



# John Washington's Civil War: A Slave Narrative

*John Washington*

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In 1872, just seven years after his emancipation, a thirty-four-year-old former slave named John Washington penned the story of his life, calling it "Memorys of the Past." One hundred and twenty years later, in the early 1990s, historian Crandall Shifflett stumbled upon Washington's forgotten manuscript at the Library of Congress while researching Civil War Fredericksburg. Over the ensuing decade, Shifflett sought to learn more about this Virginia slave and the people and events he so vividly portrays. John Washington's Civil War presents this remarkable slave narrative in its entirety, together with Shifflett's detailed annotations on the life-changing events Washington records.

While joining the canon of better-known slave narratives by Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and Solomon Northup, Washington's account illuminates a far different world. The son of a slave woman and an unknown white man, Washington never lived outside the seventy-five-mile radius that included Richmond and Fredericksburg, until his emancipation. His narrative spans his experiences as a household slave, a laborer in the Fredericksburg tobacco factory, and a hotel servant on the eve of the Civil War. He also tells of his bold venture across Union lines and his experiences as a slave under Union officers.

Washington's recollections allow for a singular look at the more personal aspects of slave life. Forced attendance at the slaveowner's church, much-anticipated gatherings of neighboring slaves at harvesttime, even a brief episode of courtship among slaves are among the events described in this remarkable narrative. On a broader scale, Washington was a witness to key moments of the Civil War, and his chronicle includes his thoughts about the wider political turmoil surrounding him, including his dramatic account of watching the Union Army mass around Fredericksburg as it prepared to invade the town. An excellent introduction and expert annotations by Shifflett reconstruct Washington's life through his death in 1918 and provide informative historical background and context to Washington's recollections.

An unprecedented window into the life of a Virginia bondsman, John Washington's Civil War communicates with real urgency what it meant to be a slave during a period of extreme crisis that sounded the notes of freedom for some and the end of a way of life for others.

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