

George Washington's Signet Ring

In February 1920, William Lanier Washington conducted a public auction of George Washington-related artifacts in New York City, under the auspices of The American Art Association (an organization that no longer exists). Item No. 16 in the auction catalog was described as follows:



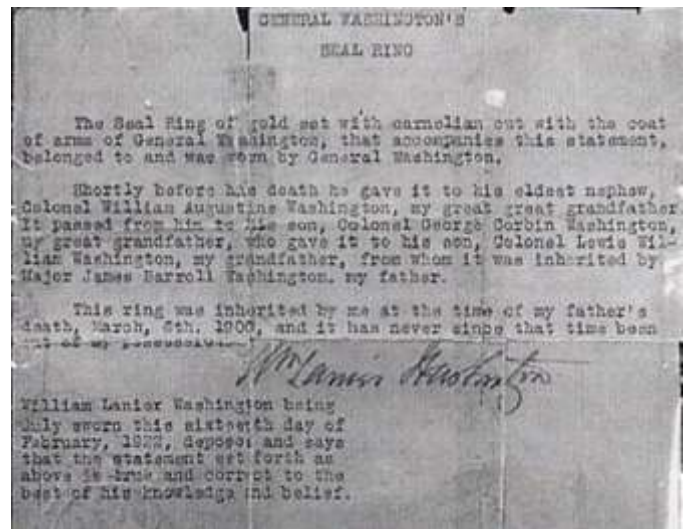
Gold Ring with Washington's Coat-of-Arms: Cut in carnelian. Given by General Washington to his nephew, Colonel William Augustine Washington. In black morocco case with inscription.

Although the surviving photograph of this ring from the 1920 auction is of poor quality, the ring's distinctly square shape indicates that it is not the same ring that ultimately came into the SAR's possession. Furthermore, the collection catalog of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association records ownership of a ring closely matching the description of Item No. 16. That ring was donated to Mount Vernon in 1963 by the family of William Randolph Hearst, a well-known collector who, like G.D. Smith and others of his era, acquired numerous objects he believed to have belonged to George Washington. It is also noteworthy that the ring sold at the 1920 auction was described as being housed in a "black morocco case," whereas the SAR's ring is contained in a wooden box—an additional point of distinction between the two objects.



In 1922, William Lanier Washington held another public sale of artifacts. In that auction, Item No. 134 was listed as: Contemporary Seal Ring. Gold. Enriched with coat-of-arms finely cut in carnelian.

This description more closely aligns with the characteristics of the seal ring now owned by the SAR. However, it must be noted that, as of this writing, no contemporary documentary evidence has been identified indicating that George Washington personally used a seal ring during his lifetime.



It is also important to observe that many items sold by William Lanier Washington were accompanied by affidavits attesting to their authenticity, similar in form and content to the affidavit associated with the SAR's signet ring. The provenance trail remains incomplete, as it is currently unknown how or when the ring passed from William Lanier Washington into the possession of President General Messmore Kendall.

This raises the central question: did the Washington signet ring now owned by the SAR actually belong to George Washington? At present, no definitive conclusion can be reached. Scholars such as Forrest Proper and others have acknowledged that some artifacts sold by William Lanier Washington were genuine and did, at one time, belong to George Washington. However, it is now impossible to determine with certainty which objects sold by Washington were authentic personal possessions of his famous ancestor and which were merely late eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century artifacts attributed to George Washington without conclusive proof.

In the absence of contemporaneous documentation or an unbroken chain of provenance, the authenticity of the SAR's Washington signet ring must therefore remain unresolved.



A 14KT gold copy was created by Kiefer Jewelers of New York in the 1970s to honor the original. The original is kept in high-security, while the replica serves to honor the legacy of Washington.