

# A BRIEF HISTORY

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The first college of the new nation, Washington College was founded in 1782 to educate citizens for the vital task of democracy. So closely linked to the creation of a new nation, our history truly distinguishes Washington College from other selective liberal arts colleges in the country. Prominent among the colonial leaders who worked to establish this institution of higher education to prepare the citizens of a new democracy was our nation's first president, George Washington.

"I am much indebted," Washington wrote in 1782, "for the honor conferred on me, by giving my name to the College at Chester." In this letter to his friend, the Reverend Dr. William Smith, General Washington also expressed the hope that the fortunes of the incipient college would prosper and donated "the trifling sum of Fifty Guineas as an Earnest of my wishes for the prosperity of this seminary." Two years later he consented to serve as a member of the Board of Visitors and Governors, a position he occupied until 1789 when he became President of the United States. He accepted an honorary degree from Washington College in 1789.

Yet more important than the gifts of his money, time, and name, George Washington shared with this "infant seat of learning" his vision for a better future achieved through education. He knew that it would take an educated citizenry to put the new nation on the right track, to lead government, to start businesses, to promote peace. He also understood that by granting the College at Chester permission to bear his name, it would forever be linked to the ideals he valued. Our mission—to prepare our students to make meaningful contributions in their world—remains the same two centuries later, and those values of scholarship, character, leadership, and service to others continue to resonate at Washington College.

The College's first president, the Rev. William Smith, was a prominent figure in colonial affairs of letters and church and had a wide acquaintance among the great men of colonial days. Joining General Washington on the Board of Visitors and Governors of the new college were such distinguished leaders as John Page, Robert Goldsborough, Joshua Seney, and His Excellency William Paca, Governor of Maryland. The Maryland legislature confirmed its first college charter upon Washington College on October 15, 1782. The following spring, on May 14, 1783, the first commencement was held. The next year, 1784, Washington College became the first college in the nation to receive state governmental support, beginning a long partnership to further the education of young people in the state.

Washington College had evolved from the Kent County School, an institution of more than sixty years' standing in "Chester Town," which by 1782 had reached considerable strength and importance as a port city.

Washington College has in recent years launched a forthright examination of the institution's troubling historical legacy of racism and the urgent need to acknowledge and reconcile this history in order to dismantle racial injustices in the present moment. This legacy includes foundational connections to slaveholders, including George Washington and William Smith, and the slave trader who owned the imposing 18th-century structures—the Custom House and Hynson-Ringgold House—both now owned by the College. The legacy also includes a long history of segregation and the courage of the College's first Black graduate, Thomas Edgar Morris, in 1962. Other heroes in this history include Thomas Bowser, a member of Kent County's thriving community of free people of color, who was honored by the College for extinguishing a fire on campus in 1817.

Today, Washington College takes full advantage of its unique place in our nation's history, its distinctive environmental setting in the Chesapeake Bay region, and its proximity to urban centers of political power, through academic programs, internship opportunities, and various partnerships. Located on Maryland's Eastern Shore, the College is seventy-five miles from Baltimore, Washington, DC, and Philadelphia.