

Women in the 18th Century

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S
MOUNT ★ VERNON

THE MOUNT VERNON LADIES' ASSOCIATION



Martha Washington

Martha Washington helped manage the Mount Vernon estate. She was married to George Washington and adopted Nelly. She also would have helped oversee Caroline and Eleanor as they labored.

NELLY WROTE
LETTERS TO
FRIENDS AND
TRAVELLED IN
HER FREE
TIME

Eleanor (Nelly) Parke Custis

ADOPTED IN

1781



She went to school
and learned to:

- Read
- Write
- Play music
- Dance
- Paint

She married Lawrence
Lewis and managed
90 enslaved individuals

"She is a little wild creature and spends
her time at the windows looking at
carriages passing by which is new to her
and very common for children to do."

-Martha Washington to Fanny Bassett
8 June 1789

Eleanor Forbes

1797

ARRIVED AT
MOUNT VERNON

She was given:

- \$150 / year
- Her own room
(above the kitchen)
- A bed
- A tea table
- Four chairs

"Sober and honest, well acquainted with
Cookery and capable of ordering and
setting out a table."

-Virginia Governor Robert Brooke
to George Washington, 1797

ELEANOR ATE THE
SAME FOOD AS THE
WASHINGTONS,
BUT SAT AT A
DIFFERENT TABLE



Caroline Branham

1764 BORN INTO
ENSLAVEMENT AT
MOUNT VERNON

Her Tasks Included:

- Sewing clothes
- Washing linens
- Lighting fires
- Cleaning the house
- Making beds

SHE WORKED
SUNRISE TO SUNSET



She had 9 Children

"Caroline [sewed] 6 Jackets & 5
Breeches [in] 6 [days]"

Farm Reports, August 30th, 1794

"By Cash paid Caroline for 10 ducks"

Manager Ledger by William Pearce,
August 22nd, 1795

Most enslaved people did not
know how to read or write, so
they left few written records of
their own. We know about
Caroline because she is
mentioned in letters, charts,
and legal documents.

Indigenous Women

Indigenous women used the land that Mount
Vernon sits on. Different native peoples- like the
Doeg and Piscataway nations- lived on this land
and traded with others. Archaeology shows us
that these people grew crops, fished, and used
resources in the area. When the Europeans
came, Indigenous lifestyles were changed.



Vocabulary

- Enslavement – a condition where a person is kept in bondage by another
- Indigenous – people who lived and thrived in a location that are native to that location
- Archaeology – the study of past human life and activities through artifacts and other physical remains

How do we know about these women?

PRIMARY SOURCES!

Vocabulary (continued)

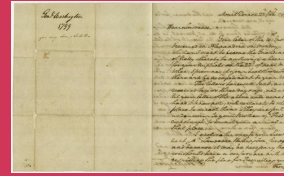
- **Primary Source** – an original document or object created by someone at the time of an event or period



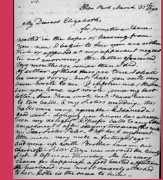
Nelly owned this teacup. She would have drank tea with her family, served by enslaved individuals or household servants.



This harpsichord was used by Nelly. She was taught by her grandmother, Martha Washington, who was known for being harsh.



This letter from George Washington gives Lawrence permission to marry his granddaughter, Nelly Custis. The two were married in 1799, ten months before Washington's death.



Nelly Custis wrote this letter to Elizabeth Bordley, a lifelong friend. She mentions that she will always be called Eleanor, because she thought Nelly was homely.



Eleanor would have served the Washingtons with cups like this. Eleanor also would have drank tea, but in far less fancy chinaware.



This bell called servants and enslaved laborers in the Mansion. Because Eleanor was in charge of many of the other servants, she may have used this bell.



George Washington wrote this letter to Bushrod, his nephew, asking about a "Mrs. Forbes" who lived in Richmond. He was in need of a good housekeeper.



This is a ledger that shows the amount of money that Eleanor Forbes was paid. She was paid \$150 a year - George Washington thought this was a high salary.



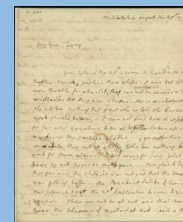
This teacup was found in the House for Families archaeology dig. Enslaved laborers like Caroline may have used this cup for tea.



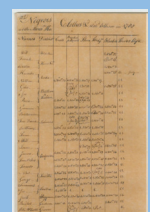
A bedwarmer like this one was often used by enslaved laborers like Caroline to heat the beds of household members.



Martha Washington wrote this letter to her niece, Fanny Bassett, complaining that Caroline did not work when she was left alone.



This ledger shows that Caroline received shoes on November 25, 1788.



Questions

1. These women represent different social classes at Mount Vernon. What are their roles at Mount Vernon?
2. What are the similarities and differences between the women's daily lives, and how might they interact?
3. How do their roles fit in the Mount Vernon plantation system, and how are they essential to Mount Vernon's operations?