

The Society of the Cincinnati

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Preface: When this topic was submitted, it had what might have been perceived as a limiting factor in the title “The Society of the Cincinnati and a military revolt that did not happen.” I am drawing your attention to that because I spend some time talking about that almost-mutiny and I wanted you to understand why.

At first, I found this topic to be an oddity. What, I wondered, would my Fellow Questors take away from this speech? Surely, you all know that the lovely city of Cincinnati lies on the Ohio River and was called the “Paris of America”. You probably know that it was the first *major* city founded after the Revolution and, therefore, is considered the first actual “American” city. Finally, it is very likely you know that the founding father who named it was Arthur St. Clair, governor of the Northwest Territory. What you may not know, however, is that Arthur St. Clair was an original member of the Society of the Cincinnati. It was his recognition of the Society and its namesake that spurred him to bestow that *same* name on the new community.

The ideal person to begin our conversation about the Society is, really, its namesake - Cincinnatus. Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus lived during the time of the Roman Republic, the fifth century BC. He was the role model for the “Citizen

Soldier”. His story achieved near legendary proportions, a not unexpected result since many historians believe his story *is* a legend.

Regardless of fact or legend, here are the highlights of the story.

Cincinnatus was born to a wealthy landowner and member of the ruling class. He probably had little formal schooling. Rather, his education focused on the two important facets of Roman life: military and pastoral work. He was regarded “a noble patrician”, who always responded in “the true type of primeval virtue, abstinence and patriotism”. (Ihne, 1870, p. 178-179)

Due to a complicated issue related to posting bail for one of his sons, Cincinnatus was bankrupted. He was left with four acres, his wife Racilla and a small number of slaves. For the rest of his life, he would, as Michael Hillyard states, remain “poor and humble yet with...pride intact.” (2001, p. 78)

During this time of the Roman Republic, it was the responsibility of the minority patrician class, of which Cincinnatus was a member, to defend the new nation. Its small size, commonly thought to be less than 50 square miles, and its key location made it desirable for conquest by other tribes and villages. (Hillyard, 2001, p. 36-42)

To counter threats and actual war, the Romans created both diplomatic and military processes based on a two-consul model. This was essentially the executive

function of the Republic, a function in which the two consuls could directly contradict the commands of each other.

This two-consul model wasn't particularly effective, however, when Rome was presented with dire circumstances. In those cases, one of the consuls would often be designated a dictator. Dictators, in charge for no more than six months, enacted martial law. The genius of the Roman system is that once the threat was resolved, the dictatorship lapsed. (Hillyard, 2001, p. 43-50)

In 461 B.C., the Republic was threatened by the Sabines. To encourage plebians to fight, they had been appeased with a relaxation of historical aristocratic claims. Cincinnatus was asked by the Roman Senate to restore order and harmony to the city. Once he concluded his efforts, the Senate wanted him to violate tradition and be reelected as a consul. Cincinnatus delivered a speech renouncing such service and castigating the Senators for even considering that appropriate. Then he returned to the farm. (Hillyard, 2001, p. 79-86)

Less than two years later, Rome was fighting on two fronts. One army was destroyed and two consuls were absent. Senate leaders again visited Cincinnatus urging him to lead an army granting him dictatorial powers in the process. Michael Hillyard paints the picture of this exchange, "Emerging from a ditch, Cincinnatus received them sitting on his spade. Wearing only a tunic due to the intense heat of that season's drought, the delegation asked him to respect the pending seriousness

of the request and put on his toga...then the delegation delivered the call-to arms. Reluctant to the task, Cincinnatus turned to Racilla and worried aloud, 'This year's crop too will be ruined, then, because of my official duties and we shall all go dreadfully hungry.' This picture of Cincinnatus is immortal...the reluctant farmer goes to save his people... Cincinnatus as the mythical hero." (2001, p. 91-92)

Following successful repulsion of the foreign armies, Cincinnatus resigned the commission giving up dictatorial powers. He left the city for his farm and declined any payment for the services he had rendered the Republic. The Soldier returned to being the Citizen.

Cincinnatus was the very ideal of character and virtue. He modeled selfless love of nation versus private success. His actions demonstrated the value of sacrifice, understanding of the importance of the *res publica* (the republic, the things of the public), and, of great importance to today's subject, subordinating the military to civilian oversight. In the classical age, these virtues were essential to the success of the republic.

For the founders of our nation, appreciating and living classical virtues provided them a "sense of identity..." and "supplied them with the intellectual tools necessary to face an..uncertain world with some degree of confidence", says Professor Carl Richard (1994, p. 12) The American educational system was brimming with references to classical antiquity. The system was built upon

curricula established in the Middle Ages and adopted by the English. Within this system, rhetoric, logic, grammar, arithmetic, music, geometry and astronomy were taught. The bases for much of this teaching were theology, philosophy, Latin, Greek and the historians of those early civilizations. (Richard, 1994, p. 20)

Richard references the “commonplace” books kept by many of the country’s founders. These were notebooks in which a person copied passages that most resonated with them. Madison, Jefferson, Adams, Hamilton and Franklin all deferred to their commonplace books when seeking appropriate classical allusions, titles and – most often – pseudonyms for their publications.

Even a founder who did not receive a formal education such as George Washington internalized the character and moral stories of the classics. “Through the use of Roman analogies,” Richards tells us, “William Fairfax, Washington’s mentor and surrogate father, impressed upon him ‘that the greatest of all achievements was, through honorable deeds, to win the applause of one’s countrymen.’” (1994, p. 37) Washington sought to emulate Cincinnatus who won the admiration of his countrymen first through leading them in times of war and then by relinquishing any perception of power.

Into this age populated by men steeped in classical influences, then, erupts the Revolutionary War. At first, the fight is for fair representation in decisions made by Parliament and King George. As the English consistently treat the

colonies as cash cows, the fires of liberty are lit. In a small room in Philadelphia, 59 men from different places unite in support of Thomas Jefferson's glowing prose. The Declaration of Independence is the gauntlet thrown down. For eight long years, from 1776-1784, thirteen colonies, along with European allies, wage battle with Britain.

While sometimes noble sounding, waging war is essentially pitting persons against each other with a violent result. In the Revolution, these persons were primarily men. The stories of Revolutionary War rank and file *soldiers* is masterfully handled by Robert Mayers in **Searching for Yankee Doodle**.

It is to the *officers* to whom we now draw our attention. Specifically, it is to the bonds of friendship they created in the heat of battle, to the livelihoods they abandoned to pursue freedom and to the lack of pay and recognition for their service. The Society of The Cincinnati was born to address these three glaring issues.

"The Society of The Cincinnati," states Minor Myers Jr., "began as a mutiny moderated into an organization". (1983, p. 1) The story begins in March 1783 as Washington's army was settling into winter quarters, commonly referred to as a cantonment, near Newburgh, New York. The British were leaving America's shores, but were not yet gone. The Peace Treaty was under negotiation in Paris but

not yet signed. The Army was about to disband, but had not yet received final orders.

Officers believed that friendships created from the heat of the battle would soon be lost. They created a voluntary association that would formalize relationships, bringing them together by state at least once per year and collectively every three years. The association would collect one month's pay from each officer and use the funds to support widows and children and occasionally wounded veterans unable to regain their footing. (Hume, 1937, p. 101)

Eligible officers were those who had served either for three years or to the end of the war. The Society would be hereditary with membership inherited by the eldest son through the generations. The organizing document for the new Society would be "The Institution". In two pages, founders laid out the Society's purposes, structure, eligibility requirements and insignia. (The three Principles of the Institution may be seen on your handout.)

To designate their membership, the Society asked Pierre L'Enfant to design both an Order (an insignia) and Diploma (membership certificate). The Insignia or Order was a medal in the shape of an eagle struck in gold and attached to the individual with a blue and white ribbon - the colors symbolic of France and America. The Diploma made of parchment was signed by Washington and Henry Knox. It was the hereditary membership and the visual significance of the Order

and the Diploma suggesting the establishment of an American nobility that instigated the push back of The Society

But first the mutiny that didn't occur. History tells us that those eager officers who joined the cause in 1775 and 1776 were poorly provisioned and seldom paid. Because both the Continental Congress and the states were printing their own money, sometimes even when these soldiers *were* paid the money was nearly worthless. Again, Myers, "Given the depreciation, being forced to accept paper at par was almost worse than not being paid at all." (1983, p. 2)

This issue of non payment was the reason behind at least 6 incidents in which elements of the Army threatened Congress between 1777 and 1781. Complicating the issue was a request from officers, supported by George Washington, to provide each officer who served to the end of the war half pay for life. This provocative idea stirred different factions in Congress. One group opposed the notion as antithetical to the whole purpose of the Revolution. Another group who supported the notion recognized Congress' inability to tax made the issue moot. Congress ultimately agreed to various pension systems but final approval and implementation took years to effect.

Achieving proper recognition and receiving payment for services were issues that had been simmering throughout the War. In 1780, the generals had joined forces to request additional support from Congress including pay increased

for inflation, higher living expenses and pensions for families of deceased officers. They threatened to resign en masse if the requests weren't approved. (Myers p. 4)

To present their case, the Generals chose Maj Gen Alexander McDougall. In Congress and in Philadelphia salons, McDougall painted a picture of those who were getting rich while the Army was barely subsisting. With no way of paying for the benefit, Congress agreed to half pay for life if an officer served until the end of the War. (Myers, 1983, p. 5) This experience led to the generals – and ultimately many other officers – becoming ardent Federalists.

In November 1782, under the guidance of Major General Henry Knox officers in Newburgh winter quarters drafted a Memorial (Letter) to Congress. The Memorial noted that the Army had borne hardship “exceedingly disproportionate to any other citizens of America.” It went on “The uneasiness of the soldiers for want of pay is great and dangerous.” (Myers p. 7) Washington himself wrote that the discontent of the Army was higher “than at any period since the commencement of the war.” (Washington's letters, as cited in Myers p. 6)

The Memorial was delivered to Congress by a delegation led again by Gen. McDougall. Their arrival was met with excitement by those members of Congress and representatives of government eager to move beyond the limitations of a confederation. Some of those representatives saw a threatening Army as the vehicle to advance their nationalistic interests.

While graciously entertained in Philadelphia, McDougall's efforts were stymied. In a letter to Maj. General Knox, the author using the pseudonym "Brutus" suggested the army mutiny and not disband until paid, "...the Army..not...loose a moment in preparing for events – and for the worst that may happen to them." (Richards, 2013, p. 163) Knox, however, stuck to his moral principles and stated the Army should not cross this line, "I consider the reputation of the American army...one of the most immaculate things on earth, and...we should even suffer wrongs and injuries to the utmost verge of toleration rather than sully it in the least degree." (Richards, 2013, p. 182)

The alleged conspirators turned to Maj. Gen. Horatio Gates. Gates, a fierce critic of Washington, had fled from an engagement with the British in South Carolina. In disgrace, he retired from the Army but Congress requested he return to serve as commander of the New Windsor cantonment. Richards suggests that Gates accepted the position intending, however, to lead a coalition of Army officers and the nation's creditors in their pursuit of payment thus restoring his reputation.

A Gates' subordinate Maj John Armstrong Jr. is often considered the author of the Newburgh Addresses, missives designed to stir up feelings of enmity and, perhaps, mutiny. Writing as a "Fellow Soldier" Armstrong spoke of the collective experiences of the officers in the first person. He referenced the struggles and

dangers of military life, and the seemingly apparent lack of concern on the part of the Continental Congress to honor those struggles. The first Address called for officers to meet and discuss concerns on March 11, 1783.

Washington learned about this call to share collective discontent. As Commander-in-Chief, he issued an order forbidding attendance at the unofficial meeting saying that to do so would be “disorderly”. (Myers, 1983, p. 13) Instead, he instructed the officers they were to attend a *different* meeting, scheduled for March 15th, at which they would hear from General McDougal and other representatives regarding meetings with Congress. Washington described this order as one “...to rescue them from plunging themselves into a gulph of civil horror from which there might be no receding”. (Washington Letters, cited in Richards, 2013, p. 224)

Washington’s order called for generals and field officers to attend along with appropriate staff. Gates, as the headquarters commander, assumed he would chair the meeting and was on the dais on that day. However, Washington himself appeared unannounced and took control. His 1600 word speech was carefully crafted to acknowledge the grave concerns of the officers yet subtly shift their focus from pay to honor. (Richards, 2013, p. 228)

Washington told the officers that the call to action from the Addresses was “unmilitary” and “subversive of all order and discipline.” He cautioned them about

accepting ideas from an anonymous source without proper reflection. He skewered the author saying, “This dreadful alternative, of either deserting our Country in the extremest hour of her distress or turning our Arms against her, (...unless Congress can be compelled into instant compliance) has something so shocking in it, that humanity revolts at the idea.” (Rhodehamel, 2001, p. 782-785)

With passion, Washington reminded the officers that either marching on Congress or simply abandoning the Army and returning home did not display the depth of their commitment to their new country. (Myers, 1983, p. 13) He urged them to believe that Congress respected them for the deprivations they had suffered and would finally ensure they received just rewards. Washington asked his officers to set an example for all future generations who would follow in their glorious footsteps.

Washington ended this possibly apocryphal speech by publicly donning glasses for the first time and asking attendees to pardon him saying, “Gentlemen, you will permit me to put on my spectacles, for I have not only grown gray, but almost blind in the service of my country.” (Trumbull Letter, cited in Richards p. 240) The room was overwhelmed with sympathy and love for the Commander-in-Chief. Any thoughts of mutiny dissolved.

As a result of Washington’s pleas, officers agreed to five resolutions. These included: the Army would do nothing to impeach its honor, the officers accepted

that Congress would not disband the Army without addressing back pay, Washington himself would plead the officer's cause, the mutiny called for in the Newburgh Addresses was vehemently disregarded, and General McDougall's committee should continue to present the officer's case to Congress. One week later, Congress, shocked by the near mutiny, approved five year's pay for officer's for whom they had earlier approved half pay for life. (Myers, p. 14)

Two months later, Major General Knox's eight-year-old idea for a fraternal and charitable organization became a reality. George Washington was asked to serve as the organization's first President-General. Although the organization would have three broad purposes: "defense of liberty, promotion of union and preservation of friendships forged in war" ("Society of the Cincinnati," 2017), its appearance on the heels of the Newburgh encounter was seen by many as a threat. As Minor Myers states, "Almost every paragraph of the Institution adopted...was to be the subject of controversy over the next two years." (1983, p. 25)

The most prominent agitator against the "Cincinnati" was Aedanus Burke, a South Carolina judge. In *Considerations on the Order or Society of the Cincinnati*, Burke took aim at the Society for trying to create an American nobility by instituting hereditary membership. He argued that this right would create an entire caste of people who believed their role was to govern others. "Some would see it (the Society) as a pension fund, some as a political threat to the Articles of

Confederation, and some as a nascent hereditary aristocracy, an attempt to establish an American order of knighthood.” (Myers, p. 19)

Burke’s pamphlet appeared as the states were discussing Congress’ approval of either officers pensions or commutation as reward for their Army service.

Congressmen expressed concern the Society would not respect the precedence of civilian authority over the military. Newspapers in Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut castigated it.

The Society also took significant criticism from American diplomats including John Jay, Benjamin Franklin, Elbridge Gerry and Samuel and John Adams. Adams wrote Lafayette the Society was “the first step taken to deface the beauty of our temple of liberty.” (Adams to Lafayette, March 28, 1784 as quoted in Davis, “Society of the Cincinnati in New England” p. 11) Perhaps those most opposed to the Society were those ineligible to join.

Addressing the political concerns suggested by the Society, as seemed to occur so often at the beginning of the nation, fell to George Washington. Washington, the absolute model of Cincinnatus, hesitated to attend the organization’s first formal meeting scheduled for May 1784. Because of all the newspaper and community pushback, he knew it could imperil his good name – the representation of his virtue.

Before agreeing to attend the first formal meeting of the Society, Washington sought advice from Jefferson. No stranger to stating his opinion, Jefferson said that the objections to the Society are, "...it is against the confederation – against the letter of our constitution...that the foundation on which all these are built is the natural equality of man." For Jefferson, an organization such as the Cincinnati would blur the lines regarding who had ultimate authority for the government - the military or the civilians. (Thomas Jefferson to George Washington, April 16, 1784)

The words of Jefferson and other critics of the Cincinnati propelled the nation's first Commander-in-Chief to attend its first national meeting in Philadelphia with the goal of abolishing the organization. The meeting was a fiery exchange between members debating if and how the Institution should be adapted. Washington himself provided seven strong recommendations including abolishing the hereditary and honorary memberships and eliminating any language which could be considered political. While encouraging change, he was really hoping for total abolition of the organization.

Journals of those present indicate that Washington used all powers of persuasion to elicit change. These included declining to serve as the Society's President or even maintaining membership. Thus, society delegates approved most of the changes Washington recommended.

Then Pierre L'Enfant arrived at the meeting and reported the French King had authorized army and naval officers to wear the gold Eagle of the Cincinnati. L'Enfant brought Washington a special Eagle set in diamonds. Abolishing the organization now would be "be an insult to America's allies in victory." (Myers, 1983, p. 61) The Society of the Cincinnati would continue for the next 234 years.

Washington was elected the first President General. The amendments to the Institution were approved by the delegates and sent to individual states for ratification, which would never occur. And the intent to eliminate politics from the efforts of the Cincinnati? Well, as an example, consider the records of the Philadelphia organizing meeting kept by the Connecticut delegation show "...That Applications should be made & signed by the Officers concerned in each State meeting praying Congress to make speedy reply to their petition for a Grant of Western Lands." (Connecticut Historical Society, 1916)

The Society continued to face pressure. Jefferson maintained his opposition that it "posed a continuing threat to the subordination of the military to civil authority, because the meetings maintained the sharp distinction between civil and military." (Myers, 1983, p. 73) Mercy Otis Warren, a chronicler of early America, wrote "...this self-created peerage of military origin would throw an undue weight into the scale of the army; while...the natural equality of man apprehended that this institution would give a fatal wound to the liberties of America." (Warren, 1805, p.

494) The rhetoric and writings of the period charged that “Such an incipient nobility doomed the American experiment in republican government at the outset.” (Myers, p. 49)

Through all this, though, the Society prospered. Estimates were that three fourths of the eligible officers had joined by July 1784. By 1786, the members of the Society were still waiting for payment of wages, whether that occurred through the institution of a national system of revenue or by the efforts of individual states. Consequently, charitable funds were slow to appear. Individual state organizations collected some charitable monies from the few officers able to exchange their commutation certificates for actual funds. Those needy families who accessed the charitable funds relied on the Diplomat signed by George Washington as proof of their officer’s membership in the Society.

In 1787, Washington attended and presided over both the national meeting of the Society and the Constitutional Convention. Of the 55 delegates to the Convention, 21 were members of the Society. Myers summarizes the impact, “Members of the society therefore made up 38 percent of the Convention’s delegates in a nation in which the roughly 2,300 members were but seven-tenths of one percent of the national population.” (1983, p. 98)

Those 21 members did not adopt the same stance on various issues arising at the Convention. For the most part, they supported the Federalist positions. However, the positions taken were those of *individuals*, not of the Society.

Members of the Society created entities to invest in and settle Ohio, and lobbied for the enactment of the Ordinance of 1787. They also served as officers in the new country's Army and Navy. Two examples of Indiana connections, who were Cincinnati, are Thomas Posey, who served as Indiana Territory governor and Maj Gen Anthony Wayne, hero of Fallen Timbers and namesake of our wonderful community.

Between 1799 and 1806, the Society was less visible throughout the country primarily due to the deaths of key leaders. Washington, the modern day image of Cincinnati, died, followed relatively quickly by Hamilton and Knox. As the early organizers passed away, the Society lost momentum. This was reflected not only nationally but throughout the state societies as Myers notes, "In its first fifty years, the Society of the Cincinnati went from being a constitutional threat to an all but forgotten organization of revered veterans and their sons." (1983, p. 205)

Much of the lack of interest and attendance had to do with western migration. Officers who had moved to Ohio and Kentucky attempted to set up their own societies in those states. They were quickly disabused of the idea when it became clear that 13 societies (in this country) were what was established and no

more. Some historians have suggested that since original members were not able to attend the meetings, the Society held even less interest for successor members who had no one advocating their participation.

In the 1820's, interest in the Society was piqued for two reasons. The Marquis de Lafayette spent a year visiting various states and remembering the Revolution. And, the issue of providing lifetime pensions arose again. When Congress finally approved a pension arrangement in 1828, one of the key reasons for the Cincinnati's original existence was finally addressed.

The last surviving *officer* to serve as President General of the Society was Maj. William Popham. Popham had been at Newburgh and when asked if the Society should be abolished said "...I will never consent to consign to eternal oblivion an Institution which received the sanction of Washington and been consecrated by his own signature..." (Schuyler as cited in Myers 221)

The last surviving member of the original Society died in 1854.

The Society languished until the 1870's when the secretary general, a former Civil War officer who won the Medal of Honor at Gettysburg, Asa Bird Gardner set out to revive it. By 1902, the thirteen state societies were back in business. By 1922, the French Society was also reestablished, "The fourteen parts of the society were all functioning for the first time in 130 years." (Myers, 1983, p. 242)

Two hundred and thirty-three years later, the Society honors the purposes of its founders in different ways than when it was established. The Principles of the Institution were:

- “An ...attention to preserve ...those exalted rights and liberties of human nature for which they have fought and bled...;
- A ...determination to promote and cherish ...that union and national honor ...necessary to their happiness and the future dignity of the American Empire; and
- To render permanent the cordial affection subsisting among officers...extending to most substantial acts of beneficence...” (“The Institution of The Society of The Cincinnati,” 2017)

The war heroes are long deceased. The 4,000 members are five to seven generations removed from them. With no living widows, orphans or needy veterans, the original charitable function of the organization no longer exists.

Created as a nonprofit organization in 1938, the Society is headquartered in Washington, D.C. With a limited staff, Anderson House hosts a museum and library devoted to the “study of the art of war and of our national heritage,” says former Society Library Director Sandra Powers. (1998)

In 2014, the Society created a division titled the American Revolution Institute. Under this umbrella, the Society placed the museum, the library and a

consistent stream of historical lectures, seminars and art exhibitions offered annually. The Institute was created to draw attention to the Society's purposes: focusing on the ideals for which Revolutionary War veterans fought and the sacrifices they made to establish this country. Emily Parsons, the Society's current Deputy Director and Curator, says there is a direct thread connecting the original purposes of the Society's founders and the work of the organization today. (Personal communication, March 9, 2017) Thousands of people visit Anderson House to learn about our country's Revolutionary War history, its first historical organization and its first hereditary association.

As an organization with a similarly long historical perspective (give or take 100 years), Quest provides a unique lens through which to view issues of importance to the times. In John Beatty's masterful speech opening the 100th anniversary year, he outlined the expansion of topics from self-improvement and business management to political and cultural to controversy and community action. "Quest," Beatty said, "has shown an ability to adapt and evolve in order to improve itself." Quest has "educated our members...enhanced our community by our presence and...(is) still a vibrant organization with a fascinating membership." (Beatty, 2011, p 15-16) Perhaps The Society of the Cincinnati's experience could serve as a model for how we ensure Quest remains relevant and thriving for another 130 years.

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