



William A. Sommerfield

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A leader in ranks of interpreters

By Sally A. Downey

Inquirer Staff Writer

For 18 years, William A. Sommerfield spent several days each month in a military buff-and-blue uniform, looking out over the Potomac from Mount Vernon, Va. When tourists called him George, he replied: "Not even Mrs. Washington calls me George. You may call me General."

Mr. Sommerfield, 79, a George Washington interpreter, died of heart failure Sept. 11 at the Watermark at Logan Square. Until this summer, he had lived on Mount Vernon Street in the Spring Garden section of Philadelphia.

Mr. Sommerfield, who acted in community theater for years, began portraying Washington in the early 1980s as a favor to his wife, Pam. She was producing educational programs with actors portraying historical characters, and when the actor she hired to play Washington canceled, Mr. Sommerfield stepped in.

He seemed perfect for the part. Like Washington, Mr. Sommerfield was 6-foot-2, 210 pounds, and blue-eyed, although his nose was slightly sharper. Instead of wearing a wig, he put the hair on the sides of his head in curls and pulled the rest back into a ponytail.

But looking like Washington wasn't enough for Mr. Sommerfield. Over the years he did meticulous research and amassed a library of books about the first president.

In 1989, former Chief Justice Warren Burger selected Mr. Sommerfield to reenact Washington's eight-day ride in 1789 from Mount Vernon to New York City, where Washington was sworn in for his first term.

That performance led to Mr. Sommerfield's job interpreting Washington at Mount Vernon. Missy Hoggan, director of special programs at the historic estate, described Mr. Sommerfield's impact on visitors to an Inquirer reporter in 2002: "He really makes them believe they're stepping back into the 18th century and meeting the great man."

Besides visiting Mount Vernon twice a month, Mr. Sommerfield appeared as Washington in 50 states, in Europe, and at the White House during the George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton administrations. He was featured on television programs including Good Morning America and Today. In 1990, he portrayed Washington when he was acquitted of treason at a mock trial in London.

Mr. Sommerfield became an honorary member of the Pennsylvania Society of the Cincinnati in 2001. Washington was the society's first president.

Though Washington died at 67, Mr. Sommerfield portrayed him until he was 77.

Last year, he retired as artistic director of the nonprofit American Historical Theatre, which he and his wife established in 1992 to educate and entertain the public with historical characters.

The performers who portrayed such figures as Galileo, Dorothy Parker, Sojourner Truth, and Eleanor Roosevelt were expected to have studied the real characters. When asked at an event if he and the other costumed characters were actors, Mr. Sommerfield replied, "We are scholars."

A native of Wisconsin, Mr. Sommerfield earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Wisconsin. During the Korean War he served in the Army in Korea.

After his discharge, he earned a master's degree in education and speech at Wisconsin in 1961.

He taught special-needs children in Evanston, Ill., before joining the sales department of Scott Foresman Publishing Co. He worked for the company in Ohio, California, and Chicago. Mr. Sommerfield met his future wife when they auditioned for a play in Corvina, Calif. They married in 1965.

The couple moved to the Philadelphia area in the 1970s and lived in Haverford before moving to Mount Vernon Street in 1979.

Mr. Sommerfield retired as vice president and editorial director of Auerbach Publishers in Pennsauken in 1981 to pursue a career as an actor and a writer.

He wrote plays and scripts for school programs, dialogue for his Washington portrayals, and dialogue for other actors at American Historical Theatre, his wife said.

A passionate tennis player, Mr. Sommerfield was a longtime member of the Germantown Cricket Club. He also enjoyed skiing in New England and

Canada with his children.

In addition to his wife, Mr. Sommerfield is survived by sons Scott, Stephen, and Michael; daughters Lynn and Debbie; a brother; and four grandchildren.

A celebration of his life will begin at noon Oct. 10 at Christ Church, 20 N. America St.

Memorial donations may be made to the American Historical Theatre, 325 Chestnut St., Suite 400, Philadelphia 19106.