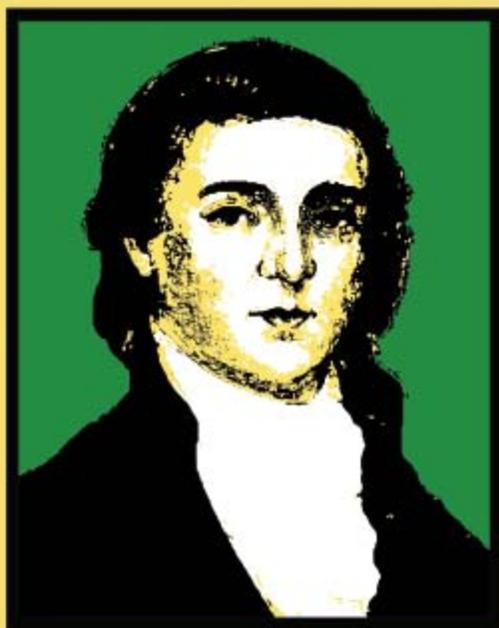


GENERAL THOMAS POSEY

SON OF THE
AMERICAN
REVOLUTION



by John Thornton Posey

GENERAL THOMAS POSEY
SON OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION



**GENERAL THOMAS POSEY
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John Thornton Posey

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INTRODUCTION

Next let us praise illustrious men. . . .
Some of them left a name behind them,
 so that their praises are still sung,
While others have left no memory,
 and disappeared as though they had not existed,
They are now as though they had never been. . . .
Ecclesiasticus, 44:1, 8-9*

A casual browser, coming upon this volume in a library or bookstore, might well wonder who Thomas Posey was and why a book would be written about his life. Widely known and respected in his own time, his name is unfamiliar to recent generations, and his memory has all but disappeared, as though he had never existed.

Posey was a brave soldier and an outstanding public statesman. His lifetime spanned one of the most exciting and meaningful periods of modern history—the creation and early formative years of the United States. He was by birth a member, and by achievement a notable representative, of what must surely be regarded as the most remarkable and prolific generation to grace this nation. This generation, born between 1725 and 1760, was courageous enough to fight and win the “glorious cause” of freedom and independence, wise enough to create a durable system of democratic government, and enterprising enough to launch a flourishing new society on the unsettled western frontier. In all these grand endeavors Thomas Posey played an active and constructive role. While admittedly not in the first rank of the founding fathers, the cumulative total of his many contributions to the historic events of his era stands out as a truly exceptional and productive life’s work.

A life of such proportions has significance and deserves recall and recognition, not only on its own merits, but also as a prototype of many other uncelebrated yet dedicated patriots of Posey’s generation, whose worthy but obscure lives adorned their singular era in time. Clearly there were countless other such now-forgotten men

**The Jerusalem Bible*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 442-443.

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who, after fighting for a cause even before there was a country, went on to help establish a government and forge a nation—men who, like Thomas Posey, up to this time have had no biographers. Yet, but for their aggregate efforts and sacrifices history strongly suggests that the revolutionary dream of a democratic society would have failed and life as we know it today in our world would be altered beyond all imagination.

Although Posey's origin is uncertain and his early life and upbringing are not fully documented, he is generally believed to have spent his formative years on the Potomac River adjacent to George Washington's Mount Vernon estate in Fairfax County, Virginia. At an early age and with a limited education, he was forced by financial and family adversity to strike out on his own to the sparsely settled Virginia frontier, where he emerged as a young entrepreneur in the saddlery trade. His first military experience—with an expedition of frontier militiamen sent against the warlike Shawnee Indians beyond the towering Appalachian range—culminated in a bloody, day-long battle along the banks of the Ohio River at Point Pleasant, (now West Virginia).

Posey was an early, eager, and valiant fighter in the American Revolution. His seven years of continuous service in the Virginia Continental line took him from the frozen Great Lakes in the north to the malaria-ridden swamps of south Georgia. His outstanding war record contains documented evidence of repeated acts of personal bravery and resourceful leadership in many military engagements. He fought in, among other battles, the decisive American victories at Saratoga and Yorktown and was wounded in an heroic assault upon the British stronghold of Stony Point on New York's Hudson River, emerging from the conflict a renowned and respected lieutenant-colonel.

In the peaceful interlude following the war Posey married into a patrician family and settled into a new role as a gentleman-planter in his native Virginia, raising a large family while remaining active in national, state and local civic affairs. Posey interrupted this comfortable country lifestyle only once, to serve a tour of duty as brigadier-general in a major expedition against a hostile Native American federation in the Northwest Territory. Soon thereafter, seeking new challenges and following a course pursued by many of his fellow Revolutionary War veterans, he moved his household to the primitive but rapidly expanding western frontier. There, in the last decades of his life, he made many significant contributions in high public office to the formation and development of four new states—as Lieutenant-Governor of Kentucky, United States

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Senator from Louisiana, Governor of Indiana Territory, and finally as U.S. Agent for Indian Affairs in Illinois Territory.

The first half-century of Thomas Posey's life was repeatedly and inextricably linked to that of his childhood neighbor and later military and governmental mentor, George Washington. This association, along with personal relationships of varying closeness with Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe, John Marshall, Henry Lee and other influential Virginians, launched Posey's post-war civic activities in his native state and enhanced his wide-ranging public career on the western frontier. But as time and distance diminished the influence of national gentry leadership in these emerging states, and a new generation of young, state-oriented populist leaders rose to power, his political fortunes waned. At a time when Federalist extremists in the eastern states were reviled as aristocratic and monarchistic, Posey's fierce nationalism and dedication to a strong central government were perceived as anti-republican. As a result, he lost as many electoral contests in the west as he won, and some of his highest posts came through political appointment, including his crowning achievement as an effective and unifying governor of faction-torn Indiana Territory.

Thomas Posey had his faults and human frailties. Personal vanity, as much as an outraged sense of honor, impelled him, as a young major, to complain directly to commander-in-chief George Washington when General Anthony ("Mad Anthony") Wayne denied him special commendation after the storming of Stony Point. Later, along with other Virginia officers, he threatened to resign his commission after being ordered to embark upon a distant winter campaign without adequate clothing or supplies. In both instances he withdrew his complaints after learning that they had caused acute discomfort and embarrassment to General Washington. Once, in the heat of battle, Posey struck down with his sword one of his own men after mistaking him for an enemy in the darkness; he apologized profusely to the badly wounded sergeant the next day. In his later public career, his retention of two former slaves as indentured servants lent an ambivalent cast to his public position on the politically-explosive issue of slavery in Indiana Territory.

A man of generally meticulous personal integrity and probity, Thomas was not always a good or discerning judge of the characters or motives of others. Several times during his adult life he was financially victimized by unscrupulous or irresponsible men. During the Northwest campaign he felt himself compelled to resign his prized brigadier-general's commission after finding himself caught in a ruthless power struggle between two higher-ranked generals,

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both of whom considered him a friend and supporter. A single, ill-advised public appearance with the charismatic but delusive former vice-president, Aaron Burr, probably cost Posey the governorship of Kentucky. Finally, he unaccountably chose to maintain an old wartime friendship with the machiavellian General James Wilkinson, long after that “tarnished warrior,” a longtime secret agent of Spain, had fallen into disrepute.

Never wealthy, Thomas struggled throughout his life to give his numerous children the educational advantages, stable home environment, and positive paternal role model that he himself had been denied. Although in the end he perceived himself to have failed in many of these cherished goals, it is perhaps a mark of his success as a husband and father that numbered among his ten adult children were a doctor, a lawyer, a pioneering woman educator, a legendary army colonel, and several successful merchants and businessmen. One or more of his issue settled permanently in each of the four frontier states in which he served to become leaders of their communities and founders of local educational or religious institutions.

Some years after his death, an undocumented but persistent tradition arose. It was widely disseminated and accepted as fact throughout the Midwest and seriously addressed in many reputable publications that Thomas Posey had actually been the natural son of George Washington. Although the evidence of such a paternal relationship is circumstantial and speculative, it has never been conclusively refuted, but Posey’s importance and claim to fame do not rest upon this unproven mythic folklore. Nevertheless, a strong case can be made that Washington was truly the spiritual, if not the biological, father of Thomas Posey.

The subject of this biography was in his own right an illustrious man well worth remembering. He was arguably the very archetype of a generation of entirely dissimilar individuals who were forged by the unifying crucible of the revolutionary struggle into a dynamic, irresistible force. Some of these same men and women, not content with the laurels won in founding and nurturing a new nation, then turned westward to lend their considerable energies and talents to the expansion and development of that nation. Thomas Posey, a true son of the American Revolution, was one of those productive pioneers, typifying the best and brightest of his extraordinary times. In recounting and documenting the impact of his life upon those times this book aspires to memorialize the first and to illuminate the latter.

CHAPTER
ONE
(1750-1774)

“ . . . born of respectable parentage. . . . ”

He was born of respectable parentage near the Potomack in Virginia in the year 1750 9th of July. In the year 1769 being a young man without fortune, but of tolerable english education he set out in quest of a situation in life that would better his fortune, and settled in the back parts of Virginia near the frontiers. . . .¹

When Indiana territorial governor Thomas Posey sat down at his desk near the end of his life to compose a detailed autobiographical sketch he chose, for whatever reasons, to devote only eighteen words to his birth, parentage, and his first nineteen years of life. Nowhere in his many surviving letters and other writings is any reference made to the existence or identity of his forebears, parents, brothers or sisters, nor to the circumstances and conditions of his childhood or youthful upbringing. No known birth, marriage, church, death or burial records provide any clue to this missing data, and his name never appears in the contemporary writings or official records of this early period of his life. The very totality of this void has itself become the basis of much speculation and conjecture. In short, his origin and family background constitute the least-known aspects of Posey's long and otherwise well-documented life.

The great weight of scholarly authority holds that Thomas was a member of the household of one Captain John Posey, a colorful if

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somewhat irresponsible neighbor of George Washington. Captain Posey's home, called "Rover's Delight," was sited on land overlooking the Potomac River, directly adjacent to Washington's Mount Vernon estate in Fairfax County, Virginia. The capricious captain's twenty-five-year social and financial relationship with George Washington has exposed him and his family to unusually-close scrutiny by generations of historians, researchers and biographers of his more renowned neighbor and friend. The considered judgment of many highly respected scholars—among them Dr. J. M. Toner, John C. Fitzpatrick, Rupert Hughes, Nathaniel Wright Stephenson and Waldo Hilary Dunn, Charles W. Stetson, Elswyth Thane, and James Thomas Flexner—places young Thomas within the troubled Posey family circle at Rover's Delight for the first nineteen years of his life.² Since, however, no authority has ever cited any documented evidence to support this view, it must still be considered a presumptive, if probable, hypothesis.

An objective examination of what is actually known of Thomas Posey discloses many similarities to George Washington in character, personality and temperament. Perhaps it was these shared qualities that led these scholars and other observers to conclude that the young man's formative years were indeed spent in near proximity to Mount Vernon, where he would have been exposed almost daily to the outstanding example and benign influence of its high-principled squire. In Posey's mature years, the many interactions between the two men arguably support, and certainly do nothing to contradict, the presumption of a close early relationship. Furthermore, there is no known record of any other Posey family, fitting Thomas' autobiographical time and place specifics, from which he could have sprung. Accordingly, the consensus of the cited authorities that Rover's Delight was the household in which Thomas Posey was nurtured and grew to manhood, though admittedly conjectural, is too unanimous and credible to be seriously challenged.

Infinitely more speculative, however, are stories which began to circulate more than a half-century after his death claiming that Posey had really been George Washington's son. These reports were based not only on the known contiguity of the Washington and Posey families in Fairfax County but also on real or perceived similarities in their physical appearance, personal attributes, characters, and achievements. Such startling assertions were unfailingly advanced with fanciful but plausible scenarios, usually supported by totally circumstantial evidence. This basic premise appears to have originated in the Midwest and later became imbedded in the

oral tradition or folklore of many of the states where Posey held high public offices in his later career. Such rumors spread throughout the nation and persisted for many decades in newspaper feature articles as well as in the biographical sketches of reputable publications. They were seriously discussed in at least three leading biographies of Washington.³ The sources, substance and evaluation of these widespread accounts of a paternal relationship between George Washington and Thomas Posey are extensively addressed in Appendix A of this volume.

After more than two centuries, it is highly unlikely that Posey's real parentage or lineage will ever be established with absolute historical certitude. The absence of this basic but critical genetic data lends added significance to the environmental influences that shaped his character and demands closer examination of the particular circumstances and conditions of his upbringing. Thus, from his birth in 1750 to his departure in 1769, young Thomas' life story is inextricably linked to the sorry saga of Captain John Posey—a man characterized by one eminent biographer of Washington, perhaps unfairly, as “that prince of scapegraces.”⁴ A more balanced and charitable assessment might adjudge the captain to have been a tragi-comic figure, whose obvious flaws and human failings seem even more glaring in the reflected light of his illustrious neighbor's nobility. These two disparate men—John Posey and George Washington—were the role models of Thomas Posey, the child and youth. Their unlikely and uneasy relationship during his maturation is the backdrop to his experience of growing up in an unstable and deteriorating domestic setting, next door to the dignified and disciplined household at Mount Vernon.

The precise time of the arrival in Fairfax County of John Posey, a native Marylander,⁵ is uncertain. His first recorded presence there was his appointment as “processioner” of Truro Parish in May 1751,⁶ and the earliest confirmation of his marriage to Martha Price Harrison was on 27 June 1752.⁷ Martha, the widow of George Harrison who died on or about 21 March 1749,⁸ was a substantial freeholder in the county. A record defining her status as a widow dated 26 June 1750,⁹ just two weeks before Thomas Posey's known birth date, strongly indicates that she was not his natural mother. Thus, Thomas must have been John Posey's son by an earlier marriage or an unsanctioned union—or he might have been brought later into the household of John and Martha Posey as an adopted or foster child.

During the first decade of their marriage—that of the 1750s—the Poseys' family and fortunes grew and flourished. In addition to

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substantial Harrison lands Martha brought to the marriage, John won from the Virginia House of Burgesses a coveted license to operate a public ferry across the Potomac River to Maryland.¹⁰ He operated the Virginia side of the franchise from six acres of riverfront land initially leased and later purchased from Thomas Hanson Marshall, owner of Marshall Hall, the Maryland terminus of the ferry.¹¹ There, on a high bluff overlooking the stately river below, he built for himself and his family a fine home he chose to call "Rover's Delight." The name implies that Posey's past life had been restless or unsettled—a trait that was to continue to characterize him throughout his life.

The structure not only accommodated his growing family, but was large enough to house and feed transient ferry passengers; although not a publicly licensed inn, his ferry advertisements proudly boasted "Private Entertainment kept at the Subscriber's House for Man and Horse."¹² Thus, through the hospitable doors of Rover's Delight, before the alert eyes of the young and impressionable Thomas Posey, passed a panorama of travelers of every class and level of colonial society—from the aristocratic Fairfaxes and eminent gentry like the Washingtons and the George Masons, to the humblest tradesmen, artisans, laborers and slaves. Posey added to his Harrison farms by purchasing from George Washington's youngest brother, Charles, 200 acres of land on the estuary of Dogue Run, a stream flowing into the Potomac just below the ferry landing.¹³ There he built a fishing landing and curing sheds, in which he processed for local sale and consumption plentiful catches of shad, herring, bass, carp, perch and sturgeon, all seined and prepared by his slaves from the waters where the creek emptied into the river.¹⁴

During this decade of material growth, several younger siblings joined Thomas in the Posey household. Martha Posey bore at least four children, John Price, Amelia (Milly), Hanson and St. Lawrence,¹⁵ and possibly a fifth, William.¹⁶ The family was not wealthy enough to afford a resident tutor, but the older children at least received a good basic schooling—the "tolerable english education" mentioned in Thomas' autobiography. Until the family fragmented in 1769, the children probably studied intermittently at one of the Free Schools attended by the offspring of other freeholders of rural Fairfax County, but none of them appear to have advanced beyond the secondary level of education.

John Posey was a frequent and often involuntary party to litigation in the local Fairfax County courts. His most serious legal dispute, extending over most of a decade, was a running battle over

land boundaries with John West, Jr. West was both the Executor of George Harrison's will, and as his nephew was the sole residuary devisee of all of Harrison's lands when death terminated Martha's dower life interest in those properties.¹⁷ The case eventually transcended legal issues and became a bitter personal feud between West and Posey, a factor which was to contribute to the latter's eventual financial collapse.

In the spring of 1758, Posey left his young family to pursue a brief soldierly career, during which he acquired the military title by which he was thereafter known by his contemporaries, and later by historians. As a militia captain, he capably led a company of "artificers," serving under George Washington in the French and Indian War. In a six-month campaign to drive the enemy from the strategic frontier post at Fort Duquesne (now Pittsburgh), General John Forbes' combined British-colonial force advanced over the formidable Appalachian range. The job of the artificers, the combat engineers of their day, was to cut a trail through the thick forests, to construct bridges across numerous streams, and to clear and fortify advance camp sites for the main army following some distance behind.¹⁸ Posey and his men were later awarded special compensation for their service, often performed while exposed to sniping and harassment from Indian and French raiding parties.¹⁹

It is not difficult to envision how eight-year-old Thomas' imagination could be galvanized as Captain Posey related his "war stories" (perhaps embellished by time and distance) to his wife and children around the family fireside. The boy was probably a spellbound audience as the captain re-lived campaign experiences with Washington over a glass of wine during one of the colonel's frequent visits to Rover's Delight while making his daily ride around his beloved Mount Vernon farms. These occasions would have inspired many boyhood games and fantasies; perhaps they sowed seeds that were to flower fifteen years later at another wilderness confrontation along the Ohio with the Indian enemy, at the battle of Point Pleasant. The military influence at Rover's Delight did not end with the Forbes expedition. Captain Posey maintained his militia connections for another four years, with occasional active service on the frontier, notably during Colonel William Byrd's campaign against the Cherokee Indians in south western Virginia. He later collected £137 in bounty money and subsistence pay for recruiting, housing, and training militiamen on his Dogue Run tract during this period.²⁰

Tragically, the decade of the 1760s was to bring the financial and personal ruin of Captain John Posey, with devastating impact upon