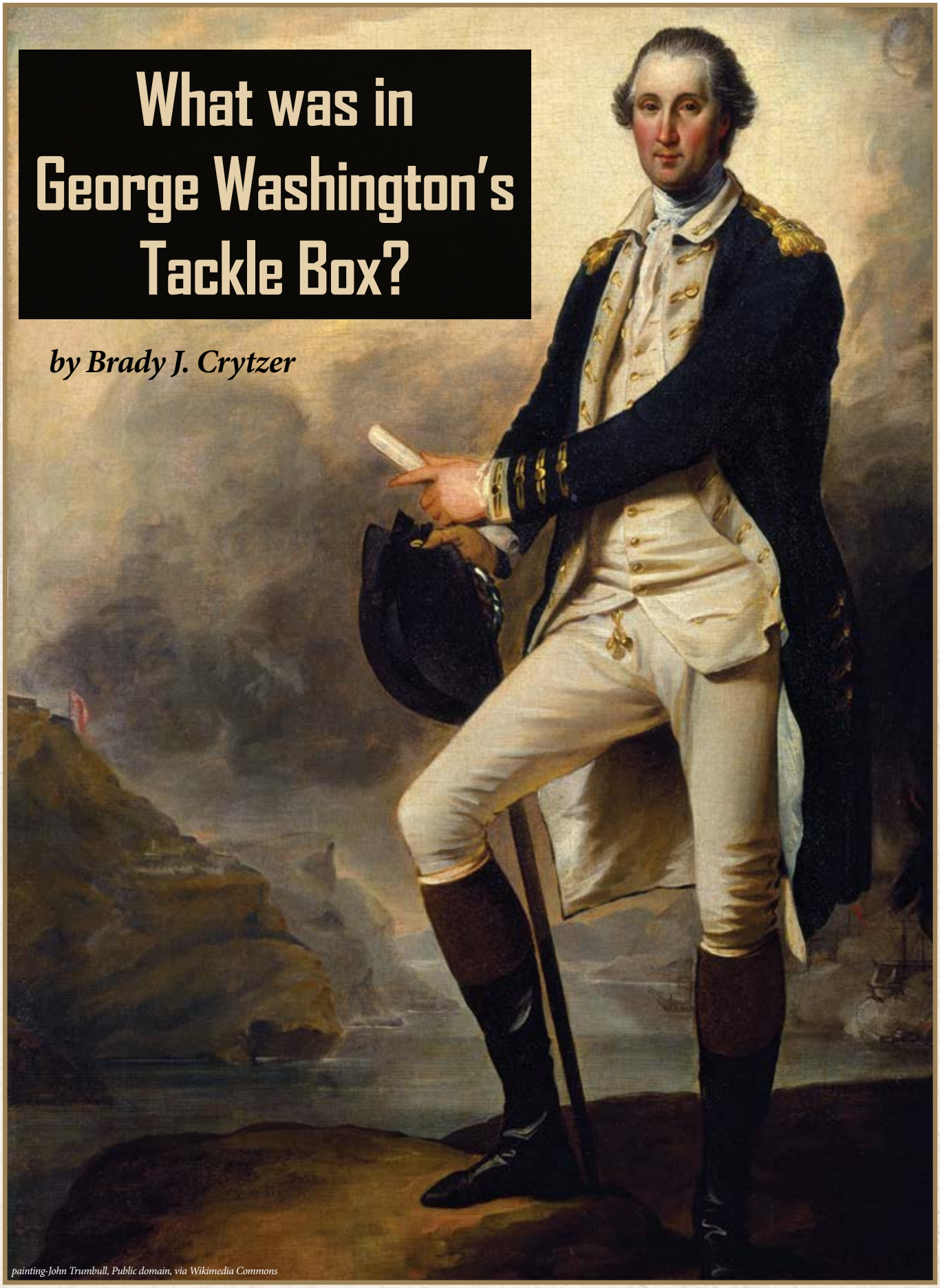
What was in George Washington's Tackle Box?

by Brady J. Crytzer



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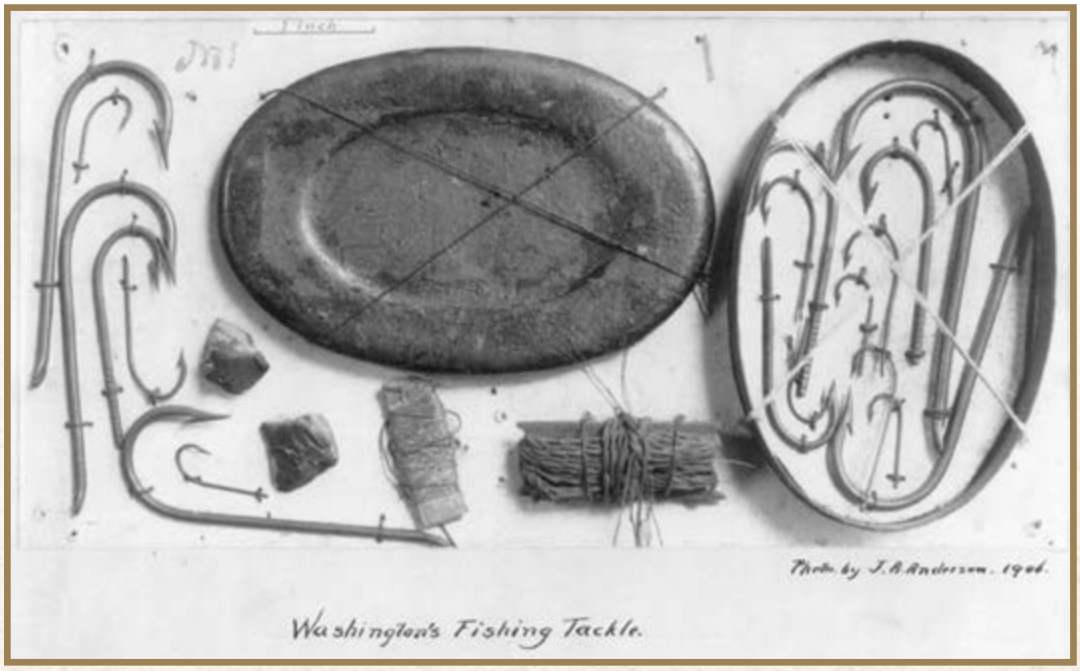

George Washington's fishing tackle.

photo-George Washington's Fishing Tackle., circa 1906. Oct. 30. Photograph. https://www.loc.gov/item/2004690240/

Long before he was America's first President, George Washington was an avid angler. Since his boyhood, the Virginian relaxed by fishing the Potomac River near his home estate at Mount Vernon. Washington carried the fate of a nation on his shoulders, but he still found time to bait a hook.

In his youth, Washington often spent his summers fishing with his brothers and remembered that their home waters were *"well supplied with various kinds of fish at all seasons of the year; and in the Spring with the greatest profusion of Shad, Herring, Bass, Carp, Perch, Sturgeon &ca."* As he grew into manhood, his fishing adventures only continued.

In September 1751, the 19-year-old Washington joined his older brother Lawrence on a voyage to the Caribbean Island of Barbados. En route, he received a practical education on the excitement of deep sea fishing. During their journey south, Washington wrote that his crewmates tangled with dolphinfish, sharks, "tigerfish" (barracudas) and pilot fish. Though his experience was mostly as an onlooker, the young Virginian was forever "hooked."

During his twenties, Washington fought for the British Crown in the dense wilderness of the Ohio River Valley. As he traipsed through the forests of western Pennsylvania, he noted the abundance of lakes, streams and rivers. When the war against France ended in 1763, he returned to the Ohio River to do some fishing. "We threw out some lines at night," he wrote, "and found a catfish of the size of our largest river cats hooked to it in the morning…"

Two decades later while the Constitutional Convention met in Philadelphia, he still managed to fish. In the sweltering heat of the summer in 1787, Washington decompressed by fishing for perch and trout while the other delegates negotiated the document that would become America's first framework of government.

Fishing was a different experience in the 18th century, but the tools of the trade are recognizable to any modern angler. Most of the equipment was made by hand and stressed function over form, and they were composed of natural materials. What was in George Washington's tackle box?

In 1762, Washington placed an order to a London merchant for "A Fishing Case for the Pocket—properly furnished with Line &ca." Today, this item remains in the collection of George Washington's Mount Vernon estate and museum. The small case measures 4½ inches across and is ¾ inches tall—the perfect size to slip into one's pocket. Unlike today's clunky, jangling tackle boxes, Washington's was small and easily hidden, ideal for a man on the move.

Inside the box were two styles of braided line. The first was made of coarse, black horse hair that was tightly woven. The dark color disguised it in the murky waters of the Potomac River, and the dense horse hair ensured it would be strong enough to wrangle whatever feisty game awaited it.

A second line stored inside the tackle box was made of fine silk. It was also strong but thin enough to be virtually invisible when in the water. These lines would be tied together in the style of a modern leader and tippet configuration and waterproofed with a small chunk of beeswax.

Including several eyeless hooks, the tiny tackle box was everything that an 18th century angler needed to land the big one. No fishing pole? No problem. Like many anglers of his day, Washington simply snagged a nearby piece of river cane to complete his rig. Although fly fishing was popular in his time, there's little evidence to suggest that Washington used anything but live bait.

George Washington found fishing to be the perfect stress reliever. Even with the weight of the world (or a nation) on his shoulders.

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