



GEORGE WASHINGTON

FIRST PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

WHIST PLAYER

PORTRAIT BY: GILBERT STUART

Card games were among the most popular of games perhaps throughout history. One reason for such popularity is perhaps the fact that the player or players only needed a pack of 52 cards, or the required number for other card games besides Whist.

George Washington was born on February 22, 1732 and died on the evening of December 14, 1799, at his home.

Following is a rather brief description of passages from his biographies, as excerpted from their publications. The inclusion of such excerpts is only to show the passion of not only George Washington, but also of the men who followed him into the war against the United Kingdom to achieve independence.

## George Washington: Farmer

by Paul Leland Haworth, Part 3 out of 4

Nor was he puritanical in respect to cards. From his account books we find that he ordered them by the dozen packs, and his diaries contain such entries as "At home all day over cards, it snowing." To increase the interest he not infrequently played for money, though rarely for a large amount. "Loo" and whist seem to have been the games played, but not "bridge" or draw poker, which were then unknown.

From entries in his cash memorandum books it is evident that he loved a quiet game rather frequently. Thus in his memorandum for 1772 I find the entry for September five: "To Cash won at cards" L1.5. Four days later he writes: "To Cash won at Cards at Mrs. Calverts" ten shillings. But on September 17th he lost L1.5; on September 30th, L2, and on October 5th, six shillings. Two days later his luck changed and he won L2.5, while on the seventh he won L12.8. This was the most serious game that I have found a record of, and the cards must either have run well for him or else he had unskilful opponents. The following March, when attending the Burgesses at Williamsburg, he got into a game, probably at Mrs. Campbell's tavern, where he took his meals, and dropped L7.10.

In one of his account books I find two pages devoted to striking a balance between what he won and what he lost from January 7, 1772, to January 1, 1775. In that time he won L72.2.6 and lost L78.5.9. Hence we find the entry: "By balance against Play from Jany. 1772 to this date ... L6.3.3." But he must have had a lot of fun at a cost of that six pounds three shillings and three pence!

It should be remarked here that gaming was then differently regarded in Virginia from what it is now. Many even of the Episcopal clergymen played cards for money and still kept fast hold upon their belief that they would go to Heaven.



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## Whist

by Trip Wiggins

**Background:** When I started this occasional column some years ago, I meant this to be one of the first games I described, but it sort of got buried someplace. We'll try again. Whist (also known as Whisk in "our day") has been around since at least the mid 17th century as Cotton's *The Compleat Gamester* says the game was so well known he need not include the rules in his book. In fact he stated that *Ruff and Honours* and *Whist* "are games so commonly known in England in all parts thereof, that every child almost of eight years old hath a competent knowledge in that recreation." It has changed much over the intervening three centuries, but we'll concentrate on the 18th century rules. Whist is the grandfather of Bridge [Ruff & Honors the great-grandfather], but, luckily for us, with far fewer rules to remember. It was normally a fun game rather than high-stakes gambling. In Virginia, Whist appears in many diaries including George Washington, Robert Wormeley Carter, John Mercer, and John Harrower. By the way, our old friend Samuel Johnson's Dictionary has this to say about Whist: *A game at cards, requiring close attention and silence.*

Col. William Byrd of Westover in the late 1730s received a letter from an English friend who wrote, "You must understand that a *Sertain game upon the Cards* call'd Whisk (much in vogue these last three or four years) has engaged the Men of all ages to keep company with Women more than ever any thing did before; 'tis apparent there are much stronger charms belonging to Cards, than any of the female sex can boast of, for till Whisk came in fashion a reasonable Man would have thought his character forfeited for ever had it been known that he spent six evenings in a week in the company of Women"

**Number of Players: 4**

**Equipment: Standard 52-card deck**

**The Play:** Draw for partners (the 2 highest cards partner, the remaining two likewise). In case of a tie, those two will draw again for their respective positions. (Ace is LOW for the initial draw only.) Example: 9 – 5 – 5 – 3. 9 is team 1, 3 on team 2. The 5's redraw and the highest will go with team 1, the other to team 2. Low card is dealer.

Partners sit across from each other, opponents to their left and right. (Sometimes players chose their own teams.)

Dealer shuffles, player to right cuts. Dealer deals all cards from left one card at a time. Last card is laid down face up to indicate Trump, then returns to the dealer's hand after first card is played.

"Elder" hand (to left of dealer) leads. Play moves from clockwise, with each player following suit if possible. If a player has none of the led suit, he may play a trump or some other suit. Once all players have laid down a card, the Trick is complete, and the highest card (Ace HIGH) in the suit led wins the Trick unless a Trump is played, in which case, it beats all cards of the led suit. If more than one player plays a Trump, the highest Trump wins the Trick. If Trump is lead, all players MUST play a Trump if they have one. Winner of the trick leads the next trick. Play continues until all cards have been played.

**Revoke:** If a player has the suit led in his hand, but plays another suit, he loses three points (3 Tricks) which are given to his opponents. (Must be challenged by opponent.) In some variations, the Revoke is not mentioned at all, so it is used if the players desire before the game starts.

**Scoring:** The game is comprised of a Rubber of three hands (aka "games") each. A complete game can be more than one Rubber, as determined by the players beforehand.

1. When a team has taken six Tricks they are said to have "made book." Any Trick over 6 counts as one point. (E.g., 7 tricks equals 1 pt, 8 equals 2, etc.)
2. If a team holds in its Tricks the Ace, King, Queen and Jack of Trump at the end of the hand, they have scored "Honors" and are awarded an additional 4 points. If three of the four cards, 3 points. If less, no additional points. In some variations, Honor points are NOT given. Again, this variation will be decided upon by the players before the game starts.
3. A team that wins a hand wins 5 points.

**Example:** Team 1 has won 9 tricks; team 2 won 4 tricks. Team 2 got the Ace, King, Queen and Jack of Trump.

**Their scores:**

Team 1: 3 points; Team 2: 4 points; thus Team 2 is the winner of the hand and receives 5 points. If honors are not scored, then Team one would have won the round 3 points to 0, and thus be awarded the 5 points. 4. A Rubber is won by the first team to win two of the three hands or 10 points. In some variations, the winning team is that team that first scores 5 points from scoring per rule 1 only (above).

Pick your style, and have fun!

**Sources:**

Nelson, Walter. *The Merry Gamester*  
Morehead, Albert. *Hoyle's Rules of Games*  
Cotton, Charles. *The Compleat Gamester*  
Carson, Jane. *Colonial Virginians at Play*

During the late eighteenth century, card games were enjoyed as a fashionable after-dinner alternative to music in private homes in the Southern and Middle Atlantic colonies. When Abigail Adams, a New Englander, visited Philadelphia in 1791, she was aghast: "I should have a winter of dissipation indeed, if I accepted all my invitations to routs [big parties] and tea and-cards." One of the best cardplayers in Philadelphia was Mary Morris, wife of the financier Robert Morris; another was Lucy Knox, whose husband, Gen. Henry Knox, was Washington's chief artilleryman. The games of loo and whist were the most common in such circles.

A typical colonist in attitude was the untypical man George Washington, who was content to gamble at cards all day, especially if it was raining out. According to his ledgers—and assuming that in this one specific case a gambler's own records can be trusted—he broke even overall, despite a stinging stretch from January 1768 to April 1769, when he never won once, and lost a total of twelve pounds, ten shillings, and threepence.

As a soldier, however, Washington had far greater problems with gambling, that by the men in the ranks. In 1756, when he was the leader of the Virginia militia, he was warned that he would lose the support of the Virginia House of Burgesses if he could not do a better job of controlling gambling among his men. During the Revolutionary War, as commander in chief of the Continental Army, he issued vehement orders against all "games of chance," but the fact that he had to issue such orders regularly indicates the frustration he faced over the issue. Even at Valley Forge, where men were freezing and going hungry for lack of supplies—or, especially at Valley Forge, where morale was so low among the troops - gambling was rampant, and it was a keen concern for General Washington.

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