

George Washington's Strawberry Jell-O Shots

by Lynne Belluscio

The day started out wet and got wetter. I was bringing a bus load of folks from LeRoy to George Washington's Mount Vernon and as soon as we got off the bus the umbrellas went up. My advice to anyone going to Mount Vernon – don't go with a large group, avoid spring break and don't go when it's raining. The rain was so heavy we couldn't see the Potomac River.

As we slogged up to the mansion, the water was literally a flowing torrent toward us. We had a "hurry-up" tour of the Mansion and a walking tour of the grounds. Unfortunately we found out later we had missed the sixteen-sided barn that Washington had built for threshing wheat. John Sackett had the honor to place the memorial wreath at Washington's tomb. (My eight-year-old grandson Evan would rather call it Washington's *sarcophagus*. "It's a better word, Grandma.")

Before we had lunch, we were scheduled to "meet" a historic figure from Washington's time. We were sitting ready for lunch when in walked Dr. James Craik, (portrayed by Thomas Plott). Craik was a close friend of George Washington for over forty years and was considered Washington's family doctor. He was born in Scotland and after studying medicine at the University of Edinburgh he served as an army surgeon in the West Indies for the British. Craik then went into private practice in Norfolk, Virginia.

In 1754 he joined the Virginia Provincial Regiment as a surgeon and met Lt. Col. George Washington. The two young men were in several battles of the French and Indian War, including General Edward Braddock's unsuccessful attempt to recapture the region in 1755. It was Craik who attended Braddock after he was fatally wounded. Craik then served under George Washington in actions in Virginia and Maryland.

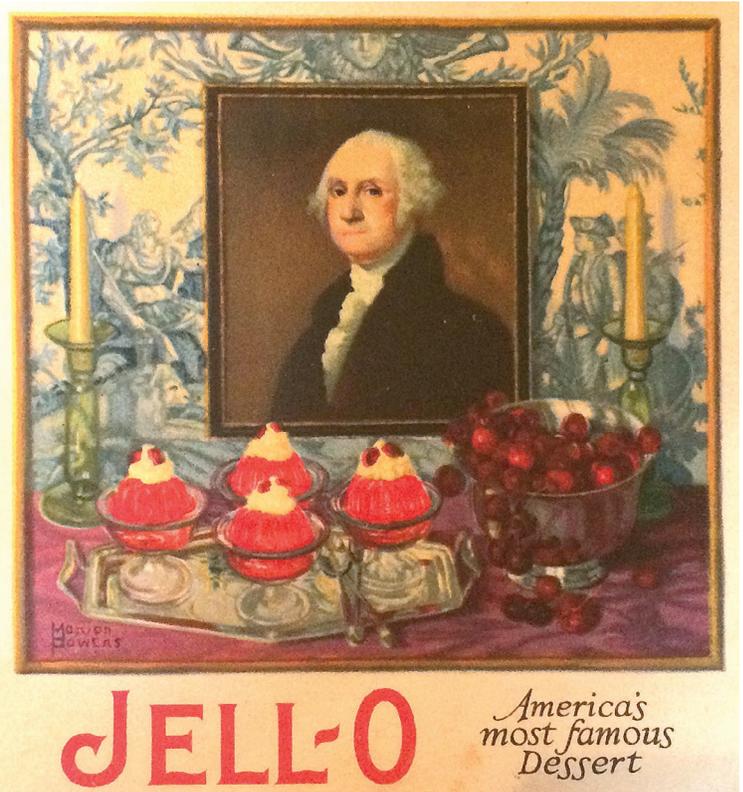
After the war, he continued working with Washington, accompanying him on surveying expeditions. During the Revolutionary War, Craik served as an army surgeon, and cared for Lafayette when he was wounded. We learned from the good doctor, that the story about Washington cutting down the cherry tree was a fabricated story,

as was the story about George throwing a silver dollar across the Potomac River. In fact, he pointed out, there were no silver dollars at that time. Craik was one of the doctors at Washington's bedside when he died on December 14, 1779. Washington was sixty-seven.

After Dr. Craik's presentation, he offered to answer any questions. Joanne Graham piped up and asked, "What was Washington's favorite Jell-O flavor?" Dr. Craik shot back - - "If he had lived to 1897, I'm sure his favorite flavor would have been like his favorite flavor of ice cream - - - strawberry!" I looked at Joanne and said "How could he know that Jell-O was invented in 1897!! That's such a random fact." Craik went on to tell us that Washington also enjoyed oysters, but oysters and Jell-O probably wouldn't be very good.

A few minutes later Dr. Craik broke out of character, and Joanne and I asked him how did he ever know that Jell-O was invented in 1897. He said that as a kid growing up, his father always told him that if you really like something you should know about it, and he really liked Jell-O and learned that Jell-O was invented in 1897. He said that he really surprised himself with being able to pull that date up from his memory and just hoped it was correct. "So you didn't know that we were from the Jell-O Museum?" "No," he said and if he was pulling our leg, he was a good enough actor that we believed him. So we're sending Thomas Plott a package, with a strawberry Jell-O shirt, and a few boxes of strawberry Jell-O, for making a really wet and soggy day, one to remember. I'm also making him a copy of the Jell-O recipe book with Washington's picture on the front. Of course it shows cherry Jell-O on the sideboard, but we won't dispute strawberry.

After all, Washington never told a lie and neither did his doctor. I'll probably put in a copy of the postcard with the Jell-O shot recipe on it. Because after we had lunch, we visited George Washington's distillery. Few people know that Washington had the largest distillery in the United States. He had stopped growing tobacco because it depleted the



soil. He turned to wheat and corn and built a gristmill. But he also discovered that it was cheaper and safer to ship whiskey instead of corn. Corn could get wet and spoil. Whiskey got better with age. So he built a distillery next to his mill. At the time of Washington's death in 1799, the five stills produced almost 11,000 gallons of whiskey. An inventory made in 1799 also included peach, apple and persimmon brandy, plain whiskey and cinnamon whiskey.

In 1999, archeologists began to uncover the foundation of the original distillery, which had burned and a few years ago, the distillery was rebuilt and each year several batches of whiskey are made at the Washington Distillery. A museum friend of mine, Tony Shahan, has volunteered the last couple of years at the Washington distillery, making whiskey. It's hot heavy work. All the water has to be carried by hand and the fires have to be stoked regularly to keep the still operating. I saw him at a museum conference a couple of weeks ago and he had just returned from two weeks at the distillery.

When our group walked into the mill,

I discovered another museum friend, Peter Curtis, who used to work at Phillipsburg Manor on the Hudson River. When Phillipsburg closed its farm demonstrations a couple of years ago, Peter went to Mount Vernon.

Each year, the Washington Distillery sells some of the whiskey that it makes. This year the whiskey will go on sale on May 16. It will be sold out in hours. So next year, on Washington's birthday, I'll toast the first president with a strawberry Jell-O shot but at \$175 a bottle, I don't think it would be wise to make it with Washington's whiskey.



Dr. James Craik, (portrayed by Thomas Plott).