

Washington's aides-de-camp

From *The American Soldier* – 1775, an aide-de-camp of General George Washington and General Artemas Ward at the Siege of Boston



During the American Revolutionary War, General George Washington relied on a small but vital team of aides-de-camp—officers of the Continental Army who served on his headquarters staff with the rank of lieutenant colonel. Alongside them was a military secretary, holding the rank of colonel. Between July 4, 1775, and December 23, 1783, 32 men were formally appointed to these roles, with others serving unofficially as volunteer assistants.

Washington was unanimously elected Commander-in-Chief by the Second Continental Congress on June 15, 1775, and took command of the siege of Boston weeks later. His first headquarters staff included military secretary Joseph Reed and aide-de-camp Thomas Mifflin. As the war expanded, so did the demands on his office. The staff handled military correspondence, drafted and copied daily General Orders, and coordinated communications across the army.

Congress initially authorized just one military secretary and three aides-de-camp, but the workload quickly proved overwhelming. Washington repeatedly requested additional appointments and eventually supplemented his team with trusted volunteers. In January 1778, Congress granted him authority to appoint headquarters staff as he saw fit.

On the battlefield, aides-de-camp acted as couriers, intelligence gatherers, and trusted emissaries—often riding directly into danger to deliver orders. Several were wounded in action. At the Battle of White Plains and the Battle of Trenton, Samuel Blachley Webb was injured in combat. At the Battle of Monmouth, both John Fitzgerald and John Laurens were wounded, and Alexander Hamilton's horse was shot out from under him. Others served for years; Tench Tilghman remained by Washington's side for more than seven years, about half that time as a volunteer.

Washington referred to his headquarters staff as "my family." While some aides were relatives or family friends, he emphasized ability above all else, insisting that talent—not rank or connections—should determine selection. Their responsibilities required intelligence, discretion, and resilience in a complex and rapidly changing war.

The headquarters staff was formally disbanded on December 23, 1783, when Washington resigned his commission before Congress in Annapolis, Maryland. Many of his former aides had earned not only his confidence but his enduring friendship—some later serving in his presidential administration.

Historians have continued to refine the record of those who served. In 1906, Worthington Chauncey Ford of the Library of Congress published a list of 32 aides and secretaries, even crediting Martha Washington for her unofficial clerical assistance. Later scholarship added Washington's nephew, George Augustine Washington, who served as a volunteer aide during parts of the war.

Though few in number, Washington's aides-de-camp played an outsized role in shaping the leadership, communication, and execution of America's fight for independence.