interest in agriculture was matched in later years by that of Thomas Jefferson. But not until 1839, when Congress appropriated \$1,000 for the Patent Office to use in the aid of agriculture, was Washington's proposal carried out. Then in the years that followed, as farmers generally felt the need for improving their methods of production, the movement spread. At last, under the leadership of Abraham Lincoln in 1862, more than a half century after George Washington's message, that movement came to fruition. Laws were passed by Congress establishing the United States Department of Agriculture and providing grants of land to aid in establishing State Colleges of Agriculture. Now, this week, the seventy-fifth anniversary of the founding of these great institutions is being celebrated at the nation's capital.

George Washington's own words, which I have just quoted, show that he considered agricultural production even in his time to be much more than a local matter. Yet many changes were destined to come that he could not possibly foresee.

He could not foresee that a protective tariff policy, adopted in the beginning to foster infant industries, would put agriculture at a permanent disadvantage. He could not foresee that mortgages on farm land would become an important part of a highly complex financial system and would be closely linked to the life insurance policies of millions of people in cities and towns. He could not foresee that fixed charges such as taxes, interest and freight rates would push thousands of farmers into bankruptcy whenever the prices of farm commodities collapsed. He could not foresee that abundant production, instead of lifting the farmer's standard of living, would sometimes crush the farmer under the weight of an unmarketable surplus. He could not foresee the development of the great corporations and labor unions, and how essential it would be for farmers to unite. He could not foresee that farm buying power would be essential to keep city factories running. He could not foresee the intricate web of economic ties that, extending across State boundaries, would almost completely submerge the local phases of agricultural production and make it more than ever a matter of vital national concern.

Knowing what we do of George Washington's belief in a national government strong enough to cope with the problems of his time, and his perception of the importance of agriculture as the foundation of our national life, we can be sure that if he had lived today he would have acted boldly to keep agriculture from going down to ruin. We can be sure that he would not have denied to agriculture advantages which government has so freely granted to industry. All his actions indicate that he would have supported farmers in programs of the type they have adopted. Just as he himself shifted from one-crop tobacco production to a balanced type of farming in order to save his soil, it seems almost certain that he would have favored government action to aid farmers as a group to bring their farming operations into balance.

And so, as we pay tribute to George Washington, the first "master farmer", let us resolve that we will be worthy of his great example. Let us resolve that as a nation we will not neglect the fertility of our soil or the integrity of our farm homes. Let us resolve that, now and always, the great art of husbandry shall have its rightful place in our American life.

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