

Washington's Coat of Arms

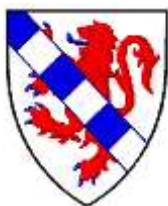


Blazon: **Arms:** Argent two bars and in chief three mullets Gules. **Crest:** From a crest coronet a raven rising wings elevated and addorsed proper. **Motto:** *Exitus acta probat* (The outcome is the test of the act).

George Washington was America's most devoted presidential user of personal heraldry. His coat of arms appeared throughout his life on everyday objects, official seals, and correspondence, and he discussed heraldry knowledgeably with leading English authorities. Despite claiming only limited familiarity with the subject, heraldry was clearly central to Washington's identity and daily life.

Washington's arms descended from a medieval English lineage dating to Sir William de Hertburn, lord of Wessyngton in County Durham around 1180. Early Washington seals featured lions, but by the mid-14th century the family adopted the now-familiar design of two horizontal bars beneath three mullets. Heraldic rolls from the 14th century record shifts in color and design, likely tied to marriages or land acquisitions, before settling into the red bars and mullets on a silver field used ever since.

These arms appear on historic buildings in northern England and were formally confirmed to Washington's ancestors in the late 16th century. They were later documented again in 1619 and described in detail to President Washington by the Garter King of Arms in 1791.



Washington Arms, ca. 1357
Jenyn's Dictionary



Washington Arms, ca. 1390
Jenyn's Roll



Drawing of Washington Arms as letter of Sir Isaac Heath, 1791

Use of the Washington arms in Virginia can be traced to at least 1735, when they were carved on the tombstone of Elizabeth Washington, the President's cousin. George Washington himself adopted the arms at a young age and used them throughout his life. His earliest known purchases of items bearing his crest date to 1755, and by 1757 his arms were engraved on a silver cruet set made in London. They also appear on a wax seal he used in 1758.

Washington applied his heraldry widely to personal possessions, including carriages, harnesses, walking sticks, bookplates, and seals. In correspondence with London merchants during the 1760s and early 1770s, he gave detailed instructions for having his arms or crest engraved on these items. The prominence of such objects is reflected in his will and in the 1802 estate sale after his widow's death, where multiple seals bearing the Washington arms or crest were purchased by family members, underscoring how central heraldry remained to Washington's identity.



Seal used by George Washington, 1758
Harper's Magazine, May 1891; rpt in Zieber



Bookplate of George Washington, 1772
Source: Library of Congress



Seal used by George Washington, 1783
Harper's Magazine, May 1891; rpt in Zieber

Washington's interest in the application of heraldry continued into the years of his Presidency. In 1790, he wrote to David and Francis Clark of Philadelphia concerning the repainting of a coach. Washington's concern that his armorial bearings appear in the best possible light is evident:

...my crest without any cipher is to be on the four quarter panels, all to be enclosed with the original ovals. If it is thought best that the crests should be painted (as Silver does not show on a light ground) they may be painted. But quere, whether of some ornamental painting within the Oval, and around the Silver crests (the colours of which should form a contrast to the silver and not be inconsistent with other parts of the work) might not look well.

The Proper Use of Arms

A coat of arms is a formal visual identity, composed of specific colors, shapes, and symbolic elements, traditionally used to distinguish and represent an individual or family. Importantly, a coat of arms is not granted to a surname or to everyone who shares a family name; it is granted to a specific individual, known as an *armiger*.

Once granted, those arms may be inherited, but only according to strict rules of heraldic law. In most heraldic traditions, inheritance follows the direct male line, passing from father to son. This means that the coats of arms commonly advertised for sale are not automatically yours to use simply because you share the same last name. Unless you can trace an unbroken, legitimate male-line descent from the original armiger, you do not have the legal or traditional right to bear those arms.

Coats of arms may include several distinct elements—such as the shield (arms), crest, supporters, and badges—each with its own meaning and rules of use. These components are officially granted through *letters patent*, issued by senior heraldic authorities. The creation, display, and inheritance of arms are governed by established laws of heraldry, which ensure clarity, legitimacy, and continuity.

The granting of arms is often compared to the registration of a trademark: just as a trademark identifies and protects a specific individual or organization, a coat of arms uniquely identifies its armiger and lawful heirs. Unauthorized use, whether intentional or not, undermines the legal and historical framework that gives heraldry its meaning and authority.