

George Mason's Place in History Unjustly Dimmed in Recent Years

THE Bill of Rights, the first 10 amendments to our Constitution, is a set of freedom guarantees that put into effect the Declaration of Independence and made liberty a reality.

The Federal Convention was held in 1787 to draft a constitution. A key figure in writing this great blueprint for government, George Mason, refused to sign it because, he said, "There is no declaration of rights."

Mason's determination created conditions that brought about the adoption of the first 10 amendments Dec. 15, 1791, a date that is recognized as Bill of Rights Day.

This event is celebrated in many places, including Oklahoma City, where Mr. and Mrs. John E. Kirkpatrick rally a group of Friends of Gunston Hall, the Virginia plantation home of George Mason, not far from historic Mount Vernon.

An illuminating book titled "George Mason and the War for Independence," by Robert A. Rutland, published this year by the Virginia Independence Bicentennial Committee, tells how this extraordinary colonist made great contributions to our freedoms, in spite of gout, headaches and reluctance to hold public office.

Rutland says that until the end of the 19th century, Mason's name always was mentioned in the galaxy that included George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry and James Madison. Hotels, schools, streets and libraries were named for Mason.

By the 1970s, Virginians who took visitors to Mason's home, Gunston Hall, told them "he had something to do with George Washington." Ma-

son's place in history has become unjustly dimmed.

Jefferson said that the Declaration of Independence had been "drawn originally by George Mason, one of our really great men and of the first order of greatness."

A lifetime of reading in law books, the classics and handbooks of political theory had given Mason a sharp understanding of what a republican society had to offer its citizens. It was Mason who spelled out the rights he felt inherently belonged to men "born equally free and independent."

Among them were these: No citizen was to have hereditary privileges. The government ought to have three separate and distinct branches — legislative, judicial and executive. Holding of property was not to be infringed nor denied. The press could never be restrained. Religion was a matter of reason and conviction, not of force or violence. And a number of others.

Before the convention, Mason observed: "We shall, in all probability, have a thousand ridiculous and impracticable proposals, and, of course, a plan formed of heterogeneous, jarring and unintelligible ingredients."

After the convention, another member, Edmund Randolph, recalled that drafts submitted by Mason "swallowed up all the rest, by fixing the grounds and plan, which after great discussion and correction, were finally ratified."

Mason's own words summed up the revolutionary experience: "God has been pleased to bless our endeavors, in a just cause, with remarkable success." May it ever be so!