George Washington is one of the most important figures in American history. He was a general, a war hero and the first president of the United States.

He was a leader of men and the father of our country.

Maybe there's something about that name. I knew a George Washington, and whether or not you've ever heard him, this George was one of the most beloved figures in boxing history.

The George Washington that I knew was a surrogate father to hundreds of boxers. He was also a leader of men. More precisely, he led boys into manhood and his success cannot be measured simply in boxing terms.

Washington was 79 years old when he succumbed to congestive heart failure on June 11, in New York City. Washington was a U.S. Marine and a husband and a father. He was Big George to anyone who walked into his gym in Bedford Stuyvesant, a section of Brooklyn in which your only birthright is that you are a long shot.

With the help of guys like Artie Cintron, Washington saw to it that Bed Stuy became synonymous with domination on the amateur boxing circuit. He built a dynasty at the New Bed Stuy Boxing Center that lasted more than two decades. It is one that certainly compares favorably with New York's other great sports dynasty – the Yankees.

"He meant a lot to me," said Mark Breland, who first came to the gym as an 80-pound 8-year-old. "He was my mentor coming up. One thing I can say about George is that I never heard him curse. I've been with George all those years and I never heard him curse and I've never seen him upset. That's unbelievable in the boxing business. You don't get that in boxing."

In terms of boxing, this is what we got from George Washington.

Mark Breland – five-time New York Golden Gloves champion, U.S. Olympic gold medalist and WBA welterweight champion

Riddick Bowe – four-time New York Golden Gloves champion, U.S. Olympic silver medalist and world heavyweight champion.

Michael Bentt – five-time national amateur champion, four-time New York Golden Gloves champion and WBO heavyweight champion.

Brian Adams – national amateur champion, three-time New York Golden Gloves champion and world-rated lightweight contender.

That represents merely a partial list of Washington's fighters. But more than the titles and the

trophies, his pupils tell the story of a man who was a pillar of decency in one of the most dangerous sections of Brooklyn.

“George was the opposite of most boxing trainers,” said Bentt. “He was very jovial, very lovable, very respectful. He was a special man. He had reverence for his fighters. I never heard him curse either. I don’t know if he ever did, but if he did, I never heard it.”

“He never neglected a soul,” said Adams. “The worst boxer in the gym, George would have him thinking he was a champion. He never played favorites, whether it was Mark Breland or an average Joe working out, George would yell up to that ring, ‘Right hand champ.’ I remember George as a big, imposing figure when I first met him. But when I spoke with him, he was more of a pussycat than a grizzly bear.”

“I don’t care who came in that gym,” said Breland, who is now 43 and himself a boxing trainer. “I don’t care if people thought the kid was a bad kid. He could have just gotten out of jail, the police could have followed him to the gym, but George would never turn a guy away. People might look at a certain kid as troublesome, but that never meant anything to George. He’d just say to them, ‘Come on, let’s get the gloves on, let’s work.’ He tried to guide them, he tried to convince them they didn’t need to get into trouble, get into street fights, stuff like that.”

When Breland turned pro he was the hottest commodity the sport had seen since Sugar Ray Leonard. He was signed by Main Events and had high-powered trainers like Joe Fariello and Lou Duva in his corner. Like the Little League coach who develops Mickey Mantle, guys like Washington are often pushed aside when it’s time to turn pro. But Breland made sure Washington was in his corner for all his pro fights.

Want more fighters developed by Washington? Not all of them were Mickey Mantles, but this list is impressive – Tunde Foster, Owen McGeachey, Stephan Johnson, Ronald McCall, Carl Jones, Chico Bell, Eddie Gregg, Webster Vinson, Ernest Mateen, Leon Taylor, Henry Brent and Winston Bentt.

This should tell you a little more about Washington’s coaching style. Of all the fighters I’ve interviewed in over a decade of covering this sport, Breland, Adams and Bentt are among the most polite, respectful and successful away from the ring.

Indeed, Washington taught so much more than jabs and hooks. To me, his greatest success was giving kids hope, encouraging them to reach for the stars in a neighborhood in which too many people reached for a gun or a crack pipe. If he kept one kid out of jail, or the morgue or off drugs, that's a bigger accomplishment than any of the champions he trained.

The truth is, it wasn’t just one kid. There were so many. Some high-minded people, none of whom ever actually visited Bed Stuy, once made fashionable the slogan “Just say no,” to drugs. George Washington wasn’t a slogan, he was there for those kids every single day. He was the foundation upon which lives were built.

“He was extremely important to the Brooklyn community because he gave kids something to

strive for," said Adams, 34 and a boxing broadcaster. "Riddick was from Brownsville, probably the worst section of Brooklyn, and he made Riddick believe that the atmosphere does not make the person. Mark was from Thompkins projects, maybe not as bad as Brownsville, but rough, and he instilled confidence in Mark that even at 6'2" and all bones, he could go out and dominate anyone he wanted. I was from Albany projects, probably the third worst projects in Brooklyn, and he made me understand that a person can leave such an area and be a productive part of society."

"He touched countless lives, countless lives," said Bentt. "There were guys like Terry Branch or Richard Brent, guys who flew under the public radar, but George left an indelible mark on them. The qualities that George instilled in us would always follow us no matter where we went or what we did."

In a sport that is often cold and unforgiving, Washington had compassion. "Once I lost to this kid, Henry Milligan, he was a white fighter from Delaware," recalled Bentt. "He was a national champion and I lost. My father was yelling at me. He couldn't believe I had lost to this white kid. After the fight, George just walked up and embraced me in front of my father. He was that kind of guy. He was compassionate and sensitive."

This is reality, not fantasy. So, no, not everyone who came through his gym was saved. He may have tried, but he couldn't wrap those big arms around an entire neighborhood. Places like Bed Stuy have plenty of sad stories and the New Bed Stuy Boxing Center wasn't immune. But one of the wayward souls that George touched was Harry Keitt, himself now an established boxing trainer. "I grew up with Harry," said Breland. "Harry was notorious in the neighborhood. George changed his whole life around."

When you are around kids for so long, two things happen – you stay younger yourself and you try to memorize a lot of names. It seems the kids kept Washington young, but remembering all those names was another story.

"I was with him for years and I don't even think George knew my name," said Breland, with a smile. "Because from day one he called me champ. I always called him Big George and he called me champ."

"He called everyone 'Champ' because that's what everyone was who came to him," said Adams. "When guys insisted that George call them by their name, he would make up a name. One guy's name was Norwood and George changed his name to Norfolk. A trainer named Owen became Orange. One guy who I swore his name was Abdu because when I first met him 14 years ago that's what George called him. This is a true story. About four years ago I ran into the guy and he told me that his name was Abdilla. I fell out laughing."

Bentt, now 41 and an actor and himself a father, remembered this about Big George while driving his son to school one day. "The thing that I recognize and appreciate now is that George never let what he saw and experienced in life and in the world of boxing rob him of his basic humanity."

Washington had a modest record as a pro fighter. He was a heavyweight during boxing's Golden Age and was good enough to once beat Charley Norkus and Keene Simmons; the latter went eight rounds with Rocky Marciano. Big George was also a sparring partner for the great Joe Louis. This is what he told me about Louis during an interview a few years back.

"After I got out of the service, that's when I started sparring with Joe Louis," he said. "We were from the same small town in Alabama, but I didn't know him from there. They picked me out of Stillman's Gym to be his sparring partner. He wanted someone who was going to make him work and I was going good then. I was his sparring partner for both Jersey Joe Walcott bouts. I went to his training camp in Pompton Lakes, New Jersey. He'd give me $20 a round. That was good money back then. I'd box four or five rounds a day with him. He didn't do all that much moving in the ring. It was short quick moves. He moved his arms like he was playing checkers, not far at all. But fast. He had great hand speed. He was the best heavyweight ever. That's the way I see it."

Washington's respect for Louis went beyond what the accomplished as a fighter. "He was my mentor and my idol," Big George said of the champion. "He loved his people. He'd give anything to help you if he could."

And so would George Washington, a man who gave his life to boxing and a Brooklyn neighborhood. Those who fought for him and loved him will always look beyond what he accomplished as a trainer. There lies the true measure of his greatness.