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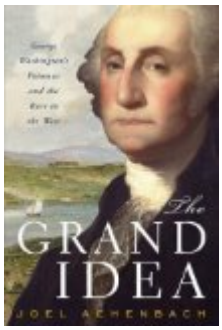

Joel Achenbach. *The Grand Idea: George Washington's Potomac and the Race to the West.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004. 384 pp. $14.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-7432-6300-9.

Reviewed by Kenneth R. Bowling

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Joel Achenbach is a journalist and his background comes through in both of the two very different parts of this fun-to-read book written for a popular audience. In the first part (chapters 1-10), Achenbach is the reporter as sleuth, carefully digging for information and checking its accuracy. As a result, factual errors are few and only one is serious: that the military demonstration in front of Independence Hall in 1783 was aimed at Congress rather than the State of Pennsylvania. This is a serious error because it is the myth used by the Supreme Court all these many decades as the primary reason why Congress must exercise exclusive jurisdiction over the District of Columbia. These ten chapters shine with the captivating imagery of a skilled and practiced writer who takes us through Washington's career as a young surveyor and soldier, as a frustrated landlord, as a transportation visionary, and as founder of the city named after him. Achenbach's chapter 4, "Ridge and Valley," captures the historical geography of the Potomac River watershed in ways reminiscent not only of Frederick Gutheim, but also of Francis Parkman and George Bancroft, whose descriptions of the area Achenbach quotes.

The author's interpretations of the facts he has dug from research in primary sources generally ring true. Occasionally he slips. The old canard that George Washington could have been king is simply nonsense: a revolutionary movement that sought to decapitate the executive branch of government was not about to make anyone king, not even Washington. Even after the counter-revolution of 1787-1788, the president was severely checked. Another canard repeated here is that "George Washington never ran for the presidency. He ran from it" (p. 157). On the contrary, the ambitious Washington understood the uses of history and knew that the only way to guarantee his legacy--and in the process advance the interests of the Potomac River and Alexandria, Virginia, about which Achenbach writes--was to embrace the presidency.

Finally, the author misunderstands the president's relationship with Peter Charles L'Enfant whose "exacting and uncompromising design" for the federal city needs to be understood as the

L'Enfant-Washington plan, one which the president and the ex-president tenaciously defended (p. 189). Washington did not fire L'Enfant; L'Enfant quit, but only after making Washington grovel, as the president desperately sought to retain his services.

Chapters 11-15 (a third of the book) are more the musings and particular interests of the journalist than an even-handed history of the Potomac from the death of Washington in 1799, up to 2004. All of these vignettes are entertaining, whether they be of the Cumberland Road, John Brown at Harper's Ferry, the saving of Mount Vernon, the Battle of Ball's Bluff, or the B&O and the C&O railroads. However, the language of these latter chapters is at points flippant and exaggerated, most notoriously where Achenbach describes Jefferson's federal government as a store-front boutique and his Monticello as inhabited by "countless mulattoes ... many looking remarkably like the Master" (pp. 224-225).

Despite these shortcomings, the story of George Washington and the Potomac River, which has often been told before, has never been told so well, in large part because the reader comes away with an impression of the man as well as the river. Since the 1980s, historians and the Mount Vernon Ladies Association of the Union have struggled to present Americans with "the man" rather than "the monument," often too consciously. In ***The Grand Idea*** Achenbach skillfully presents the man as a bold, geographically-obsessed, ambitious visionary. The author is the first to suggest, but does not develop, the fundamental connection between George Washington's vision of the Potomac-Ohio link to the West and that of Thomas Jefferson, Meriwether Lewis, and William Clark's vision of the Missouri-Columbia link. A third important achievement of the book is that the author brings to the attention of a general audience the fact that disunion was an eighteenth century concept before it was a nineteenth century reality.

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