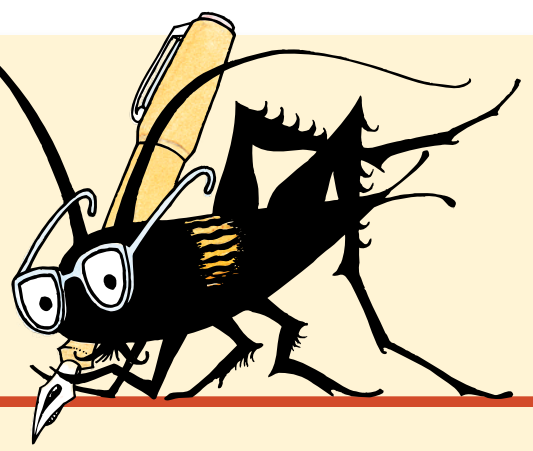




Old Cricket says



IN THE UNITED States, George Washington is honored as the “Father of Our Country.” But did you know he was also “Father of the American Mule”?

According to my friend Rosalie Lauerman, the first president often proclaimed that farming was one of his “most favorite amusements.” To improve American agricultural methods, which he criticized as “unproductive” and “ruinous,” Washington studied British books about the latest scientific ideas and exchanged letters with the authors. To increase his harvests, Washington experimented with enriching the soil with nutrients and planting a variety of crops in rotation. When he learned that farmers in Spain used mules for fieldwork, he wanted to try them at Mount Vernon, too. Hardly any mules—the offspring of male donkeys and female horses—existed in the young country, so Washington decided to breed his own.

In 1785, the king of Spain sent Washington a magnificent male donkey, Royal Gift. Unusually large and hardy, Royal Gift stood five feet tall, a foot taller than standard donkeys. His ears measured fourteen inches, slightly longer than a football.

By crossbreeding Royal Gift with his finest mares, Washington produced mules as strong and durable as Royal Gift, but livelier and faster. Keeping careful records, he found that mules worked longer and harder than horses, yet ate less. In time, mules replaced horses in Mount Vernon’s fields.

Convinced of the “extraordinary goodness” of his mules as a better and cheaper form of horsepower, Washington sent Royal Gift on a breeding tour. Americans had never seen such an impressive donkey. Royal Gift’s star power drew crowds and sparked interest in breeding mules. A hundred years later, nearly two million mules and donkeys were working in American fields.

“How much more delightful,” the former general—and enthusiastic first farmer—wrote, “is the task of making improvements on the earth, than all the vain glory . . . of conquests.”

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