

Washington's Vision Charles Wesley Alexander (1861)

Charles Wesley Alexander was a publisher in Philadelphia. Under the pen name Wesley Bradshaw, he authored various works of sentimental, sensationalistic, or propagandistic fiction that were presented by their narrators as true. "Washington's Vision" is one such work that was widely reprinted in northern newspapers during 1861-62, early in the Civil War. The short story purports to relate an encounter that its narrator, a Philadelphia resident, had on July 4, 1859, with a 99-year-old Revolutionary War veteran named Anthony Sherman. Sherman recounts for the narrator a vision that George Washington experienced while wintering at Valley Forge during the winter of 1777; Sherman claims to have heard Washington himself recount the vision just hours after the experience. The vision is thus presented to readers as a story (told by Washington) within a story (told by Sherman) within a story (told by the narrator).

Washington's vision, as invented by Alexander, is presented below, excerpted for brevity. To be clear: the "I" who speaks in these excerpts is Washington. In the 21st century, Alexander's short story was disseminated online by Americans who took the fictional narrative for fact.

I do not know whether it was owing to the anxiety of my mind or what, but this afternoon, as I was sitting at this very table, engaged in preparing a dispatch, something in the apartment seemed to disturb me. Looking up, I beheld, standing exactly opposite to me, a singularly beautiful female. [...] I felt a strange sensation spreading throughout me. I would have risen, but the riveted gaze of the being before me rendered volition impossible. I essayed [...] to address her, but my tongue had become powerless. [...] Gradually the surrounding atmosphere [...] grew luminous. Everything about me appeared to rarify—the mysterious visitor herself becoming more airy and yet even more distinct to my sight than before. [...]

Presently I heard a voice saying, "Son of the Republic, look and learn," while at the same time my visitor extended her arm and forefinger eastwardly. I now beheld a heavy white vapor at some distance, rising, fold upon fold. This gradually disappeared, and I looked upon a strange scene. Before me lay spread out, in one vast plain, all the countries of the world: Europe, Asia, Africa, and America. I saw rolling and tossing, between Europe and America, the billows of the Atlantic, and between Asia and America lay the Pacific.

"Son of the Republic," said the same mysterious voice as before, "look and learn." At that moment, I beheld a dark, shadowy being, like an angel, standing, or rather floating, in midair between Europe and America. Dipping water out of the ocean in the hollow of each hand, he sprinkled some upon America with his right hand, while he cast upon Europe some with his left. Immediately a dark cloud arose from each of these countries and joined in mid-ocean. For a while it remained stationary and then moved slowly westward until it enveloped America in its murky folds. Sharp flashes of lightning now gleamed throughout it at intervals, and I heard the smothered groans and cries of the American people. A second time, the angel dipped water from the ocean and sprinkled it out as before. The dark cloud was then drawn back to the ocean, into whose heaving waves it sank from view.

A third time I heard the mysterious voice, saying, "Son of the Republic, look and learn." I cast

my eyes upon America and beheld villages, towns, and cities springing up, one after another, until the whole land, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, was dotted with them. Again I heard the mysterious voice say, "Son of the Republic, the end of a century cometh; look and learn."

At this, the dark, shadowy angel turned his face southward, and from Africa I saw an ill-omened specter approaching our land. It flitted slowly and heavily over every village, town, and city of the latter, the inhabitants of which presently set themselves in battle array, one against the other. As I continued looking, I saw a bright angel, on whose brow rested a crown of light on which was traced the word UNION, bearing the American flag, which he placed between the divided nation and said, "Remember, ye are brethren." Instantly, the inhabitants, casting from them their weapons, became friends once more and united around the national standard. And again I heard the mysterious voice, saying, "Son of the Republic, the second peril is passed; look and learn."

And I beheld the villages, towns, and cities of America increase in size and number until at last they covered all the land from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and their inhabitants became as countless as the stars in heaven or the sand on the seashore. And again I heard the mysterious voice, saying, "Son of the Republic, the end of a century cometh; look and learn."

At this, the dark, shadowy angel placed a trumpet to his mouth and blew three distinct blasts and, taking water from the ocean, sprinkled it out upon Europe, Asia, and Africa. Then my eyes looked upon a fearful scene. From each of these countries arose thick black clouds that were soon joined into one. And throughout this mass gleamed a dark red light, by which I saw hordes of armed men, who, moving with the cloud, marched by land and sailed by sea to America, which country was presently enveloped in the volume of the cloud. And I dimly saw these vast armies devastate the whole country and pillage and burn the villages, towns, and cities that I had beheld springing up.

As my ears listened to the thundering of cannon, clashing of swords, and shouts and cries of the millions in mortal combat, [...] the dark, shadowy angel placed his trumpet once more to his mouth and blew a long, fearful blast. Instantly a light, as of a thousand suns, shone down from above me and pierced and broke into fragments the dark cloud which enveloped America. At the same moment, I saw the angel upon whose forehead still shone the word UNION, and who bore our national flag in one hand and a sword in the other, descend from heaven attended by legions of bright spirits. These immediately joined the inhabitants of America, who I perceived were well-nigh overcome but who, immediately taking courage again, closed up their broken ranks and renewed the battle.

[...T]he shadowy angel, for the last time, dipped water from the ocean and sprinkled it upon America. Instantly the dark cloud rolled back, together with the armies it had brought, leaving the inhabitants of the land victorious. Then, once more, I beheld villages, towns, and cities springing up where they had been before, while the bright angel, planting the azure standard he had brought in the midst of them, cried in a loud voice to the inhabitants: "While the stars remain and the heavens send down dew upon the earth, so long shall the Republic last!" And taking from his brow the crown, on which still blazed the word UNION, he placed it upon the standard while the people, kneeling down, said, "Amen."

The scene instantly began to fade and dissolve, and I at last saw nothing but the rising, curling

white vapor I had first beheld. This also disappearing, I found myself once more gazing upon my mysterious visitor, who, in that same mysterious voice I had heard before, said, “Son of the Republic, what you have seen is thus interpreted: Three perils will come upon the Republic. The most fearful is the second, passing which the whole world united shall never be able to prevail against her. Let every child of the Republic learn to live for his God, his land, and Union.”

With these words, the figure vanished. I started from my seat and felt that I had seen a vision wherein had been shown to me the birth, progress, and destiny of the Republic of the United States.

Source: Wesley Bradshaw [Charles Wesley Alexander], *Washington’s Vision: The First Union Story Ever Written* (Philadelphia: C. W. Alexander & Co., 1864), 12-15. Digital scan available from the Wright American Fiction Project, Indiana University Libraries, <https://purl.dlib.indiana.edu/iudl/wright/VAC5570>. The text of Alexander’s story is public domain in the United States because published in the United States before 1923.

The 1864 edition was chosen as the source for these excerpts because that edition was self-published, presumably giving Alexander more editorial control of the text than was the case for any of the printings that had previously appeared in newspapers. The earliest identified publication of the text is Wesley Bradshaw, “Washington’s Vision,” *Clearfield Republican* (Clearfield, PA), April 17, 1861, 1, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83032199/1861-04-17/ed-1/>. The *Clearfield Republican* said it was reprinting the text from *American Monthly*, but a search of digitally accessible issues of magazines titled *American Monthly* has not located that printing.

Excerpts edited by John-Charles Duffy. Quotations marks that enclosed Washington’s narrative in the source publication have been omitted. Paragraph breaks adjusted for a more compact presentation of the text. Spelling and punctuation emended in line with modern American conventions. A grammatical infelicity corrected (*sunk* → *sank*). The use (or not) of small caps for *Union* and the capitalizing of *Republic* replicate the source.

These edited excerpts from Alexander’s story are intended for **teaching** purposes only. For **research** purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite one of the source publications listed above.



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