

An Analysis of the Scholarly Consensus Regarding George Washington and the Cherry Tree “Myth”

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INTRODUCTION

The author of the best-selling biography ever written about George Washington was Mason Weems.¹ However, it seems to be a litmus test for an historian to be taken seriously that he or she must exhibit a condescending disdain for Weems’ content, especially his anecdote about Washington ruining his father’s cherry tree and confessing it. Hence, in his book, *Where the Cherry Tree Grew* (2013), University of South Florida history professor Philip Levy states that in recent years professional historians have agreed that “Knocking Weems was a way to show that one was ‘one of us,’ real, credible, truthful...”² Surprisingly, then, this year on Presidents’ Day, Pulitzer Prize winning journalist and former president of the White House Correspondents’ Association, Carl M. Cannon, offered this caution against injudiciously “knocking Weems.”

¹ Michael Kammen, “Introduction” in Douglas Southall Freeman, *Washington* (Collier Books, 1992), xvii; Hugh T. Harrington, “The History of Parson Weems,” *The Journal of The American Revolution*, September 25, 2013. Harrington states that only the Bible sold more than Weems’ biography of Washington in the years following its advent. (<https://allthingsliberty.com/2013/09/history-parson-weems/>).

² Philip Levy, *Where the Cherry Tree Grew: The Story of Ferry Farm, George Washington’s Boyhood Home* (St. Martin’s Press, 2013), 159. Regarding the cherry tree story, Levy himself believes that “The evidence that the story is true is equal to the evidence that it is false.” (<https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/facts/myths/george-washington-and-the-cherry-tree-myth/where-the-cherry-tree-grew-an-interview-with-phillip-levy/>).

In his widely acclaimed “Washington, a Life,” author Ron Chernow dismisses Weems as the man “who manufactured enduring myths about Washington refusing to lie about chopping down a cherry tree [and] hurling a silver dollar across the Rappahannock.” But just as we must be careful not to pass along hagiographic hokum when writing about politicians, so must we take care in our debunkings. There are several problems with dismissing these accounts as myths.³

Is Cannon naïvely challenging a settled scholarly consensus? Isn't it firmly established that the cherry tree story is completely false? Doesn't everyone know that historians have conclusively debunked this myth?

No, no, and no.

This paper shall propose a new paradigm with respect to Weems' cherry tree anecdote in *The Life of Washington*. Consequently, the language of the

³ Carl M. Cannon, “Great American Stories: George Washington,” February 21, 2023. https://www.realclearpublicaffairs.com/articles/2023/02/21/great_american_stories_george_washington_883017.html Carl Cannon is the son of the celebrated biographer of Ronald Reagan, Lou Cannon; for Cannon's scholarly credentials see Harvard Kennedy School Institute of Politics <https://iop.harvard.edu/fellows/carl-cannon>. Cannon's challenges to Weems' critics extends the long dispute with a history of its own going back to at least the 1920s: “Dr. Barton Defends Cherry Tree Story: Weems Better than Lodge on Washington, He Says,” *Boston Globe*, March 10, 1927, 12. Pittsburgh Attorney Richard B. Tucker offered, “Defense of Parson Weems and His Cherry Tree Story,” at the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, Feb. 12, 1949. At the end of his life in 1953, Douglas Southall Freeman made this general comparison between Weems and his debunkers, “Parson Weems was far more nearly accurate in his appraisal than the debunkers have been.” Freeman, quoted by Kammen, “Introduction” in Douglas Southall Freeman, *Washington* (Collier Books, 1992), xvii. In 1956, Arthur H. Merritt refereed the dispute concluding that it remains an “open” issue. Arthur H. Merritt, “Did Parson Weems Really Invent the Cherry-Tree Story?” in *New-York Historical Society Quarterly* 40 (July 1956), 252-63. Merritt asked, “Why can't this simple question be settled once and for all?” In 1962, Marcus Cunliffe surveyed the facts, pro and con, in his “Parson Weems and George Washington's Cherry Tree,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*; v. 45, without a verdict. The dispute was revived again in 2014: Paul Bedard, “Fight Erupts over George Washington Cherry Tree ‘Myth’,” *Washington Examiner*, March 14, 2014. Austin Washington, the first President's great grandnephew is currently continuing the contest.

“myth” of the cherry tree story shall be consigned to the dustbin of passé scholarship by any serious scholar or historian going forward from here.

That is an extraordinary claim and, and as Sagan one said, extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. We intend to meet that requirement herein.

To be sure, Weems was an embellisher, a plagiarizer, and fraught with economic motives. The usual evidence offered to impugn Weems’ penchant for skewing facts include 1) his self-identification as the “Rector of the Mt. Vernon Parish,” when in fact Weems was but an occasional preacher in the “Truro Parish” at Pohick Church, the Parish that *served* Mt. Vernon;⁴ 2) his attribution to Augustine Washington of a lesson using seeds that he almost certainly plagiarized from the writings of James Beattie;⁵ 3) an eyewitnesses’ (General Peter Horry) sharp criticism of Weems’ claims about Francis Marion, “you have carved and mutilated it with so many erroneous statements, [that] your embellishments, observations and remarks must necessarily be erroneous.”;⁶ and 4) some of Weems’ information is factually in error. To wit, he wrote that Lawrence Washington wept with joy over his little brother’s victories in the French and Indian war when, in fact, Lawrence died before the war began.⁷ He also designates Isaac Potts’ wife the name “Sarah” in 1777, when Potts’ wife was named “Martha” in 1777. This, of course, is but a brief enumeration of all of Weems’ flaws.

If the question is simply whether or not Weems met the standards of rigorous scholarly and academic history, then there is nothing to dispute.

⁴ Henry Cabot Lodge, *George Washington* (Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1889), I:42.

⁵ Lodge, I:43.

⁶ General Peter Horry to Mason Weems, February 4, 1811, in *Southern and Western Monthly Magazine and Review*, January 1845, Volume 1, Issue 1, 42.

⁷ Peter Henriques, *First and Always: A New Portrait of George Washington* (University of Virginia Press, 2020), chapter 3, “I cannot tell a lie.”

Weems fell hopelessly short. He certainly made errors. His writing was in an entirely different category than what we think of as academic and scholarly history today. He was a bookseller by trade, so his economic motives cannot be disregarded. He even admitted that his approach was to “throw facts” together into a “romance.”⁸ He called his own work “artful,” and targeted to the “popular tastes of Americans.” There is no contesting that Weems’ style opened his “history” to suspicion.

What we are contending, however, is not the polar opposite conclusion of the cherry tree mythbusters – our case is not to “prove” the truth of Weems’ account of the cherry tree.

What we believe we *can* show with conclusive scholarship, research, and erudition, is that the myriads of writers, many who are professional historians, who claim that the cherry tree story has been disproven, that it’s entirely a myth, and that the case is closed, are woefully indefensible. We will demonstrate, beyond dispute, that the real myth here is that the story has been proven to be a myth.⁹ That is not the same as saying that we hold the story to be verifiably true. In the end, the reader will see that Cannon’s admonition is *extremely* warranted. We will show that many, if not most, who with an air of superiority, have “knocked Weems,” particularly with reference to the cherry tree anecdote, tend to be very careless, without an evidentiary foundation, and quite unscholarly in their *ipse dixit* fallacies. In short, Cannon’s bold censure has merit.

Carl Cannon is not the only recent writer who has presaged our research. Seasoned Presidential historian and prolific author, Carl S. Anthony, observed, perhaps over-stridently:

⁸ Mason Weems to Peter Horry, December 13, 1809. *Views and Reviews in American Literature: History and Fiction* (Wiley and Putnam, 1845), 134.

⁹ The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines “countermyth” as “a commonly believed but false idea) that states the opposite to another myth.”

(<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/counter-myth>)

The single most bizarre aspect of the George-Washington-chopped-down-the-cherry-tree story story, however, is the fact that, in over 200 years, not one archivist, historian, librarian, journalist, or curator who relished attacking Weems ever undertook any research into it... Those who reject it, never give evidence to disprove it.¹⁰

Anthony's observation seems to be an echo of Mason Weems' most noteworthy biographer, Professor Lawrence C. Wroth of Brown University,

It is asserted, generally carelessly and without any thought upon the subject, that Weems was father and mother to this famous anecdote as well as its sponsor, and no one may deny the assertion. It is only fair, however, to say that no really good reason has ever been given for holding this view, and no evidence has ever been brought forward in support of it.¹¹

Though these, and several other researchers, have expressed doubts about the "myth" label appended to Weems' anecdote, none have dissected and investigated the scholarship as thoroughly as we shall accomplish herein.

Our aim is to avoid with vigilance any further baseless pontification upon Weems, pro or con. Instead, we shall look directly at the sources and scholarship and consider all the evidence piece by piece. This study will

¹⁰ Carl S. Anthony, "New Evidence Tells Truth of George Washington's Cherry Tree Tale," February 12, 2012. Carl Anthony evaluated the widespread dismissal of the anecdote and wrote, "it wasn't long before we were told that, like Santa Claus, it was just a well-intentioned myth. In fact, the truth may be closer to the myth." <https://web.archive.org/web/20120318022644/http://carlanthonyonline.com/2012/02/20/new-evidence-tells-truth-of-george-washingtons-cherry-tree-tale/>

¹¹ Lawrence C. Wroth, *Parson Weems: A Biographical and Critical Study* (Eichelberger Books, 1911), 66. Even more reproachful is the evaluation of Carol Seneca, a staff writer for the *Pocono Record*, who in 2016 characterized the denial of Weems' cherry tree story as "the snobbish, elitist intellectualism of late-coming historians and biographers." Carol Seneca, "Evidence Supports Truth of Cherry Tree Story," *Pocono Record*, February 20, 2016.

demonstrate convincingly that much of what has been criticized about Weems' cherry tree anecdote more often than not involves

- 1) misrepresentation of Weems' writing,
- 2) misrepresentation of the consensus of professional historians
- 3) insufficient research pertaining to the identification of Weems' source for the anecdote.

In the end, the "myth" label on Weems cherry tree story will forever be dispensed with by anyone who carefully considers these findings.

PART ONE: MISREADING THE ANECDOTE

Carl M. Cannon recently wrote, "Modern biographers of George Washington are so disdainful of Weems' work that they don't seem to have even read it."¹² Austin Washington, a kinsman of the first President, strongly agrees. "The tale of George Washington and the cherry tree has been mistold for two hundred years – and thus mistakenly criticized, as people have been criticizing a story that Parson Weems never told."¹³

Here is evidence that supports their sharp critique. Weems' debunkers are wont to call Weems' cherry tree story a *myth* or a *lie* with these descriptors:

This story of Washington as a young boy chopping down his father's cherry tree and being incapable of lying about it was the purely fictional creation of a "biographer" named Parson Weems.

The young Washington tried out a new axe by chopping down his father's cherry tree. When questioned by his father he responded famously, "I cannot tell a lie. It was I who chopped down the cherry tree."

¹² Cannon, *op. cit.*

¹³ Austin Washington, *The Education of George Washington* (Regnery, 2014), 13.

Weems wrote that Washington, after chopping down a cherry tree, confessed his evil deed because he could not tell a lie.

George Washington's inability to tell a lie is a lie.¹⁴

To begin, we will show the irony that anyone who concurs with these particulars is at least as much a perpetrator of mythology and reckless history as Weems ever was.

Indeed, there is an anecdote included in Weems' 1806 *Life of Washington* about young George Washington, a hatchet, and a cherry tree. Yet those who represent the anecdote in the form stated above have either not read the anecdote or not understood it. Here are five principal ways the anecdote has been misread.

1. WEEMS NEVER PUBLISHED A STORY OF WASHINGTON "CHOPPING DOWN" A CHERRY TREE

First, even the most reputable of George Washington's modern biographers incorrectly attribute to Weems the allegation that six-year-old George Washington "chopped down" his father's cherry tree.¹⁵ The feat itself seems almost mythological on its face. It is an indisputable fact, however, that nowhere in Weems' publications can one find a claim that little George

¹⁴ Kenneth C. Davis, *Don't Know Much About Mythology* (Harper, 2006), 28; Stuart P. Green, *Lying, Cheating, and Stealing* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 82; Steven K. Green, *The Birth of a Myth* (Oxford, 2015), xi.; Ray Raphael, *Founding Myths* (New Press, 2011); Amy Zegart, "George Washington Was a Master of Deception," *The Atlantic*, November 25, 2018.

¹⁵ E.g., Joseph Ellis, *His Excellency: George Washington* (Vintage, 2005), 7; Ron Chernow, *Washington: A Life* (Penguin, 2010), 813; Edward G. Lengel, *Inventing George Washington: America's Founder, in Myth and Memory* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011), 21; Willard Sterne Randall, *George Washington: A Life*, (Holt, 1997), ch. 1; Richard Brookhiser, *Founding Father: Rediscovering George Washington* (Simon & Schuster, 1997), 6; Gordon S. Wood, "The Greatness of George Washington," in *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, Spring 1992 Volume 68, #2.

Washington “chopped down” a cherry tree. Here are the only words found in Weems about what Washington did to the tree: “he tried the edge of his hatchet on the body of a beautiful young English cherry-tree, which he barked so terribly, that I don't believe the tree ever got the better of it.”¹⁶ In the parlance of 18th and 19th century forestry, “barking a tree” means to “peel or strip off bark.”¹⁷

Defending Weems, Cannon put it like this, “Mason Weems didn't write about young George ‘chopping down’ any tree... the verb ‘barks’ eludes modern historians, what it means is that the boy idly swung his hatchet and gouged the tree.”¹⁸

Jack D. Warren, Jr., author of the new book entitled, *The Enduring Importance of the American Revolution* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2023), and author of “The Childhood of George Washington,”¹⁹ commented upon Hugh Harrington’s treatment of Weems in the *Journal of the American Revolution*. Warren urges historians not to blame Weems, but rather painters for the “tree chopped down.”

In Weems, by the way, Washington only “barks” the tree with a hatchet, something boys will do. Artists found it impossible to depict that with any drama, and they, not the much-criticized Parson Weems, colored our imagination with a tree chopped down.²⁰

¹⁶ Mason Locke Weems, *The Life of Washington the Great* (Augusta, GA: George P. Randolph, 1806), 8-9.

¹⁷ Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (B.L. Hamlen, 1841), 72.

¹⁸ Cannon, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ Jack D. Warren, Jr., “The Childhood of George Washington,” *Northern Neck of Virginia Historical Magazine*, Vol. 9 (1999), No. 1, 5789.

²⁰ Jack D. Warren, Jr., November 11, 2020, commentary on Hugh T. Harrington, “The History of Parson Weems,” in *The Journal of the American Revolution*, September 25, 2013.

In 2014, Washington's great-nephew, Austin Washington, flippantly offered a million-dollar bounty to anyone who could show him where Weems ever claimed that George chopped down a cherry tree.

I realize the purse is just \$1 million, not even enough to buy your own Falcon Jet, but the offer is good. One million dollars to the first one of you who spots in the cherry tree story when George chops it down... in Weems actual story, the young George Washington never chopped the cherry tree down.²¹

Well, so what? Barking it or chopping it down? What difference does it make?

When one is representing oneself as a superior historian in the posture of condemning another's work for its lack of accuracy, precision, and its errors, it becomes tremendously ironic when that critic invokes impunity while being recklessly loose with facts, as if it being accurate should not really matter in his own case. This is commonly called hypocrisy. The way in which "reputable" rebukers of Weems have not been accountable in this respect is an embarrassing blemish on the integrity of the historians' craft. One aim of this publication is to call the debunkers to account for their own carelessness.

Paradoxically, when the debunkers say it is a myth that George Washington chopped down his father's cherry tree, they are absolutely correct, but not for the reasons they give. They blame Weems' for making up the story of the chopped cherry tree, when in fact it is the very debunkers themselves who made up the story that Weems authored a story of a chopped cherry tree. Weems never wrote of such story.

²¹ Austin Washington, *The Education of George Washington* (Regnery, 2014), 22.

2. THE HERO OF THE ANECDOTE WAS NOT GEORGE WASHINGTON

Echoing a multitude of scholars, Weems-debunker William Roscoe Thayer, former president of the American Historical Association, identified George Washington as the “hero” of Weems’ cherry tree anecdote.²² This is simply wrong. In his recent reflections concerning the trendiness of criticizing Weems, Cannon set the record straight.

Modern scholars miss the entire point of Weems' cherry tree allegory. It wasn't primarily about young George's innate honesty. The protagonist and hero of this yarn was Augustine Washington -- for his leniency and intelligence as a parent. It was passed along by Weems as a window into the enlightened home in which George Washington was raised: a home where little boys weren't whipped for absent-mindedly gashing a tree.²³

Jack D. Warren, Jr. also corrected the widespread misreading.

Weems’ main purpose was didactic – and ironically, it was not to encourage honesty in children but rather to discourage the kind of brutal corporal punishment that was common in the eighteenth century... and it is George’s father, Augustine, who was the hero of the tale.²⁴

Norman Risjord is another who exposed the common misconception. “The hero of that story is not George, as is commonly supposed, but his father, who declines to whip the boy...”²⁵

²² William Roscoe Thayer, *George Washington* (Houghton Mifflin, 1922), 2. Also David Adams Leeming, *The Handy Mythology Answer Book* (Visible Ink, 2014), 9; Bernard Mayo, *Myths and Men: Patrick Henry, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson* (University of Georgia Press, 2010), 30; E.D. Hirsch, Jr., Joseph F. Kett, & James Trefil, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (Knopf Doubleday, 1988), 24; Perry R. Hinton, *The Perception of People: Integrating Cognition and Culture* (Taylor & Francis, 2015), 177.

²³ Cannon, *op. cit.*

²⁴ Warren, *op. cit.*

²⁵ Norman Risjord, *Populists and Progressives* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 46. Oddly, Risjord adds that Augustine refrained from whipping George even though he told a lie, when the story makes it clear that George did not tell a lie.

The anecdote was written to extol the excellence of the parenting skill of Augustine Washington, George's father, not the honesty of George Washington. The anecdote begins with Augustine Washington explaining to his son why children tell lies. To wit, because they fear the consequences of telling the truth when they have misbehaved. Augustine explained the phenomenon with these words:

Many parents, indeed, even compel their children to this vile practice, by barbarously beating them for every little fault: hence, on the next offence, the little terrified creature slips out a lie! just to escape the rod.²⁶

To illustrate the quality of Augustine Washington's parenting philosophy, Weems relayed the instructions which the elder Washington gave to his son:

But as to yourself, George, you know I have always told you, and now tell you again, that, whenever by accident, you do anything wrong, which must often be the case, as you are but a poor little boy yet, without experience or knowledge, you must never tell a falsehood to conceal it; but come bravely up, my son, like a little man, and tell me of it: and, instead of beating you, George, I will but the more honour and love you for it, my dear.²⁷

Weems' design here was clearly to provide an example of Augustine's superior parenting philosophy, not to make a preposterous claim regarding George's moral perfection. But since the hero of the whole book was George Washington, the idea that George did not lie about the barked tree captured the emotion and memory of readers, leading to the supposition that George's moral excellence was the point of the anecdote. It was, nevertheless, a faulty supposition.

²⁶ Mason Locke Weems, *The Life of Washington the Great* (Augusta, GA: George P. Randolph, 1806), 8-9.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Though Gary Wills accurately remarked, “The conclusion of the tale makes it clear that the hero is Washington’s father,”²⁸ Weems’ detractors consistently portray the intent of Weems’ anecdote as extolling the great piety of the heroic first President. In addition to the non-existent chopping down, most debunkers are also quite erroneous on this point.

3. WEEMS NEVER REPRESENTED WASHINGTON AS A PERSON INCAPABLE OF LYING

Thirdly, Weems’ detractors have represented Weems’ intent as to claim that George Washington was of such constitution that he did not even have the capacity to tell a lie. The celebrated Oscar Wilde perpetrated this nonsense, stating that Americans embrace “unattainable ideals,” providing as his evidence Weems’ hero who was, “a man, who, according to his own confession, was incapable of telling a lie.”²⁹ In an echo of Wilde, historian William Roscoe Thayer asked: “‘Why couldn't George Washington lie?’ was the comment of a little boy I knew, ‘Couldn't he talk?’”³⁰

Amy Zegart criticizes Weems by stating “George Washington’s inability to tell a lie is a lie,” and then proves it by demonstrating how often Washington lied as commander of the Continental Army.³¹ Russell Baker,

²⁸ Gary Wills, “Mason Weems, Biblioplist,” *American Heritage*, February/March 1981 Volume 32, Issue 2.

²⁹ Oscar Wilde, “The Decay of Lying” (1891) in *The Best Known Works of Oscar Wilde: Including the Poems, Novels, Plays, Essays, Fairy Tales and Dialogues* (Blue Ribbon Books, 1927), 608.

³⁰ William Roscoe Thayer, *George Washington* (Houghton Mifflin, 1922), 2. Wilde continued his remarks with, “and it is not too much to say that the story of George Washington and the cherry-tree has done more harm... than any other moral tale in the whole of literature.” Thayer nearly plagiarized Wilde writing that the story, “has probably done more than anything else to implant an instinctive contempt of its hero in the hearts of four generations of readers.”

³¹ Zegart, *op. cit.* continues, “That old cherry-tree fable – in which young George admits to his father that he did, indeed, chop down the tree with his hatchet – was invented

Pulitzer Prize winning *New York Times* writer, observed, “They couldn’t understand a person that never lied, thinking it unnatural, even contemptible, and most certainly dumb in the extreme.”³²

In other words, the myth that Weems’ has been accused of perpetrating is the claim that George Washington was a person metaphysically incapable of lying throughout his life. But that was never Weems’ intent. Weems was an embellisher, but not a buffoon. If one reads the anecdote in full, the intent is perspicuous. In the context of the instructions his father had given him about the value of taking the risk to be honest when caught, when Augustine inquired as to who damaged his cherry tree, George said, “I can't tell a lie, Pa; you know I can't tell a lie. I did cut it with my hatchet.” Only a modicum of knowledge of English usage, idioms, or expressions is required to recognize that this statement was not meant to be a modal or metaphysical postulate about the ontological possibilities Washington possessed, but rather a figure of speech.

“Alright, Alright, I can’t lie to you, I did it,” is something many people commonly assert when cornered with a misdeed. To derive from that that the person is claiming that he or she does not have the capability at any time to lie is absolutely inane. But those historians who allege, as did Thayer, that the implication of Weems’ anecdote was that George Washington was created with a constitution of character such that it was beyond his physical, mental, and psychological capacity to tell a falsehood, have essentially fabricated their own myth. That was never Weems’ claim.

It was George Washington’s step-grandson, not Weems, who published to the world that Washington’s mother declared that “my son always speaks

by a Washington biographer named Mason Locke Weems in 1806 to boost his book sales.”

³² Russell Baker, “Cherry Tree Story Makes Us Uneasy,” *New York Times*, February 22, 1986.

the truth.”³³ Even then, the expression was simply hyperbole, not myth. It was not until Weems was no longer alive that his anecdote was reworked as the story of “The Boy who Could Not Tell a Lie.”³⁴ To debunk the myth that it was *impossible* for Washington to lie, like debunking the myth that Washington chopped down a cherry tree, is not to debunk anything ever written by Weems.

4. THE ANECDOTE TOOK PLACE AT MT. VERNON (LITTLE HUNTING CREEK), NOT FERRY FARM

According to Weems, the cherry tree story was the second anecdote relayed to him by a cousin of George Washington. The first is dated fall of 1737 and the second is dated to the time of George Washington’s sixth birthday, February 22, 1738.

During both of those dates Washington was living at Little Hunting Creek (later Mt. Vernon) near Alexandria, Virginia, not at Ferry Farm near Fredericksburg, Virginia. The Washingtons did not move to Ferry Farm until December 1, 1738.³⁵ Yet professional historians are wont to represent the Weems’ anecdote as if it could have only happened at Ferry Farm.³⁶ The Mt. Vernon location of the anecdote certainly undermines the allegation that archaeologists at Washington’s homestead on the

³³ George Washington Parke Custis, *Recollections and Private Memoirs of Washington* (New York: Derry & Jackson, 1860), 132.

³⁴ “True Stories of Children IV: The Boy Who Could Not Tell a Lie,” *The Gospel Messenger*, Saturday, Dec 16, 1837, 3.

³⁵ Bernhard Knollenberg, *George Washington, the Virginia Period, 1732-1775* (Duke University, 1964), 140.

³⁶ Philip Levy: *Where the Cherry Tree Grew*, 217; Frank Grizzard, *George Washington: A Biographical Companion* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2002), 109; Mt. Vernon Ladies Association (<https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/ferry-farm/>).

Rappahannock dispelled Weems' folklore by failing to find a hatchet or cherry trees anywhere in the dig site there.³⁷

This otherwise insignificant geographic fact also becomes rather significant when evaluating Weems' claim of access to Washington's cousins, as we shall see below.

5. MANY TREATMENTS OF WEEMS ARE OUTRIGHT FABRICATIONS

Some published claims regarding Weems' anecdote are simply woeful. Professor Bart Ehrman, for example, makes the following vacuous claim.

We know that this story never happened, because the person who invented the tale later admitted to having done so. He was a Christian minister named Mason Locke Weems, usually known as Parson Weems. As a later biographer of Washington, Parson Weems confessed that he made up the story, even though he once had claimed that he received it from a credible eyewitness.³⁸

The claim that Weems later confessed to having fabricated the story is, itself, entirely fabricated. Certainly, if that had been the case there would be no debate here whatsoever. Ehrman simply manufactured his own myth to discredit the story as a myth. This is entirely inexcusable "scholarship."

Professor David Nyberg of SUNY Buffalo styles himself an exposé of lies. In his book, *The Varnished Truth: Truth Telling and Deceiving in Ordinary Life*, he gives this treatment of Weems cherry tree anecdote.

³⁷ Barry Joyce, *The First U.S. History Textbooks: Constructing and Disseminating the American Tale in the Nineteenth Century* (Lexington Books, 2015), 1; Associated Press, "No Hatchet (Yet), But Washington's Boyhood Home," July 3, 2008. Cristen Conger, "How Revisionist History Works," (<https://history.howstuffworks.com/history-vs-myth/revisionist-history.htm>). This line of argumentation is no stronger than the "proof" that the cherry tree story is true based on a hatchet found with cherry tree sap on it in 1996. Russell Baker, "Scholarly Surprises," *International Herald Tribune*, March 29, 1996, 20; *New York Times*, March 26, 1996.

³⁸ Bart D. Ehrman, *Forged* (Harper Collins, 2011), 53.

Not only is it a fabrication, it is also plagiarized – by a parson! The Reverend Mr. Weems saw fit to lift the tale from a story by Dr. James Beattie... So, for over a hundred years American school children have been taught always to tell the truth by being told a lie in a story plagiarized by a man of God.³⁹

If Dr. Nyberg had read Beattie, he might have averted the egg on his face in this regard. Nowhere in Beattie's writing is there found anything at all resembling the cherry tree anecdote. There is a different anecdote in Beattie's writing that Weems probably plagiarized, but *not* the cherry tree anecdote. Again, if it could be easily shown that Weems stole the cherry tree story from Beattie or anyone else, the case would be closed. But Nyberg's claim is another myth created to discredit the story as a myth. These kinds of myths about myths take on a life of their own, so we find several other publications by later historians (and earlier ones that Nyberg may have echoed) that perpetrated Nyberg's myth in order to prove the cherry tree story is a myth.⁴⁰

Dr. Doug Bradburn is the President of George Washington's Mount Vernon. According to Bradburn, Weems wrote an anecdote about George's father who planted cabbage seeds, and then "his father said these cabbages

³⁹ David Nyberg, *The Varnished Truth: Truth Telling and Deceiving in Ordinary Life* (University of Chicago Press, 1995), 155.

⁴⁰ Joe Nickell, *Unsolved History: Investigating Mysteries of the Past* (University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 119. In fact, this bogus claim can be traced back to at least 1913 when Herbert Bruce Feller wrote "Myths of American History," in which he said, "Some time before Weems undertook the preparation of his work, there appeared in London a small volume written by Dr. Beattie on the life of his son. In this book appeared the story of the cherry-tree, with the youthful Beattie as the hero. Weems adopted it bodily, credited it to George Washington, and included it in his book." Herbert B. Feller, "Myths of American History," *Munsey's Magazine* 49 (1913), 279. Thomas Hunt Martin was also a conduit of this myth writing about Beattie's book, "In this book will be found the very story of the historic cherry tree with young Beattie as the hero." T.H. Martin, *The American's London* (E.V. Mitchell, 1925), 16.

are going to tell the destiny of a great man.”⁴¹ This is not to be found anywhere in Weems. According to Weems the elder Washington planted the seeds in the form of letters that spelled out the name, George Washington. There is nothing about the seeds “telling his destiny” as Bradburn conveys. Bradburn also attributes to Weems the quote, “Father, I cannot tell a lie,” which also is not found in Weems. Weems quoted Washington saying, “Pa; you know I can't tell a lie.” The change from “Pa” to “Father” appears first in the 1836 *McGuffey's Readers*, and the version “Father, I cannot tell a lie,” first appears in an 1837 Christian newspaper under the title “The Boy Who Could Not Tell a Lie.”⁴² Again this famous line, “Father, I cannot tell a lie,” is ironically and wrongly attributed to Weems by a multitude who claim to be correcting Weems’ misattributions.

Stuart Green not only attributed to Weems a similar bogus quotation, “I cannot tell a lie. It was I who chopped down the cherry tree,” Green also falsely alleges that Weems said Washington “chopped down” the tree with an “axe.” It has been already established that Weems never wrote of the tree being chopped down; what is more, to equate an axe with a hatchet is to equate a cannon with a pistol.⁴³

Another inexcusable distortion of Weems was published by Brown University Historian, Gordon Wood, who erroneously wrote that Weems “tells a story that he said he had heard from Washington’s nurse... This was, of course, the story of the cherry tree about whose chopping down Washington could not tell a lie.”⁴⁴

⁴¹ Doug Bradburn, “George Washington's Youth.” George Washington’s Mt. Vernon, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EWfvapfHL7o>)

⁴² “True Stories of Children IV: The Boy Who Could Not Tell a Lie,” *The Gospel Messenger*, Saturday, Dec 16, 1837, 3.

⁴³ Stuart Green, *op. cit.*

⁴⁴ Gordon S. Wood, “The Greatness of George Washington,” in *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, Spring 1992 Volume 68 # 2. (<https://www.vqronline.org/essay/greatness-george-washington>)

The assertion that Weems claimed to derive the anecdote from Washington's nurse is demonstrably false. Weems made it clear that his source was Washington's "cousin" not "nurse." It's likely that Wood is conflating the actual myth of Joice Heth, a black woman hired by P.T. Barnum in 1836 to say that she was the 161-year-old ex-nurse of George Washington, since she went about telling a version of the cherry tree anecdote.⁴⁵ But, again, when one is daring to refute the inaccuracy of another writer, it is incumbent that the critic do so accurately.

Furthermore, like Nyberg's blunder, Wood's made up "nurse" source has also trickled down to later careless purveyors of flawed history.⁴⁶

The online educational site "Founder of the Day" represents Weems as using a triple-hearsay source for the cherry tree anecdote.

Now he [Weems] publishes a new edition every year and in 1805 he publishes his fifth edition, and the fifth edition is the first time we see a story that he heard from a woman who heard from someone else who heard one time that maybe George Washington chopped down a cherry tree.⁴⁷

Alas, the truth is that Weems said he received the anecdote directly from an eyewitness.

In short, it is more than fair to say that many of those who have "knocked Weems" have done so quite irresponsibly insofar as responsible myth-

⁴⁵ Michael Farquhar, *A Treasury of Deception* (Penguin, 2005), 8; Benjamin Reiss, *The Showman and the Slave Race, Death, and Memory in Barnum's America* (Harvard University Press, 2009), 63.

⁴⁶ Dennis & Peter Gaffney, *The Seven-Day Scholar: The Presidents* (Hachette Books, 2012), week 1.

⁴⁷ "Mason Locke (Parson) Weems and the Cherry Tree Story...Plus Fallout with The Church of England," founderoftheday.com.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8A1bUwbESOM>

busting requires accurately representing that which one is targeting as a myth.

PART TWO: MISREPRESENTING THE CONSENSUS OF PROFESSIONAL HISTORIANS

If we accept the perspective of most “fact-checkers” today, we should be convinced that historians have conclusively proven that there is no possibility that Weems’ anecdote has any basis in fact. Bruce Crumley, a “fact-checker” for *Google Arts and Culture*, wrote, “virtually all historians agree that the entire tale was made up.”⁴⁸ This supposed consensus is not just a fiat of amateurs. In *The Real George Washington*, Eric Braun declared “they [historians] agree that the cherry tree story is a myth. It simply never happened.”⁴⁹ “Professional historians have debunked Weems’s anecdote of the truthful Washington and the cherry tree,” wrote historians Duffy and Muller in 2014.⁵⁰ Historians Angela M. Labrador and Neil Asher Silberman

⁴⁸ Bruce Crumley, “Fact-checking Presidential Myths,” <https://artsandculture.google.com/theme/fact-checking-presidential-myths/1AJCyYwYy0FnKg?hl=en>; Likewise, Rudy Canno, “Top 5 myths about US Presidents that aren’t true,” writes, “Most historians are convinced that George’s first biographer, Mason Locke Weems, made up this entire story.” <http://www.wearethemighty.com/mighty-history/top-5-myths-about-us-presidents-that-arent-true> Hugh Harrington assured his readers that “virtually everyone recognizes Weems’ histories for the fiction that they are.” Hugh T. Harrington, “The History of Parson Weems,” in *The Journal of the American Revolution*, September 25, 2013.

⁴⁹ Eric Braun, *The Real George Washington: The Truth Behind the Legend* (Capstone, 2019), 25. Hugh T. Harrington, former editor of the *Journal of The American Revolution* provides a similar *ipse dixit*: “virtually everyone recognizes Weems’ histories for the fiction that they are.” Ironically, his next sentence is, “The real lesson of Parson Weems’ is that as historians we must continually look to the sources of our information and not blindly accept what ‘is written’ as gospel. Weigh the evidence before considering it valid.” Hugh T. Harrington, “The History of Parson Weems,” *The Journal of The American Revolution*, September 25, 2013.

⁵⁰ John J. Duffy, & Nicholas Muller, *Inventing Ethan Allen* (University Press of New England, 2014), 4.

assure their readers that the cherry tree story has “been proven false.”⁵¹ We are left with the impression that all reputable historians concur that the story was entirely a product of Weems’ own mind, and that there are no dissenters among professional historians. Granted, if we are to resolve the matter by simply tallying the assertions of published commentators, pro and con, the “myth” side will prevail. On what grounds, however, are the “myth”-er’s opinions based?

Cannon astutely notes that the myriad of writers who have published that the cherry tree story has been debunked as a myth provide little more than *ipse dixits*.⁵² In other words, it is easy to find published in hundreds, perhaps thousands, of books and articles the confident yet unsupported assertion that Parson Weems “fabricated,” “made up,” “invented,” “faked,” “concocted,” and “lied” about the cherry tree. Very few, if any, give any evidentiary grounds for these *ipse dixits*, but the most common basis is the *ad populum* fallacy “everyone knows” it’s a myth.⁵³ The “myth” label is most popular because it’s popular to be popular. This phenomenon is called sycophantism: conforming to the crowd to gain credibility. In other words, the grounds for “knocking Weems” as Levy remarked, is that it is a requirement for a historian to *fit in* as a member of the guild. To do otherwise is to risk ridicule.

⁵¹ Angela M. Labrador & Neil Asher Silberman, *The Oxford Handbook of Public Heritage Theory and Practice* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 409.

⁵² Cannon wrote, “Weems cites a source, although he doesn’t name her, which is more than his detractors do for their smug rebuttals.” Carl Cannon, *On This Date* (Grand Central Publishing, 2017), Feb. 22, 1732.

⁵³ E.g., Charles Solomon, “Lies, Legends & Cherished Myths of American History,” *L.A. Times*, Sept. 29, 1991. Braun rests on the premise that it is “common knowledge” that the story is a myth, *op. cit.*, 26. One writer hinges the debunking on the basis that archaeologists failed to find cherry trees when excavating Washington’s birthplace at Pope’s Creek. Cristen Conger, “How Revisionist History Works,” <https://history.howstuffworks.com/history-vs-myth/revisionist-history.htm>.

It is important here to remember that a myth is, by definition, a “widely held but **false** belief or idea.”⁵⁴

Despite the multitude of sycophants that declare the anecdote is a myth, an actual survey of reputable historians who have studied the anecdote most scrupulously over the years ends in stark contrast to these dogmatic decrees of the debunkers. In light of these very measured judgments of those who have carefully studied the facts, the unsubstantiated claims of there being a scholarly consensus simply do not hold up.

The trained historian who is recognized as the principal biographer of Mason Weems was Lawrence C. Wroth, a research professor at Brown University until 1965. After researching Weems’ entire life extensively, Wroth opined,

There is something to be said for the authenticity of the anecdote. The story is probable in every detail, and it is well known that Weems was assiduous in the collection of Washington anecdotes of every sort... It is quite within the pale of probability that when Weems gave as his authority for the story the same ‘excellent lady’ who had told him others of her memories of the youthful hero, he was speaking sober truth.⁵⁵

Jack D. Warren, Jr., author of “The Childhood of George Washington,” shared his view of the anecdote through the *Journal of the American Revolution*:

I wrote the successful nomination for the site of Washington’s childhood home, conventionally referred to as Ferry Farm (though we have no evidence it was called that in the eighteenth century) to be designated a National Historic Landmark. As this was one of the places the famous cherry tree might have grown, and this remains the most famous anecdote of Washington’s childhood, I

⁵⁴ *The Oxford American College Dictionary*, (Oxford University Press, 2002), 895.

⁵⁵ Lawrence C. Wroth, *Parson Weems: A Biographical and Critical Study* (Eichelberger Books, 1911), 66.

had to deal with it. I came to the conclusion — and argued — that the story was entirely plausible.⁵⁶

Frank Grizzard, editor of *The Papers of George Washington*, used the same language as Warren, conceding Weems' cherry tree story is "entirely plausible in essence." Grizzard adds that the dearth of documentation "seals forever the possibility of knowing whether there is any basis for the story."⁵⁷

Even Philip Levy, author of *Where the Cherry Tree Grew*, who observed that "knocking Weems" is a necessary qualification for anyone who wishes to be initiated into the priesthood of reputable historians, does not concur with their assertion that the evidence proves the cherry tree anecdote mythological. "The evidence that the story is true is equal to the evidence that it is false. There's nothing implausible about it," Levy told the Mt. Vernon Ladies Association.⁵⁸

One of the most thorough scholarly assessments of the anecdote was published by Arthur H. Merritt, "Did Parson Weems Really Invent the Cherry-Tree Story?" in the *New-York Historical Society Quarterly*. Merritt ended his careful study with this assessment of the truth of the anecdote:

⁵⁶ Jack Warren, November 11, 2020, commentary on Hugh T. Harrington, "The History of Parson Weems," in *The Journal of the American Revolution*, September 25, 2013. See also Jack Warren, National Historic Landmark Nomination Nfs Form 10-900 Usdi/Nfs Nrh Registration Form (Rev. 8-86) Omb No. 1024-0018 Washington, George, Boyhood Home Site; Jack D. Warren, Jr. "The Childhood of George Washington," *Northern Neck of Virginia Historical Magazine* 9, No. 1., 5789.

⁵⁷ Grizzard, *op. cit.*, 46.

⁵⁸ Philip Levy, "Where the Cherry Tree Grew: An Interview with Philip Levy." February 7, 2023.

<https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/facts/myths/george-washington-and-the-cherry-tree-myth/where-the-cherry-tree-grew-an-interview-with-phillip-levy/>

“let no crabbed historian put [it] asunder - at least until more decisive evidence comes to light.”⁵⁹

Harry Oscar Bishop, longtime president of the National Press Club, and an editor and historical researcher for the *National Republic*, asked Weems’ critics for their evidence. “If the attackers of this story have any proof of their assertions, let them come forward with them – but I venture the assertion that they have none.”⁶⁰

George W. Stimpson, another president of the National Press Club and a very prolific researcher, offered this evaluation of the anecdote, foreshadowing Levy’s:

There is just as much reason for believing it as there is for disbelieving it. That Weems used his imagination in retelling the story - twenty years after he heard it – is obvious from the detailed manner in which he wrote. But there is no evidence disproving Weems's assertion that he received it from an aged lady who was a distant relative of the Washingtons and who spent much of her time in the family when a girl.⁶¹

Likewise, in 1962, history professor David Van Tassel of Case Western Reserve University observed that the cherry tree story “has been the favorite target of debunkers and sophisticates,” and yet, “no scholar has succeeded in proving it false.”⁶²

⁵⁹ Arthur H. Merritt, “Did Parson Weems Really Invent the Cherry-Tree Story?” in *New-York Historical Society Quarterly* 40 (July 1956), 252-63.

⁶⁰ H.O. Bishop, “That Cherry Tree Story: Not a Myth,” *National Republic*, February 1927, Volume XIV, No. 10, 14.

⁶¹ George W. Stimpson, *Why Do Some Shoes Squeak? and 568 Other Popular Questions Answered* (Bell, 1984), 271.

⁶² David Van Tassel, “The Legend Maker,” *American Heritage*, February 1962, Volume 13, Issue 2.

Pulitzer Prize historian Van Wyck Brooks wrote, “he [Weems] may have picked up in the neighborhood the story of the cherry tree that soon became so famous when he published his book.”⁶³

On Washington’s birthday in 1986, the Pulitzer Prize winning *New York Times* writer, Russell Baker, wrote an assessment of the anecdote concluding with, “I find the story of George and the cherry tree entirely credible. What is odd is that so many Americans are eager to dismiss such a plausible story as silly mythology.”⁶⁴

In February 1988, Joseph Gustaitis, the editor of *Colliers Encyclopedia* and a highly respected historian published “Mason Locke Weems: ‘I Cannot Tell a Lie’” in *American History Illustrated* in which he concluded, “it is at least possible that he (Parson Weems) got the story from a reliable source.”⁶⁵

Professor Richard M. Gamble notes that the emergence of the cherry trade on the Potomac simultaneously to the date of the anecdote is unlikely a mere coincidence:

There is no question that Weems invented the tale of “Pa, I can not tell a lie, I did it.” But to doubt the veracity of the aged woman’s recollection of a six year-old playing with a hatchet and “barking” a young fruit tree is another matter entirely. That sounds exactly what a young boy might do, and what an old lady might remember after some prodding. The source places the incident “when George was about six.” George was six in 1738, at which time the Washington family was living along the Potomac River at Little Hunting Creek – not along the Rappahannock River at “Ferry Farm.” Add to this that earliest surviving record to document the export of (chopped down) Cherry wood from Virginia takes place on the Potomac River in – wait for it – September 1738. What are

⁶³ Van Wyck Brooks, “The World of Washington Irving,” *The Atlantic*, June 1944.

⁶⁴ Russell Baker, “Observer; The Plausible Tree,” *New York Times*, February 22, 1986 (<https://www.nytimes.com/1986/02/22/opinion/observer-the-plausible-tree.html>)

⁶⁵ Joseph Gustaitis, “Mason Locke Weems: ‘I Cannot Tell a Lie’” *American History Illustrated*, February 1988, 40-41.

the odds that the two earliest tales of Cherry trees in the Northern Neck would take place in the same locale, in the same year? Look it up. I did.⁶⁶

Herb W. Reich is a mythbuster who published a series of books on historical falsehoods. As much as Reich wanted to join in the chorus of historians who call the anecdote false, bogus, and debunked, in *Don't You Believe It* and *Lies They Teach in School*, Reich exhibits a rare degree of historical honesty, “No one has ever been able to definitely discount the possibility that it actually occurred... Is it history or myth? We will probably never know.”⁶⁷ Likewise, Richard Martin of the *Arkansas Democrat* concedes, “It's at least possible that the cherry tree story is substantially true.”⁶⁸

Fulbright Professor, Wilson Jeremiah Moses, American History professor emeritus at Penn State, wrote in 2019 of the cherry tree story, “for all we know, it might be true.”⁶⁹

This litany of scholarly opinion is in addition to other current historians, already mentioned above, such as Carl M. Cannon, Carl S. Anthony, and Austin Washington who are all on record in opposition to the “myth” label on the cherry tree story.

Most significantly, mainstream reputable institutions like the National Park Service and the leading online fact-checking agency, Snopes, reject the scholars who, over the years, have labeled Weems’ anecdote “wholly

⁶⁶ Richard Gamble, August 23, 2021, commentary upon “Did George Washington Chop Down a Cherry Tree and Confess?” <https://ourhistorymuseum.org/blog/did-george-washington-cut-down-a-cherry-tree>

⁶⁷ Herb Reich, *Don't You Believe It!: Exposing the Myths Behind Commonly Believed Fallacies* (Skyhorse, 2010), 117; Reich, *Lies They Teach in School* (Skyhorse, 2012), 117.

⁶⁸ Philip Martin, “Biographers Can't Tell a Lie; or Can They, George?” *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, May 10, 2015.

⁶⁹ Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Thomas Jefferson: A Modern Prometheus* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 2.

false”⁷⁰ or who claim that the anecdote has “been proven false.”⁷¹ The National Park Service exhibits a very scrupulous approach to historic epistemology, cautioning, “This story is not so easily disproved.”⁷² This is a stark contrast to the superciliousness of the typical academic historian who writes, “Parson Weems tale about chopping down the cherry tree - *is a complete fabrication.*”⁷³ Snopes, which will very readily deem a claim “false” when the evidence demands it, does not jump aboard with the confident Weems detractors. Rather, Snopes deems the anecdote, “unproven,” explaining, “This rating applies to a claim for which we have examined the available evidence but could not arrive at a true or false determination, meaning the evidence is inconclusive.”⁷⁴

The distinction between an assertion being labeled “false/untrue” (cf. myth/fiction) as opposed to it being labeled “unproven/inconclusive,” is a very important one. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a myth is a “purely fictitious narrative,” and *fictitious* is defined as “counterfeit, not genuine.”⁷⁵ For example, it is *unproven* whether Washington died of epiglottitis.⁷⁶ It cannot be categorically labeled a “myth.” It would also be unscholarly to insist upon the “myth of Cleopatra’s suicide,” or “the myth of Lizzie Borden killing her parents.” These are historical uncertainties, not proven falsehoods. Myths are false.⁷⁷

Law professor John Eidsmoe, who holds both a law degree and a doctorate wrote, “At worst, Weems’s anecdotes must be regarded as unsubstantiated;

⁷⁰ John Remsburg, *Six Historic Americans* (Truth Seeker, 1906), 146.

⁷¹ Angela M. Labrador & Neil Asher Silberman, *The Oxford Handbook of Public Heritage Theory and Practice* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 409.

⁷² National Park Service, “George Washington and the Cherry Tree,” <https://www.nps.gov/articles/george-washington-and-the-cherry-tree.htm>

⁷³ Joseph Ellis, *His Excellency: George Washington* (Vintage, 2005), 7. Emphasis ours.

⁷⁴ <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/george-washington-chop-cherry-tree/>

⁷⁵ OED (Clarendon, 1921), 536 & 302.

⁷⁶ <https://constitutioncenter.org/blog/the-mysterious-death-of-george-washington>

⁷⁷ *The Oxford American College Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 895.

they have not been proven false.”⁷⁸ History Professor Steven C. Bullock, author of “Weems’s Washington: A Biography of Parson Weems’s *Life of George Washington*,” was asked about the cherry tree anecdote. He wisely answered, “I’ve never accepted the idea that we know this to be absolutely false.”⁷⁹

This lesson in epistemology is truly an important corrective for historians who consider it appropriate to use careless unqualified language because “everyone knows” it’s been proven false. As a matter of basic logic and epistemology, attempting to prove a negative is almost always a perilous endeavor. It seems, however, that too many who are styled “reputable” historians are willing to use unqualified and irresponsible descriptions of Weems’ anecdote: false, disproven, myth, fake, fiction, fabrication, fraud, lie, etc. In fact, all that the debunkers can say is that the evidence for the anecdote is much weaker than a current historian is accustomed to, and that the provider of the anecdote had a reputation for taking liberties with facts. Of course, those flaws matter, but they do not prove that everything Weems wrote that is uncorroborated must be false.

At minimum, we have made a compelling case that a circumspect historian should not be using irresponsible descriptions such as “false,” “disproven,” and “mythological” when referring to Weems’ cherry tree story. Going forward, honest scholars will limit their word choices to qualified terms such as, “potentially fabricated,” “uncorroborated,” or “dubious.”

It is incongruous that those who scold Weems for his carelessness are so often very willing to use entirely unqualified language regarding that which is,

⁷⁸ John Eidsmoe, *Christianity and the Constitution* (Baker, 1995).

⁷⁹ Steven C. Bullock, “How Parson Weems Remade George Washington,” The Library Company of Philadelphia (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=05biZF_0xKk).

in fact, uncertain. Ironically, then, the real “myth” of the cherry tree story is the assertion that it is certainly a myth.

PART THREE: EVALUATING WEEMS’ SOURCE

In January, 1800, Weems wrote to his publisher, “Six months ago I set myself to collect anecdotes about him [Washington]. You know I live conveniently for that work.”⁸⁰ This fact that Weems’ social circle was truly a convenient locus to collect first-person anecdotes about George Washington is a salient factor that has gone generally overlooked, even denied! Since Weems exaggerated his relationship to Washington, it has been assumed that he also inflated his connections to Washington’s relatives and neighbors. Therefore, it seems very reasonable to doubt whether Weems was truly networked with eyewitnesses of Washington’s youth. Philip Levy has turned this doubt into a declaration. In his 2015 work, *George Washington: Written Upon the Land*, Levy wrote, “Nothing exists to hint that Weems had special access to Washington’s thoughts or stories from his past.”⁸¹

Our research utterly shreds that claim. Weems’ bountiful access to Washington’s relatives was indisputable. In fact, Weems even married one of George Washington’s second cousins. Walter B. Norris, former Naval Academy professor at Annapolis, was one of the few who saw the importance of Weems’ *convenient* context.

It is thus clear that the opportunities open to Weems to secure firsthand information about Washington's life were much greater than has generally been supposed. Through his relatives the Ewells, and their relatives the Balls, through Dr. Craik, with whom he had the double bond of connection by marriage and

⁸⁰ Mason Weems to Matthew Carey, January 12 or 13, 1800, in William Alfred Bryan, “The Genesis of Weems’ ‘Life of Washington’” *Americana*, Vol. XXXVI, 208.

⁸¹ Phillip Levy, *George Washington: Written Upon the Land*, (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2015), 145.

medical studies, through his association with such people of the region as Rev. Lee Massey, many of whom had known Washington from early years, and also through other friends whom he met in his book-selling journeys through Virginia, he might easily come upon stories which had never been published.⁸²

Until now, no researcher has investigated Weems' network thoroughly to determine whether his claim to having interviewed eyewitnesses was credible. This year, James Bish, coauthor of this article, followed up painstakingly on Dr. Norris' insights, undertaking an extreme depth of research to show that Mason Weems was indeed positioned geographically, chronologically and demographically in convenient and optimal locations to obtain eyewitness stories about Washington's early life.

Bish's book, *I Can't Tell a Lie: Parson Weems and the Truth about George Washington's Cherry Tree, Prayer at Valley Forge, and Other Anecdotes* (2023), identifies almost every relevant person who was in Weems' social circle from his youth until his publication of the *Life of Washington*. The book offers far more evidence than there is room to reveal here. It leaves no question that Weems was firmly networked, from his school days at the Jenifer School in Maryland, to his connections in Philadelphia with celebrated leaders such as Rev. William Smith, to dozens of other personal connections he had with George Washington's relatives, friends, and associates. In short, the book demolishes the allegation that Weems did not have special access to persons who could tell him authentic stories about

⁸² Walter B. Norris, "Historian of the Cherry Tree: Parson Weems and His Life of Washington," *The National Magazine*, Volume 31 (1909), 500. Parson Weems was a known quantity in Northern Virginia in the early 1790s as the Alexandria vestry authorized Weems to become their ecclesiastical assistant to the Rev. Bryan Fairfax. Bishop William Meade, *Old Churches, Ministers, Families of Virginia* (Lippincott, 1861), II, 259. By 1795, Weems had married into the Northern Virginia landed class, a second cousin of George Washington, and eventually inherited the home where George and Martha spent the night after their wedding, Bel Air. William G. Clothworthy, *In the Footsteps of George Washington: A Guide to Sites Commemorating Our First President* (McDonald & Woodward, 2002), 398.

George Washington's past. Of course, we aver that the contents of Bish's entire book serve as further and stronger support for the thesis of this present article. As such, we obviously recommend the book to anyone wanting a deeper plunge. Nonetheless, in the interest of brevity, and with a focus on the cherry tree anecdote in particular, we here summarize Bish's findings regarding that anecdote.

Using detailed genealogical and geographical materials, Bish has almost conclusively identified the person referred to by Weems as source of the cherry tree anecdote.

When Weems provided the cherry-tree story, he explicitly claimed that he received it directly from an eyewitness. Since he did not identify that eyewitness by name, many have accused Weems of fabricating the source, completely making her up. Not so fast. Weems' reference, though unnamed, does include many specifics that either fit or do not fit with known facts. Weems says that the cherry tree and another anecdote was "related to me twenty years ago by an aged lady who was a distant relative, and when a girl spent much of her time in the family." Then as Weems relates the anecdotes the source refers to George as "my cousin Washington," and George's father refers to the source as, "this good cousin of yours."

If Weems' source was authentic, here is what must be true as inferred from the description:

Weems knew the source personally and talked with her sometime around 1786.

The source is a cousin of GW, but not a first cousin, as she was "a distant relative."

The source is someone who was a “girl” in 1738, and “aged” in 1786.

The source is someone who spent time with the Washingtons in 1737 and 1738.

The source never came forward after the anecdote was published, identifying herself.

To date, no scholar has taken on the project of identifying the source for the cherry tree story that Weems gave credit. Bish has rectified this research gap with a compelling and profound investigation. His book, *I Can't Tell a Lie*, makes a strong case that Weems' informant was George Washington's second cousin Sinah Ball McCarty.⁸³

SINAH BALL MCCARTY

Sinah Ball McCarty was George Washington's second cousin, through his mother Mary Ball Washington.⁸⁴ Sinah was introduced to her younger cousin George when she was four and George was one month old. Almost as soon as George was born,

The proud young mother [Mary Ball Washington] hastened to present her fine boy to her own kindred, and when he was a month old she took him to visit her [first] cousin, Major James Ball at “Bewdley,” in Lancaster County.⁸⁵

⁸³ James Bish, *I Can't Tell A Lie: Parson Weems and the Truth about George Washington's Cherry Tree, Prayer at Valley Forge, and Other Anecdotes* (2023), 251ff.

⁸⁴ Horace Edwin Hayden, *Virginia Genealogies* (E.B. Yardy, 1891), 63ff.

⁸⁵ Sara Agnes Rice Pryor, *The Mother of Washington and Her Times* (MacMillan, 1903), 83. Moncure Conway references a note from Augustine Washington in 1733 which laid out plans for the visits. Conway, *Barons of the Potomac* (Grolier, 1892), 56. Pryor seems to have used that document in her book. In 1932 the United States George Washington Bicentennial Commission, led by historian Albert Bushnell Hart, published an exact date of the young Washington's first visits to relatives, “Within a few weeks after his birth his proud parents took him, on April 3, 1732, to visit some relatives.” *The Mother of George Washington* (1932), 8. In 1936, H. Ragland Eubank, in his work, *Touring*

Major James Ball was Sinah Ball's father.⁸⁶ When the Washingtons showed up in Sinah's house at Bewdley in 1732, Sinah was four and her father James was recently widowed (1730).⁸⁷ Mary Ball Washington's presence in the life of the motherless 4-year-old Sinah was helpful and welcome.

Shortly after Sinah Ball was born, her first cousin Sarah Ball married Dennis McCarty and they moved from the shores of the Lower Potomac to the shores of the Upper Potomac in (present day) Fairfax County.⁸⁸ In 1735, another of Sinah's first cousins, Mary Ball Washington, made the same move from the shores of the Lower Potomac to the shores of the Upper Potomac.

In the early 1730's Sinah's own father, James, also began to acquire lands in Northern Virginia, some of which was devised to Sinah.⁸⁹ Hence, with his

Historyland: The Historic Northern Neck of Virginia wrote, "It was at Bewdley that she took her first born, the future First President of the United States, on his first visit." Alice Curtis Desmond's historic novel, *George Washington's Mother* (Dodd Mead, 1961), 32, indicated that the baby George was taken "on a round of visits" in his first year.

⁸⁶ *Virginia Genealogies*, 63ff.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Michael Joseph O'Brien, *The McCarthys in Early American History* (University of Wisconsin, 1921), 39ff. Daniel McCarty's uncle Daniel was such a close friend of Augustine Washington (George's father), that each made the other executors of their wills. McCarty's father, Dennis, migrated from the Fredericksburg region to the north side of Pohick Run in 1729 and Augustine Washington followed to nearby Little Hunting Creek (Mt. Vernon) in 1735.

⁸⁹ For the land holdings of James Ball in Prince William County, see Fairfax Harrison, *Landmarks of Old Prince William*, 245, 254. James Ball's Prince William land is also referenced in Ruth and Sam Sparacio, *Deed Abstracts of Prince William County, Virginia, 1745-1746/1748-1749*, page 27. Also, Harry Connelly Groome, *Fauquier During the Proprietorship: A Chronicle of the Colonization and Organization of a Northern Neck County* (Old Dominion, 1927), 108. National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, Crooked Run Valley Rural Historic District, number VDHR File No. 030-5369, p 103. (https://www.dhr.virginia.gov/VLR_to_transfer/PDFNoms/030-5369_CrookedRunValleyRHD_2004_Final_Nomination.pdf). The land willed to Sinah was of interest to George Washington, as indicated in a letter from Daniel McCarty to

own future interest intended for Northern Virginia, James permitted the motherless Sinah to follow her female first cousins to Northern Virginia in her youth. Sinah Ball's father held the Northern Virginia property in 1738, when George Washington was about six and allegedly was gifted a hatchet by his father. In the Fairfax homes of her cousins Sarah Ball and Mary Ball, the girl Sinah found surrogate mothers. Sinah's older sister Sarah also came to Northern Virginia with her husband Charles Ewell, who had been associated with Augustine Washington in the iron business. As a young lady, Sinah was courted in Fairfax by her cousin Sarah Ball McCarty's son, Daniel, who was raised a few miles from Mt. Vernon.⁹⁰ They married in Fairfax in 1748. Sarah Ball, Sinah's mother-in-law (and cousin), became caretaker at Mt. Vernon during the revolution.⁹¹

Sinah Ball and Daniel McCarty lived at Mount Air, the halfway point between Mt. Vernon and Pohick Church. Sinah's husband and George Washington served together on the Pohick Church vestry and on the building committee.⁹² Sinah's pew at Pohick was "directly opposite" George Washington's pew.⁹³ Often when Washington attended the Pohick Church, he stopped at the McCarty house on the way home to dine with Daniel and Sinah.⁹⁴ "It was common practice," wrote Niall O'Dowd, "for the Washingtons to stop by the McCarty home every Sunday on their way home from church."⁹⁵ In his diaries, Washington chronicled twenty dinner

George Washington, December 6, 1769, in response to Washington's letter to McCarty (<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/02-08-02-0187>).

⁹⁰ O'Brien, *op. cit.*

⁹¹ Gwendolyn K. White, *Commerce and Community: Plantation Life at George Washington's Mount Vernon, 1754 To 1799* (Ph.D. Dissertation, George Mason University, 2016), 76.

⁹² O'Brien, 52.

⁹³ *The Journal of the American-Irish Historical Society*, Volumes 15-16 (1917), 120.

⁹⁴ One of Mason Weems' descendants, Ted Weems, relayed that it had been passed down from generation to generation that the Parson received the information from a "neighbor of the Washingtons." Ted Weems, quoted in "Cherry Tree Story True, Says Weems," *Dallas Morning News*, February 16, 1959.

⁹⁵ Niall O'Dowd, *George Washington and the Irish: Incredible Stories of the Irish Spies, Soldiers, and Workers Who Helped Free America* (Skyhorse, 2022), digital.

visits with the McCartys between 1768-1775 and 1785-1788 and on six of those occasions the McCartys stayed overnight at Mount Vernon.⁹⁶

February 26, 1760	Oct 16, 1772 (overnight)
July 16, 1768	August 14, 1773
January 23, 1769 (overnight)	September 8, 1773 (overnight)
April 24, 1769	February 7, 1774
April 27, 1769	February 26, 1775 (overnight)
June 11, 1769	March 2, 1775 (overnight)
October 6, 1771	February 14, 1785
May 15, 1772 (overnight)	September 3, 1786
May 16, 1772	October 26, 1786
August 2, 1772	October 6, 1787

The documentation is clear. Sinah Ball, George Washington's second cousin and close neighbor, had an intimate familial relationship with George from his infancy until she was at least 60 years of age.

So what?

Sinah Balls' sister Sarah married Charles **Ewell**, father of Mariamne **Ewell** Craik, the wife of Washington's closest associate, Dr. James Craik.⁹⁷

Hence, Sinah Ball was Mariamne Craik's Aunt. Sarah was also Frances (Fannie) **Ewell's** grandmother.

⁹⁶ Washington Diaries: February 26, 1760, July 16, 1768, January 23, 1769 (overnight), April 24, 1769, April 27, 1769, June 11, 1769, October 6, 1771, May 15, 1772 (overnight), May 16, 1772, August 2, 1772, Oct 16, 1772 (overnight), August 14, 1773, September 8, 1773 (overnight), February 7, 1774, February 26, 1775 (overnight), March 2, 1775 (overnight), February 14, 1785, September 3, 1786, October 26, 1786, and October 6, 1787.

⁹⁷ James Craik's wife was born in the house that would be later occupied by her niece, Mrs. Parson Mason Weems and husband. George Washington and Martha spent their honeymoon night in that house. William G. Clothworthy, *In the Footsteps of George Washington: A Guide to Sites Commemorating Our First President* (McDonald & Woodward, 2002), 398.

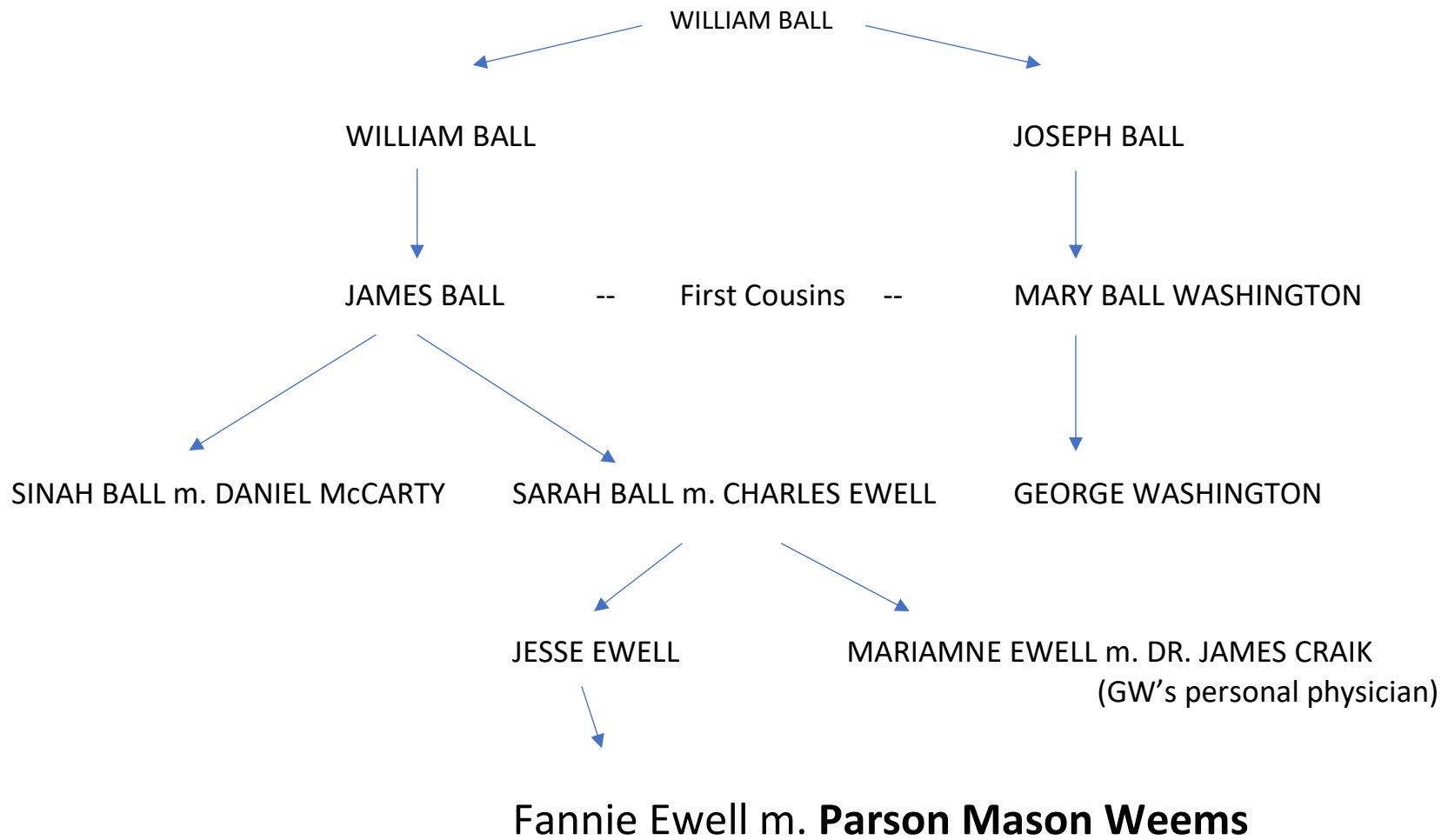
Sinah Ball McCarty was, therefore, the Great Aunt of Frances (Fannie) Ewell.

Fannie Ewell was the WIFE of Parson Mason Weems.⁹⁸

Parson Weems' own wife was the second cousin (twice removed) to George Washington!

Sinah Ball was not just Washington's cousin who knew him as a boy, she was also near kin to Mrs. Mason Weems. The following chart illustrates the kinship between George & Sinah and Mason & Sinah.

⁹⁸ The wedding of Mason Weems and Fannie Ewell had all the trappings of "an old Virginia wedding," at the Bel Air mansion on July 2, 1795. Alice Maude Ewell, "Life at Old Bel Air," *The Times Dispatch*, Richmond, Virginia. Sunday, November 1, 1936. The assumption that Fannie's kinsfolk in the vicinity attended the wedding (viz., Sinah Ball McCarty) is more than reasonable.



It was in his youth, while attending the Jenifer School in Port Tobacco, Maryland in the early 1770s, that Weems became acquainted with George Washington's intimate friends and relatives, Dr. James and Mariamne (Ewell) Craik and their children. Dr. Craik and George Washington were very close, having served alongside each other in the war against the French. Craik also served alongside General Washington in the Revolutionary War, and became his personal physician, even being at George's deathbed in 1799.

Between 1773-1775 and 1787-1798, Washington's diary reveals at least eleven visits by either Dr. James Craik or his wife, Mariamne Ewell Craik to Mount Vernon with five of those visits accompanied by Sinah's family members with three overnight visits at Mount Vernon. On two of the visits, the Craiks had either earlier visited or were going to visit Sinah's family after their visit to Mount Vernon. It was the Craik's routine that their visits to Mount Vernon to see their cousin, George Washington, included a stop just three miles distant to visit Mariamne (Ewell) Craik's uncle and aunt, Daniel and Sinah (Ball) McCarty at nearby Mount Air.⁹⁹

Certainly, in 1787 many Americans would have enjoyed the opportunity of meeting General Washington and Dr. Craik provided that privilege for Reverend Weems. On March 2, 1787, Dr. Craik's son (Weems' old schoolmate), Dr. James Craik, Jr., took Rev. Mason Weems from Port Tobacco, Maryland to Fairfax, Virginia. Following the Craik family routine detailed above, a stop would have been made at nearby Mount Air, to visit Craik's uncle and aunt, Daniel and Sinah Ball McCarty, both of whom were George Washington's cousins. Here, then was a nearly exact fulfillment of the date the anecdote was identified by Weems in 1806 as "related to me

⁹⁹ 3 Washington Diaries: September 8, 1773 (overnight), December 13, 1773, December 14, 1773, February 26, 1775 (overnight), February 27, 1775, March 3, 1787 (overnight), October 6, 1787, September 4, 1788 (overnight), September 5, 1788, October 25, 1797, and April 30, 1798.

twenty years ago,” as well as a perfect fulfillment of the source who Weems identified as “an aged lady who was a distant relative, and, when a girl, spent much of her time in the family.” After visiting in Sinah’s home, Craik Jr. and Weems visited George and Martha Washington the next day and stayed overnight before heading back to Maryland.

Now, back to the description of Weems’ source for the cherry tree anecdote

Weems knew the source personally and talked with her sometime around 1786.

Sinah was Weems’ wife’s great Aunt; Weems and Sinah’s niece’s son (James Craik) were overnight guests at Mt. Vernon together with GW in early 1787. They were traveling together just three miles from of the home of Sinah, Craik’s relative. On other occasions when Craiks came to Mt. Vernon, it is recorded in GW’s diary that their previous or next stop was Sinah’s place (GW Diary, Feb. 26, 1775 & Sept. 5, 1788).

Weems’ source is identified as a cousin, but not a first cousin, as she was “a distant relative.”

Sinah Ball was George Washington’s second cousin

Weems’ source is identified as someone who was a “girl” in 1738.

Sinah Ball was 10 years old in 1738

Weems’ source was identified as “aged” around 1786

Sinah Ball was 58 years old in 1786 (and 59 on the night that Mason Weems visited Mt. Vernon with Dr. Craik, Jr.). This was a time when the average life expectancy at birth was 28 years.¹⁰⁰

Weems' source is someone who "When a girl, spent much of her time in the family" particularly 1737 and 1738.

Sinah Ball knew George Washington personally from the time he was one month old; as a youth she inhabited the vicinity of her cousins Sarah Ball McCarty and Mary Ball Washington. Sinah Ball would have been nine years turning ten in February 1738 and George would have been five years old turning six that same month.

Sinah Ball's first cousin, Sarah Ball McCarty's family had moved to the McCarty home of Cedar Grove, near Little Hunting Creek (Mt. Vernon) probably about 1727-28. When the Washingtons moved to Little Hunting Creek in 1735, both of Sinah Ball's cousins were living in a close proximity to each other in present-day Fairfax County. Sinah Ball's mother, Mary, died on September 15, 1730 and at her death, there were eight children living at home with four under the age of ten. Sinah's father, James remained single until marrying Mary Bertrand (Ewell) Ballendine on April 25, 1742. This meant that James Ball was a widower for almost twelve years with young children to nurture, the youngest being two-year old Sinah at her mother's death. James obviously would have needed female relatives at different times of the year to help with his young children, particularly Sinah. Small wonder, then that Sinah spent significant periods of time as a girl extensively visiting her first cousin, Sarah Ball McCarty and her first cousin once-removed, Mary Ball Washington.

¹⁰⁰ John N. Kotre and Elizabeth Hall, *The Dramatic Journey from Birth to Death* (University of Michigan Press, 1997), 47.

The source never came forward after the anecdote was published, identifying herself.

Sinah Ball died in 1798. She never knew that Weems published the anecdote.

Does Bish's research "prove" that Weems' cherry tree anecdote originated with an eyewitness, namely Sinah Ball? Of course not. Does it prove that the anecdote very well could have originated with Sinah Ball? Absolutely. Sinah's fit to the description given by Weems is hand-in-glove.

There is also the matter of the fact that Weems was so networked with Washington, his family, and his neighbors, that at any time after 1806, he was conscious that any one of them, including his own wife, was prone to ask, "Mason, which relative in our circle told you this information in 1786?" Weems detractors would have us believe his response would have been something evasive like "none of your business." If Bish's detective work is correct, Weems could have easily provided the name upon request.¹⁰¹

So why didn't Weems do so in his book?

Sinah died in 1798. It seems quite unlikely that Weems ever procured her permission to use her name in print. Hence, it may have been out of respect to her and her family to obscure her identity since she did not authorize it.

¹⁰¹ The other point that has been raised by a number of commentators is the fact that none of those who were in the close circle of friends and relatives ever came out in opposition to Weems' alleged "lie." Arguing from the absence of evidence is usually unconvincing, because no one called Weems out on his plagiarism during his life either; but relatives like his George's adopted Nellie, who lived longer than Weems, were certainly in a place to censure phony anecdotes.

It was also customary at the time for writers to disguise or obscure some of their sources. For example, in many books when a source is referred to, only a letter or two of the name is provided with a dash or dashes representing the missing letters. Why?

This practice has been given a name by a literary scholar, “The Dostoevsky Dash”¹⁰² defined as “a literary device developed in the 17th century to protect authors from retaliation or accusations of libel.”

This practice was magnified if a government official was involved. For example, consider the title and opening paragraph of a 1766 publication about recent controversial politics:

The Speech of Mr. P----- and Several Others, in a Certain August Assembly on a Late Important Debate (1766)

BEFORE the Meeting of P – rl – m – t, December 17, 1765, it was understood that Mr. P--- was for the Repeal of the Am-----n St – p Act, and that the M-----y concurred with him in Opinion.¹⁰³

This attempt at “obscuring” information was rather transparent. It was clearly a meeting of *Parliament*, the politician was *Mr. William Pitt*, the Act was the *American Stamp Act*, and the *Majority* concurred. Publishers felt this convention, however, gave them some degree of protection from any legal consequences.

Just as 18th century obscuring rarely masked the source very effectively, Bish has shown that Weems’ cloaking of his source would not have been

¹⁰² Addison River, *The Dostoevsky Dash: The Reasons for Dashed out Information in Literature* (<https://bookriot.com/the-dostoevsky-dash/>) March 17, 2021.

¹⁰³ William Pitt, *The Speech of Mr. P----- and Several Others, in a Certain August Assembly on a Late Important Debate: with an Introduction of the Matters Preceding it (1766)*.

terribly difficult to deduce for anyone in the Mt. Vernon social circle in 1806. To Bish, identifying Sinah Ball as Weems' source was as elementary as identifying Franklin as the author of the Silence Dogood letters.

CONCLUSION

The widespread and reckless language of "the myth of the cherry tree" is unscholarly, unsupportable, and entirely without merit. Though we have not "proven" that the cherry tree story is true, we have provided sufficient evidence that it very well *may have originated* with an eyewitness. It has not been proven false, as many writers insist. There is no question that if Weems were to be tried for fabricating the story, he would have to be acquitted because of "reasonable doubt." If historians or other scholars continue to publish that the cherry tree story is definitely a lie, a falsehood, or a myth, they can only do so by burying their heads in the sand oblivious to this research. It may remain vogue to do so as a secret handshake for the initiated priesthood of professional historians (as Levy indicated in our opening paragraph), but this study prohibits the "myth" label from being used any longer with scholarly integrity.