

TAKING AGENCY IN MOUNT VERNON'S ENSLAVED COMMUNITY

LEVEL:

High School (Grades 9-12)

TIMEFRAME:

Approximately 40 minutes

OBJECTIVES:

Students will analyze the relationship between historical sources and events of the present day.

Students will improve their critical thinking skills by analyzing primary sources and contextualizing its place in a larger narrative.

Students will detect possible limitations in perspective for various kinds of historical evidence and differing secondary interpretations.

Students will learn about enslaved life at Mount Vernon in the 18th Century.

Students will increase vocabulary surrounding slavery and agency in the 18th century.

STANDARDS:

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| • Revolution and the New Nation | • Application of Knowledge through higher-order thinking skills |
| • Principles of Democracy | • Integrating Evidence from Multiple Relevant Historical Sources into a Reasoned Argument About the Past |
| • Evaluating Sources | |
| • Reading for Perspective | |
| • Using multiple historical sources to identify further areas of inquiry | |

PROCEDURE:

1. As a class, discuss the term *agency*.
 - a. Many historians today study the concept of “agency” or choice over one’s life, specifically when looking at the lives of marginalized people throughout history. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “agency” means “action or intervention, especially such as to produce a particular effect.” Synonyms include activity, force, influence, choice, power, effect.
 - b. Discuss as a class how the students exhibit agency in their own lives.
 - c. Ask students how this word could relate to the experience of enslaved people in Virginia.

2. Divide the class into groups of three and assign each group a place at Mount Vernon and its associated primary source.
 - a. Students can use the virtual tour to see 360-degree view of the site, which gives more information.
 - b. Printed versions can be found using *Primary Source- Taking Agency* (included in PDF)
 3. Ask each group to answer the questions in the *Worksheet- Taking Agency* (included in PDF)
 4. Ask each group to present their findings to the rest of the class.
 5. Ask students what they learned about enslaved life at Mount Vernon. If possible, write the answers on the board.
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OPTIONAL EXTENSION ACTIVITY:

1. Make a list of other primary sources and objects that historians could study to learn more about the enslaved workers' choices at Mount Vernon. What questions do you still have about the choices enslaved people made? What objects would help answer these questions?
2. Visit the *Lives Bound Together* virtual tour to learn more about the individual people enslaved at Mount Vernon: <https://www.mountvernon.org/the-estate-gardens/museum/lives-bound-together/lives-bound-together--virtual-tour/>.

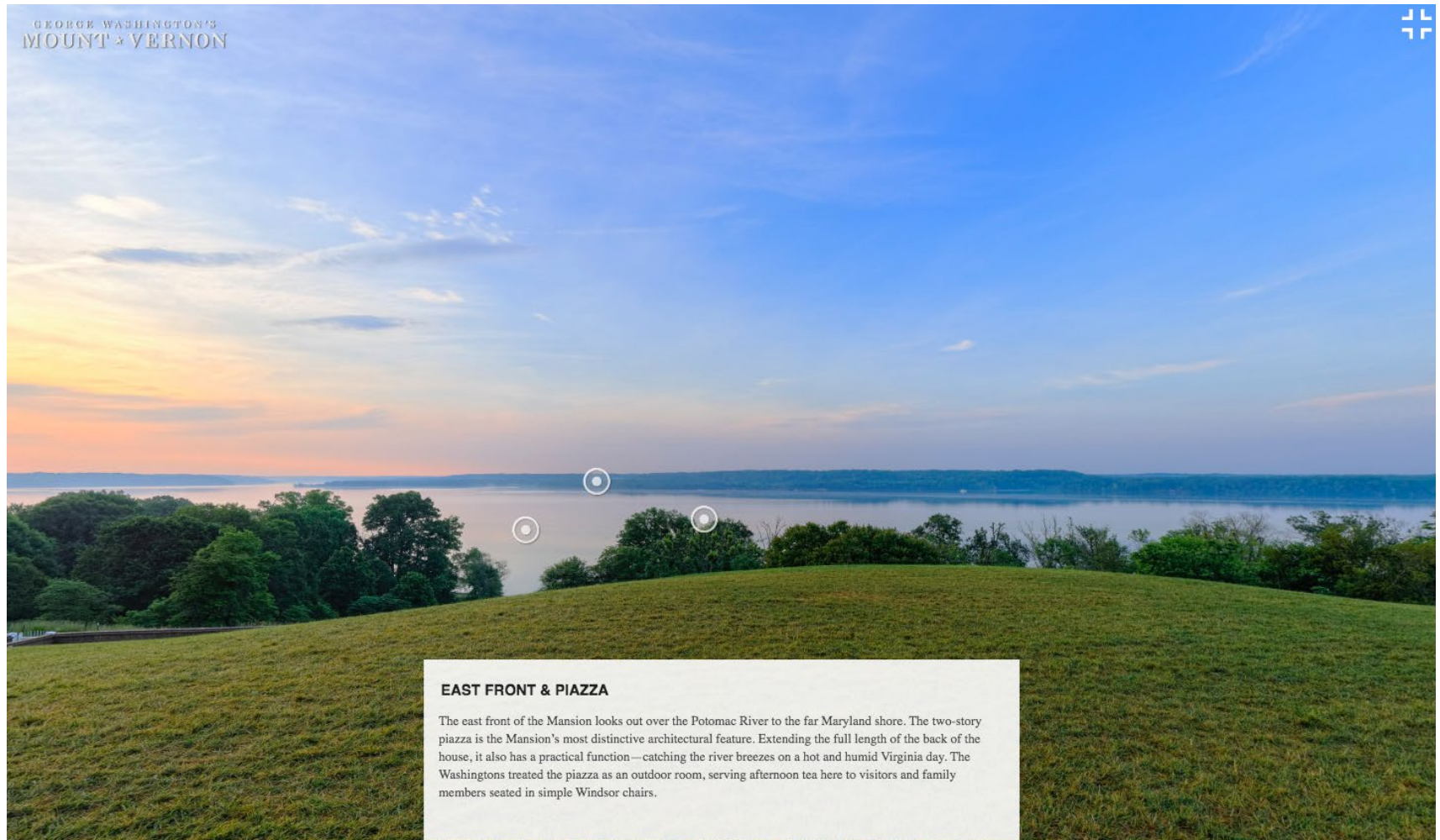
1 What location did you analyze?

5. From whose perspective are you learning about this location in the primary source? How would this information be different if told from an enslaved person's point of view?
6. List different groups of people who had the opportunity to make choices in this space, along with types of choices they could make. These can be choices about people, resources or ideas.
7. In these sources, how did enslaved people (or an enslaved person) show some control, large or small, over an aspect of their lives (or life)?
8. Based on discussions about slavery on the virtual tour, how does this act of agency represent larger ideas about exhibiting control over one's life within the enslaved population living at Mount Vernon?
9. What lessons can be learned by studying how enslaved people fought for areas of control within their lives while living in a system designed to take away their humanity?

PRIMARY SOURCE:
TAKING AGENCY IN MOUNT VERNON'S ENSLAVED COMMUNITY

Location A: The Potomac River

To view in virtual tour, find under 'Mansion': <https://virtualtour.mountvernon.org/>



Primary Source A:

Washington, Lund. *List of Slaves Returned from British*. List. 1781. From The Washington Library Digital Collection <http://catalog.mountvernon.org/digital/collection/p16829coll13/id/153>.

Peter. — an old man
 Lewis. — an old man
 Joseph. — an old man
 Frederick. — a man about 45 years old — on Brunswick and Delmar
 Gummert. — a man about 45 years old — valuer, a brick maker
 Henry. — a man about 40 years old — valuer, a Hoagless
 John. — a man about 20 years old, stout & healthy
 James. — a man about 40 years old, stout & healthy
 Thomas. — a lad about 14 years old — House servant
 Peter. — a lad about 15 years old — very likely
 Stephen. — a man about 20 years old — a cooper by trade
 James. — a man 25 years old — stout & healthy
 William. — a man about 20 years old — by trade a seaman
 Joseph. — a man about 40 years old — very likely
 Lucy. — a woman about 20 years old
 Esther. — a woman about 10 years old
 Deborah. — a woman about 16 years old

The above Slaves were taken from his Excellency
 General Washington — by Capt. Mich^d. Coates
 in the Squag Fleet of War — in April 1781.

Frederick, Joseph, Gummert, James,
 Thomas, & Peter — were rescued
 after the capture of York. — The General's Salute on Jan^y in Philadelphia
 I cannot tell what it was. Sp^d 12 letters spoken for by Gen^l Coates in his
 with a very valuable Boat — 25 feet long
 was also carried off by the above General
 and his Squadron.

Lund Washington

Primary Source A:
Transcription

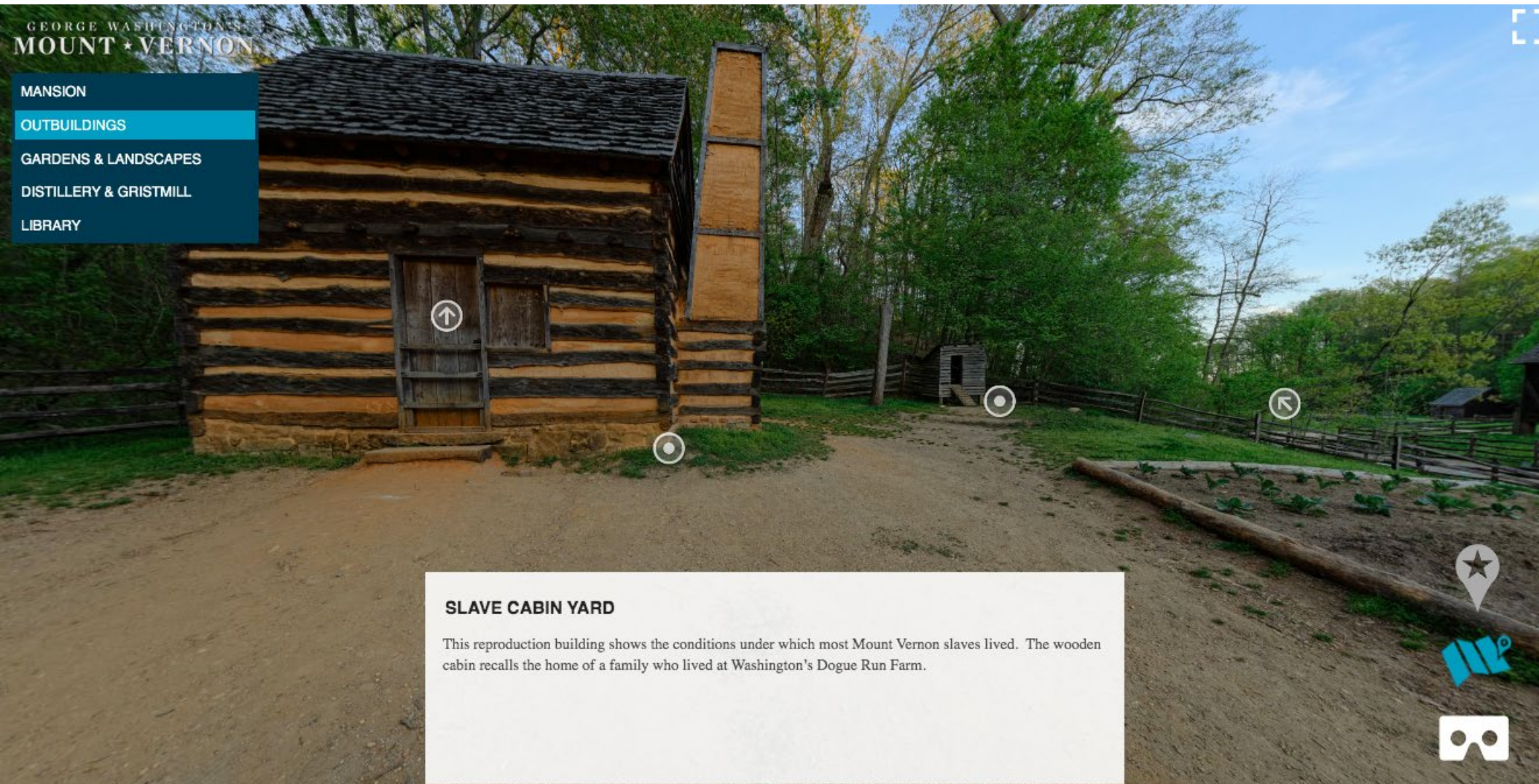
- 1 Peter-an old man
- 2 Lewis-an old man
- 3 Frank*-an old man
- 4 Frederick*-a man about 45 years old-an overseer and valuable
- 5 Gunner*-a man about 45 years old-valuable, a brickmaker
- 6 Harry-a man about 40 years old-valuable, a Horseler
- 7 Tom-a man about 20 years old-stout & healthy
- 8 Sambo*-a man about 20 years old-stout & healthy
- 9 Thomas*-a lad about 17 years old-House Servant
- 10 Peter-a lad about 15 years old-very likely
- 11 Stephen-a man about 20 years old-a cooper by trade
- 12 James- a man 25 years old- stout and healthy
- 13 Wally-a man about 20 years old-by trade a weaver
- 14 Daniel- a man about 19 years old-very likely
- 15 Lucy*-a woman about 20 years old
- 16 Esther*-a woman about 18 years old
- 17 Deborah-a woman about 16 years old
- 18 The above slaves were taken from his Excellency General Washington-by- Captn Richard Graves in the savage sloop of war-
- 19 in April 1781.
- 20 Frederick, Frank, Gunner, Sambo, Thomas recovered in Philadelphia. Lucy and Esther recovered after the siege of York. The
- 21 (Guns?)! ?? Solvage on Tom in Philadelphia and I cannot tell what it was. (Unreadable)...from him in Philadelphia...
- 22 Note a very valuable boat-22 foot keel was also carried off by the above Graves and his squadron.

Primary Source A:
Document Context

A list noting the fourteen men and three women who escaped on the H.M.S. Savage was compiled by Lund Washington. The runaways included: Peter, Lewis and Frank, all described as "old," Frederick, forty-five years old and an overseer, Gunner a brickmaker who was in his mid-forties, Harry a "Horseler" around forty years old, Tom, and Sambo who were both twenty and described as "stout and Healthy." In addition, were: Thomas a seventeen-year-old house servant, Peter who was fifteen years old, Stephen a twenty-year-old cooper, twenty-five-year-old James, Watty (or Wally) a twenty-year-old weaver, Daniel who was nineteen years old, Lucy who was twenty, Esther who was eighteen, and Deborah who was sixteen years old. Seven of the individuals who escaped the plantation on the British ship—Frederick, Frank, Gunner, Sambo, Thomas, Lucy, and Esther—were eventually returned to Mount Vernon at some point after the siege at Yorktown in the fall of 1781.

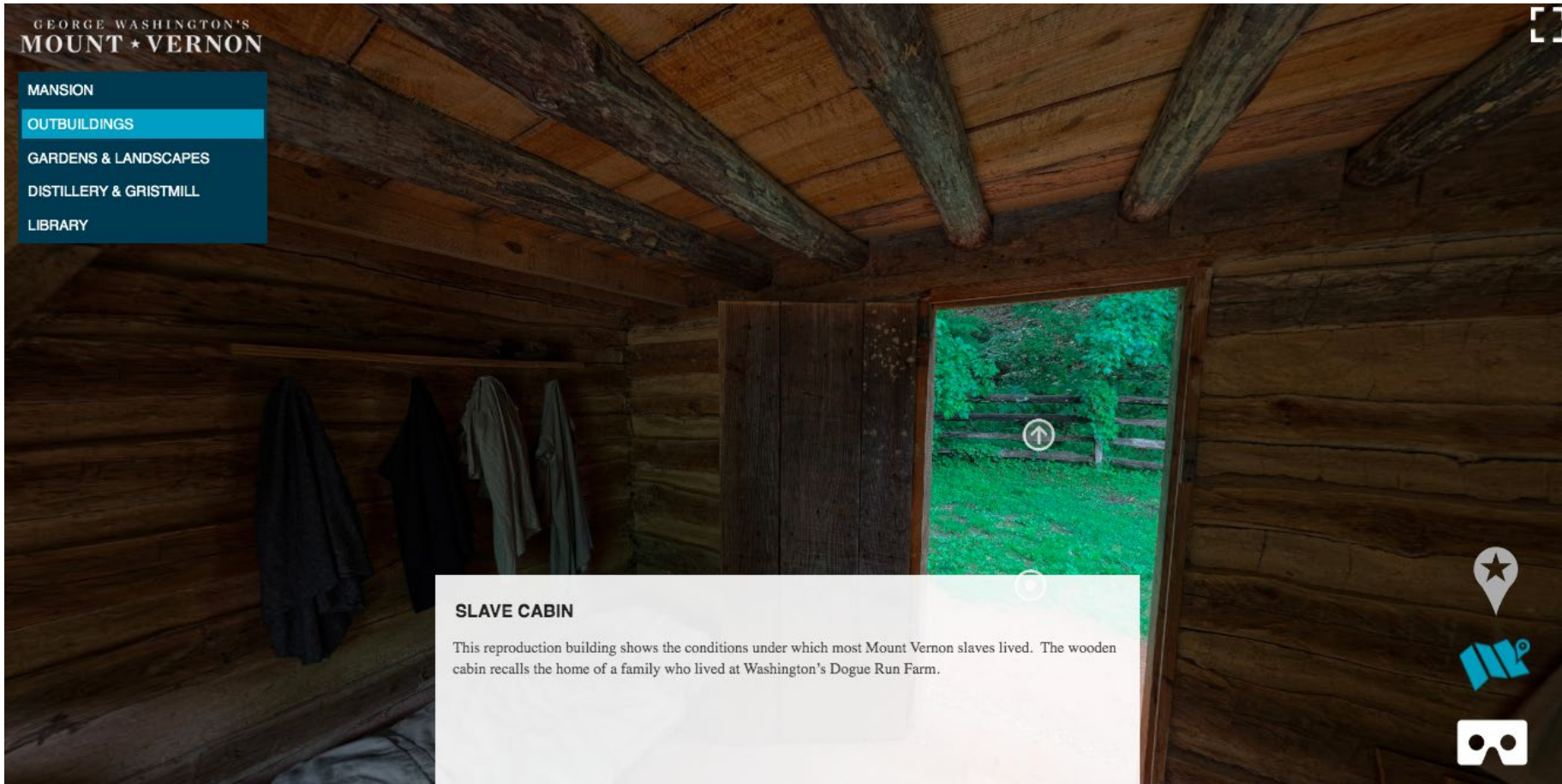
Location B1: The Slave Cabin

To view in virtual tour, find under 'Outbuildings': <https://virtualtour.mountvernon.org/>



Location B2: The Slave Cabin

To view in virtual tour, find under 'Outbuildings': <https://virtualtour.mountvernon.org/>



Primary Sources:

A Collection of Archeological Artifacts from the House of Friends Site (Housing for Enslaved Residents at Mount Vernon)

Primary Source B1:



Amethyst glass sleeve button inlay with molded scalloped clam shell shape

Primary Source B1:

Object Context

This is a decorative glass inset which originally was set into the metal backing of a linked, or sleeve, button. Such insets are referred to as “pastes,” and could be colored, cut, or molded, and would have been set into metal backings. This example is an amethyst-colored glass, which has been molded into a clam shell element. Sleeve buttons served much the same function as modern cuff links, securing shirt sleeves together. Generally, circular forms, such as this, gained popularity in the second half of the eighteenth century. Depending on the material used to embellish these forms, sleeve buttons could be quite expensive. By and large, however, simple metal sleeve buttons were among the cheaper items available at local stores.

Primary Source B2



Turkey Sternum

Primary Source B2: Object Context

Part of a turkey's sternum, a bone found in a turkey breast. This is a large meat-producing part of a turkey and is high in protein.

Primary Source B3:



Persimmon seeds, 10 complete, 15 fragments

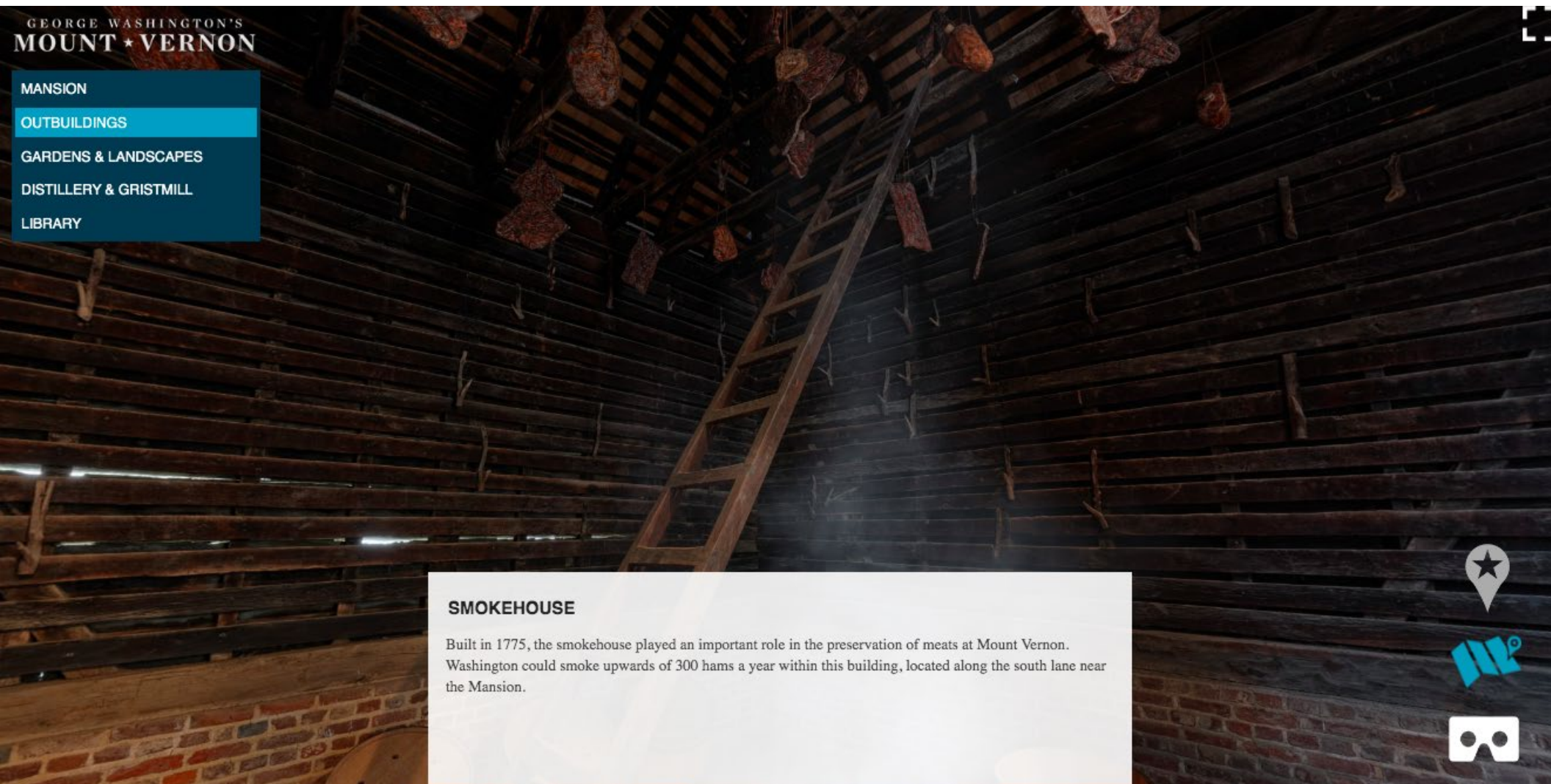
Primary Source B3:

Object Context

10 complete and 15 fragments of burnt persimmon seeds. 2 seeds were destroyed during identification. original total count is 27. Latin name: *Diospyros virginiana*. Persimmon seeds were the most common type of seed found in the House for Families. They were also present in the South Grove Midden which suggests that they were eaten both by plantation owners and the enslaved population. Persimmon is a native fruit and was easily dried and preserved. It also had a variety of medicinal uses. (McKnight, Justine W. 2015. "A Study of Macro-botanical Remains Recovered from the House for Families at George Washington's Mount Vernon 44FX762/40 and 44FX762/47".)

Location C: The Smokehouse

To view in virtual tour, find under 'Outbuildings': <https://virtualtour.mountvernon.org/>



SMOKEHOUSE

Built in 1775, the smokehouse played an important role in the preservation of meats at Mount Vernon. Washington could smoke upwards of 300 hams a year within this building, located along the south lane near the Mansion.

Primary Source C:

From George Washington to William Pearce. Letter. 7 June 1795. National Archives Founders

Online. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-18-02-0153>

1 Philadelphia 7th June 1795.
2 Mr Pearce,
3 ...I wish you could find out the thief who robbed the meat house at Mount Vernon, & bring him to punishment. And at the
4 same time secure the house against future attempts; for our drafts upon it will be pretty large, I expect, when we come
5 home; wch probably may be about the middle or 20th of next month. Nathan has been suspected, if not detected, in an
6 attempt of this sort formerly; & is as likely as any one to be guilty of it now. Postilion Joe has been caught in similar
7 practices; and Sam I am sure would not be restrain[ed] by any qualms of conscience, if he saw an opening to do the like. I am
8 Your friend &ca
9 Go: Wash

PRIMARY SOURCE:
TAKING AGENCY IN MOUNT VERNON'S ENSLAVED COMMUNITY

Primary Source C:
Document Context

This letter from June 7, 1795 was written from George Washington to William Pearce, his hired farm manager during his second term as president. At the end of the letter, Washington refers to the disappearance of meat referenced by Pearce in a previous letter. Nathan was a 27-year-old enslaved cook at Mansion House and was married to Peg, was another of GW's slaves who lived at Muddy Hole Farm. Postilion Joe, a enslaved worker owned by Martha Washington's estate, appeared on the 1786 and 1799 slave lists for Mansion House. His wife, Sall, was enslaved by George Washington and lived at River Farm.