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Washington's hemp seed love

I was in Polo, Illinois talking hemp with retired farmer Paul Fossler, who had the rare experience of legally growing hemp (cannabis). Fossler wasn't merely allowed to grow hemp – he was encouraged by the US government during World War II. His interview appears in a documentary on the subject called *Government Grown: How Polo Illinois Helped Win the War*. Like fellow farmer George Washington, Fossler grew hemp for the good of his country.

Why hemp? – **Because it's awesome**. It can be used for clothing, food and fuel without negative environmental effects. Those facts have been known for thousands of years. Today hemp seed is hailed as a **superfood** because of its ratio of Omega-3 to -6 fats – though it's illegal for American farmers to grow it. Making hemp legal for farming is obvious. That's not our seed of dispute; instead, we want to direct your attention to Washington's hemp farming, and in particular, *his hemp seed love*.

The seeds from the hemp plant have been a superfood in any century (not just our own). Washington harvested these seeds for 34 years. He first grew hemp in 1765 – more than a decade before becoming a revolutionary. At this time he was a Virginian, an elite plantation owner, and a subject of the King of England. As we talk about his hemp seed love, keep in mind Washington's slaves were working his hemp fields.

Hemp was grown in Virginia from its founding; in 1607 colonists were harvesting fiber and seed. A dozen years later it was mandated that every colonist grow 100 plants to support the colony – with the Governor boasting he would grow 5,000!

Washington became familiar with hemp in 1765 as he began to grow it as a cash crop. He was making some money growing tobacco and shipping it to London markets. But tobacco farming was depleting his soil – something hemp wouldn't do.

His need for another cash crop coincided with the British Empire's call for hemp. The King and Parliament passed a law putting a **"bounty" on hemp**. A bounty was an extra payment for a crop deemed beneficial to the crown. In practical terms, a bounty was used to increase the price a farmer could expect. Hemp was to be grown in the colonies by farmers like Washington, and then transported to London where it would be made into sails and ropes for British ships. At the height of the Revolutionary War, the Virginia Assembly would pass its own **hemp bounty**. (Hint: are you beginning to see hemp's importance?)

Hemp history is generally told from the fiber perspective, producing a focus on hemp as a war material. Another history is told by looking at the life-giving aspects of hemp

seed, where the focus is on nutrition and the stars are the perfectly balanced Omega fatty acids.

“Washington’s Diaries” provide a historical record of his first hemp crop. The diaries read more like a farmer’s almanac. These aren’t his intimate thoughts. They are grow-notes from a dedicated businessman. His first recorded hemp note in 1765 begins with a May planting:

*May 12-13: “Sowed **Hemp** at Muddy hole by Swamp.”*

*May 16: “Sowed **Hemp** at the head of the Meadow at Doeg Run & about Southwards Houses with the Barrel.”*

These two farms – Muddy Hole and Doeg Run – were part of the Mount Vernon lands and where Washington planted his hemp crops. There are no hemp entries again until three months later. Washington checks on his plants at Doeg Run and is a bit disappointed ...

*August 7: “Began to separate the Male from the Female **hemp** at Do—rather too late.”*

Here is an informed farmer. Hemp is a sexed plant. This means there are male and female plants. When growing for seed, after pollination of course, the males only limit the growth of the females by competing for sun and soil. That is why the males should have been separated. His annoyance with time – “rather too late” – shows, as we’ll see below, that this was his seed patch.

By early September and into October, Washington checks on and harvests his crop of hemp for seed:

*September 4: “Began to Pull the **Seed Hemp** but it was not sufficiently ripe.”*

*September 25: “**Hempseed** seems to be in good order for getting – that is of a proper ripeness—but oblige to desist to pull my fodder.”*

*October 10: “Finishd pulling **Seed Hemp** at River Plantation.”*

The harvest is complete. We can glean from the historical record that Washington harvested 5000 pounds of hemp fiber in 1765. There is one more entry for the year regarding **hemp seed**. Washington, while making a note about sowing winter wheat, makes mention of the hemp seed and its harvest:

*October 31: “Finished sowing Wheat in **Hemp** Ground at Rivr. Plantn. & plowed in a good deal of shattered **Hemp Seed—27 Bushls. in all 152.**”*

Washington’s first “Hemp Seed” harvest was 152 bushels – quite impressive. He also mentions spreading 27 bushels of “shattered Hemp Seed.” If you mill hemp seed you can collect the oil – with the shattered seed being plowed in with the winter wheat as a natural fertilizer. All that seed would have produced a lot of hemp oil – estimated at 80 to 100

gallons. That **superfood-oil** would have been a valuable commodity on a plantation with many needs and feeding hundreds of people.

Now speed forward to 1789-97 and Washington's presidency. POTUS 1 signed a tariff law in 1792 to protect and promote American hemp – which he was growing. He was also still interested in his hemp seed. As POTUS 1 he writes home to Mount Vernon in 1796 with an important hemp question:

*“What was done with the Seed saved from the India Hemp last summer? It ought, all of it, to have been sown again; that not only a stock of seed sufficient for my own purposes might have been raised, but to have disseminated the seed to others; as it is **more valuable than the common Hemp.**”*

Our presidential hempster was pretty hot for hemp seed – even to the point of disseminating “the seed to others.” He also is growing two kinds of hemp from seed – India Hemp and common Hemp. It was the hemp seed, that life-containing seed and its natural goodness, which held Washington's attention throughout his career.

In one of his last letters, a now retired POTUS 1 and farmer again, Washington still had hemp on his mind. On 3 December 1799, he opens a letter with – “*Dear Sir: Have you succeeded, or are you likely to succeed, in procuring the **Hemp seed** I required?*”

This seed would have been required for next year's planting – a season he never saw. Washington died on 14 December, eleven days after the letter, concluding 34 years as a hemp grower. One can say it clearly – he was a hempster to the end.

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Search terms

George Washington's Diaries and hemp; hemp superfood; hemp oil; Omega-3 and Omega-6 EFAs; *Government Grown Polo IL*; Kentucky's 1943 Hemp Seed Project for 4H Clubs; Marc Emery.

Research and selected readings

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