

# WASHINGTON'S AXE

TEN MINUTE PLAY

By Gary Peterson

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## **WASHINGTON'S AXE**

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**SYNOPSIS:** A huckster tries to sell an antique axe to a customer, purporting that it is the actual hatchet used by George Washington to cut down his father's prized cherry tree. The situation begs the age-old question: if you replace all the parts of an object, does it still retain its identity?

### **CAST OF CHARACTERS**

(2 *EITHER, EXTRAS*)

THE HUCKSTER (m/f)

THE RUBE (m/f)

SPECTATORS (m/f) ..... Optional.

### **A NOTE ON THE CHARACTERS**

There really are only two actors required for this play, who may be either sex, though you may desire spectators onstage as well. Such spectators should shift their focus back and forth between the two principals, as if they were watching a tennis match.

The Huckster stands on a raised platform, and has a table or podium upon which he will display the items he is selling, most notably the title article, George Washington's actual hatchet.

The Rube is a member of a small gathering of spectators, goggling at the highly unusual array of articles offered up for sale.

### **PROPS**

You will need a small hatchet (perhaps made of rubber) that appears to have a wooden handle and a steel axe head. The Rube should carry a fair amount of cash for the transaction. You will also need a small fake silvery coin, and perhaps other objects on the podium or table.

**SCENE:** An outdoor auction of unique memorabilia. Present day.

**AT RISE:**

**THE HUCKSTER:** My friends, you will want to step closer. (*THE RUBE* does so.) Now, we come to the part of the auction that features articles that are truly unique. First up, we have this singular item— (*He displays a small hatchet*) —Now, let me remind you of the story that was recounted by George Washington's biographer, Parson Mason Locke Weems... It seems that when Washington was a little boy, this would be around 1736, he was given a small hatchet by his father, Augustine. The boy was very fond of his axe, and he went about chopping almost everything that came his way. One day, as he wandered about the garden amusing himself by hacking away at this and that, he chanced upon a beautiful, young English cherry tree, the pride of his father's orchard. Well, of course this temptation proved too great for the young boy. He chopped that cherry tree down and left its branches simply lying on the ground. Some time after this, his father discovered what had happened to his favorite tree. He demanded to know what mischievous person had savagely cut the tree down. Well, young George came forward and confessed, "I cannot tell a lie, Father, I chopped down the tree with my little hatchet." At that moment, the senior Washington proudly hugged his son, delighted that the boy had been so truthful. (*Pause.*) Well, ladies and gentlemen, believe it or not, I am holding in my hands right now the very hatchet used by George Washington himself to chop down that cherry tree! Yes! This hatchet has been saved and protected for over 275 years! And this unique, irreplaceable, one-of-a-kind item can be yours for a very reasonable price! Think of it! You can own a piece of actual anecdotal antiquity! (*THE RUBE tentatively raises his hand.*) Yes, sir, you have a question?

**THE RUBE:** A request. I'd like to look at the axe, if I may.

**THE HUCKSTER:** Certainly, sir! (*He hands the hatchet to him.*) But handle it carefully! Examine the superior workmanship! Note well the care that has been taken to safeguard this important heirloom for nearly three centuries! (*THE RUBE raises his free hand timidly again. THE HUCKSTER looks at THE RUBE sidelong.*) Do you have another question, sir?

**THE RUBE:** (*Inspecting the axe.*) An observation. This hatchet looks in very good shape for almost 300 years old.

**THE HUCKSTER:** How perceptive you are! Yes, indeed! As I stated, this artifact has been very well cared for. The family that preserved it to these many years cherished it, held it in utmost regard, and kept it free from all harm.

**THE RUBE:** They sure used a good wood preservative.

**THE HUCKSTER:** Yes, they did.

**THE RUBE:** Yet they are willing to part with it?

**THE HUCKSTER:** They have come upon hard times, sir, and so they reluctantly gave it to me to offer up at this very special sale. The mother fairly wept as she handed the treasure over.

**THE RUBE:** And you say this is George Washington's actual axe?

**THE HUCKSTER:** The genuine article! He chopped down the famous cherry tree with that very hatchet.

**THE RUBE:** But this handle looks pristine! Are you sure that George Washington himself actually handled the handle?

**THE HUCKSTER:** Yes, he handled the handle.

**THE RUBE:** (*Amazed.*) He handled the handle?

**THE HUCKSTER:** (*Positive.*) He handled the handle.

**THE RUBE:** (*Becoming unsure.*) He *handled* the handle?

**THE HUCKSTER:** (*Certain.*) He *handled* the handle.

**THE RUBE:** He handled (*Strong emphasis.*) **this** handle?

**THE HUCKSTER:** No, not **that** handle.

**THE RUBE:** He didn't handle the handle? How did he chop down the cherry tree if he didn't handle the handle?

**THE HUCKSTER:** (*Confident.*) Oh, he handled the handle. He handled the handle, all right. (*Clarifying.*) Just not that specific handle.

**THE RUBE:** What do you mean?

- THE HUCKSTER:** Well, as I said, that axe is over 275 years old! Understandably, through use, the handle wore out.
- THE RUBE:** The handle wore out?
- THE HUCKSTER:** The *original* handle wore out.
- THE RUBE:** The original handle wore out?
- THE HUCKSTER:** The original handle wore out and was carefully and lovingly replaced with a new and sturdier one.
- THE RUBE:** (*Pointing to it, somewhat taken aback.*) You replaced the original handle with this handle?
- THE HUCKSTER:** No, that's a replacement. The original handle was swapped with a second handle, which eventually wore out, too. That second handle was substituted with a third and so on. I think that particular handle is the seventh replacement handle. Seventh or eighth.
- THE RUBE:** Then Washington didn't handle the handle.
- THE HUCKSTER:** (*Confident.*) Oh, yes, Washington handled the handle!
- THE RUBE:** He didn't handle *this* handle.
- THE HUCKSTER:** No, he didn't handle *that* handle! How could he? It was replaced long after his death in 1799. But as a *child*, he handled the handle.
- THE RUBE:** (*Musing.*) As a child, he handled the handle...
- THE HUCKSTER:** He had to handle the handle when he chopped down the tree.
- THE RUBE:** But this isn't the handle he handled back then.
- THE HUCKSTER:** Back then when?
- THE RUBE:** Back then when he handled the handle to chop down the cherry tree. Using this hatchet, you say.
- THE HUCKSTER:** Yes, he chopped down the tree with that very hatchet.
- THE RUBE:** (*Pause, then indicating the axe head.*) Did he chop with this top?
- THE HUCKSTER:** Of course he chopped with the top.
- THE RUBE:** He *chopped* with the top? (*He examines it closely.*)
- THE HUCKSTER:** (*Reassuringly.*) He *chopped* with the top.
- THE RUBE:** He chopped with the top?
- THE HUCKSTER:** (*Decisively.*) He chopped with the top.

**THE RUBE:** He chopped with (*Again, strong emphasis.*) this top?

**THE HUCKSTER:** He chopped with the top when he handled the handle. What makes you question it?

**THE RUBE:** (*Tapping the head.*) It says "Made in U.S.A."

**THE HUCKSTER:** What does?

**THE RUBE:** (*Showing it to THE HUCKSTER.*) The top. The blade here. It says real tiny, "Made in U.S.A."

**THE HUCKSTER:** (*Somewhat quizzically.*) It says "Made in U.S.A.?"

**THE RUBE:** (*Certain.*) It says "Made in U.S.A."

**THE HUCKSTER:** (*Suddenly decisive.*) Well, of course it says "Made in U.S.A." The Washingtons were quite wealthy, and would have nothing other than finely forged Pennsylvania steel for their tools.

**THE RUBE:** (*Slowly.*) But—

**THE HUCKSTER:** Are you now doubting this was forged in the U.S.A.?

**THE RUBE:** No, I'm thinking it's forged.

**THE HUCKSTER:** You think it was forged?

**THE RUBE:** You said it was forged.

**THE HUCKSTER:** I said it was forged?

**THE RUBE:** You said it was forged finally.

**THE HUCKSTER:** I said it was finely forged. Finest steel, forged and tempered—

**THE RUBE:** —In Pennsylvania, I know.

**THE HUCKSTER:** Surely, you daren't distrust American steel!

**THE RUBE:** (*Shocked.*) No!

**THE HUCKSTER:** American steel is the finest steel made!

**THE RUBE:** Indeed it is!

**THE HUCKSTER:** American steel is the envy of the whole world!

**THE RUBE:** You'll get no argument from me!

**THE HUCKSTER:** And yet we seem to be arguing!

**THE RUBE:** Because there's something troubling about the axe head—

**THE HUCKSTER:** And that is?

**THE RUBE:** George Washington could not possibly chop with this top.

**THE HUCKSTER:** Of course he chopped with the top. He didn't use the handle. (*To chop with.*)

**THE RUBE:** You said he *did* use the handle.

**THE HUCKSTER:** He *handled* the handle, but he chopped with the top.

**THE RUBE:** He could not have chopped with this top.

**THE HUCKSTER:** You're not proposing he chopped with the handle?!

**THE RUBE:** No! I'm saying Washington did not chop with this top.

**THE HUCKSTER:** The handle couldn't handle it; he had to chop with the top.

**THE RUBE:** (*Emphatically.*) Not with *this* top.

**THE HUCKSTER:** And just what would stop him chopping with that top?

**THE RUBE:** Washington chopped with this chopper in 1736.

**THE HUCKSTER:** That's what I said.

**THE RUBE:** The top of this chopper clearly says in tiny print, "Made in U.S.A."

**THE HUCKSTER:** Your point is?

**THE RUBE:** There was no U.S.A. then for it to be made in.

**THE HUCKSTER:** How's that?

**THE RUBE:** The U.S.A. wasn't made until 40 years later in 1776.

**THE HUCKSTER:** Ahhh....

**THE RUBE:** So this chopper topper was forged much later than the chopping event.

**THE HUCKSTER:** Oh, but the reason for that is simple!

**THE RUBE:** I'm glad something is.

**THE HUCKSTER:** The first chopper topper was copper. That cheap child's copper chopper topper rusted out ages ago, so it was replaced with a much more proper copper chopper topper.

**THE RUBE:** So this is the replacement topper?

**THE HUCKSTER:** (*Slowly.*) No, that top is finely forged Pennsylvania steel, as I said. Don't you see that any mere copper chopper topper's improper? A copper chopper simply couldn't last very long...the topper was eventually replaced with a better, stronger, steel chopper topper.

**THE RUBE:** This one?

**THE HUCKSTER:** No, another one. That's a replacement.

**THE RUBE:** Which replacement is this?

**THE HUCKSTER:** I believe that's the sixth chopper topper. Counting the two copper.

**THE RUBE:** But that means Washington did not chop with this chopper!

**THE HUCKSTER:** Of course he chopped with that chopper!

**THE RUBE:** He didn't!

**THE HUCKSTER:** He did!

**THE RUBE:** (*Emphatically.*) He didn't!!

**THE HUCKSTER:** He most certainly did! I have a parchment to prove it.

**THE RUBE:** You have a parchment with proof?

**THE HUCKSTER:** The patriarch of the preservationists presented a parchment providing perfect positive proof!

**THE RUBE:** Well, that's different. A parchment with proof's probably persuasive! May I peruse it?

**THE HUCKSTER:** Peruse it?

**THE RUBE:** Yes, may I please peruse the parchment the patriarch presented that purports to prove that this was the President's property?

**THE HUCKSTER:** You want to peruse the parchment the patriarch presented that positively proves that this was the President's property?

**THE RUBE:** Precisely.

**THE HUCKSTER:** You do?

**THE RUBE:** Yes.

**THE HUCKSTER:** No.

**THE RUBE:** What do you mean "no"?

**THE HUCKSTER:** No, you can't peruse the parchment.

**THE RUBE:** No?

**THE HUCKSTER:** No. No one can see it!

**THE RUBE:** Why not?

**THE HUCKSTER:** Well, the parchment's so old, it's perished.

**THE RUBE:** The parchment of proof has perished?

**THE HUCKSTER:** Partially. The salutation still remains.

**THE RUBE:** Super! Surely I can study the salutation?

**THE HUCKSTER:** I don't think so.

**THE RUBE:** No?



**THE HUCKSTER:** Yes, no.

**THE RUBE:** Why can't I see what remains?

**THE HUCKSTER:** The remains are so brittle that literally nothing remains of them.

**THE RUBE:** Nothing remains of the remains?

**THE HUCKSTER:** Little remains to be seen. And that little is brittle. You can handle the handle or opt for the top, but you cannot peruse the parchment.

**THE RUBE:** I see.

**THE HUCKSTER:** No, you can't see. The remains would disintegrate upon study.

**THE RUBE:** Why don't you replace it?

**THE HUCKSTER:** Replace what?

**THE RUBE:** Replace the poor, partially preserved parchment.

**THE HUCKSTER:** (*Shocked.*) Replace the parchment! Preposterous!

**THE RUBE:** But without the parchment, you have no positive proof that that was the President's property.

**THE HUCKSTER:** Oh, I have proof. I have the parchment for proof.

**THE RUBE:** Which I can't see.

**THE HUCKSTER:** Yes.

**THE RUBE:** Yes?

**THE HUCKSTER:** Yes, that is to say "no."

**THE RUBE:** No?

**THE HUCKSTER:** Yes, no.

**THE RUBE:** (*Confused.*) No?

**THE HUCKSTER:** (*Decisive.*) Yes, no!

**THE RUBE:** At least we've agreed on one thing.

**THE HUCKSTER:** What's that?

**THE RUBE:** You've finally confused me.

**THE HUCKSTER:** Just doing my job.

**THE RUBE:** Yes. (*Pause.*) Well, how much is it?

**THE HUCKSTER:** Three hundred dollars.

**THE RUBE:** Three hundred dollars?!?

**THE HUCKSTER:** How much would you pay for the priceless? An item of such singular antiquity that it cannot possibly be replaced?

**THE RUBE:** But it has been replaced. Many times!

**THE HUCKSTER:** Never!

**THE RUBE:** Always! Every time a part of the axe wore out, it was replaced!

**THE HUCKSTER:** Carefully and lovingly!

**THE RUBE:** With complete disregard!

**THE HUCKSTER:** And always with something finer and better!

**THE RUBE:** That makes it worse! It has no value!

**THE HUCKSTER:** Its value is incalculable! That is the selfsame axe that the great George Washington used to chop down his father's prized cherry tree, way back in 1736!

**THE RUBE:** It is nothing of the kind. The actual axe has long since rotted and rusted away.

**THE HUCKSTER:** How dare you declare that? I have positive proof—

**THE RUBE:** —Provided by the patriarch that preserved the President's property for posterity, I know.

**THE HUCKSTER:** I've seen the partial parchment!

**THE RUBE:** I haven't!

**THE HUCKSTER:** You can't!

**THE RUBE:** I shan't! But you miss my point.

**THE HUCKSTER:** I do?

**THE RUBE:** You do.

**THE HUCKSTER:** What point is that?

**THE RUBE:** (*Pointing at the axe parts.*) That George Washington didn't handle this handle nor chop with this top.

**THE HUCKSTER:** Sure he did.

**THE RUBE:** No, he didn't!

**THE HUCKSTER:** He most certainly did.

**THE RUBE:** He most certainly did not!

**THE HUCKSTER:** How do you figure?

**THE RUBE:** The handle's been replaced, right?

**THE HUCKSTER:** Yeeesssss....

**THE RUBE:** —and the top has been replaced too, right?

**THE HUCKSTER:** Yeeeeesssss...

**THE RUBE:** Therefore the handle he handled and the top he used to chop are both long gone! This is a totally different hatchet than the one George Washington used!

**THE HUCKSTER:** Oh! (*Longish pause.*) Ten bucks off, then.

**THE RUBE:** (*Enthusiastically.*) I'll take it! (*He gives THE HUCKSTER some cash. Pause. He marvels as he studies his purchase.*)  
George Washington's actual axe!

**THE HUCKSTER:** (*Moving on.*) All right! Next up, we have an authentic ancient Roman platinum coin, emblazoned with the face of Julius Caesar and stamped with the date 820 B.C.

**THE RUBE:** (*Raises his hand, but then thinks better of it and lowers it.*) That's just wrong in so many ways...

*FADE OUT. CURTAIN.*

**THE END**

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