

Homeschool Day Adult Guide

How to Use this Guide

This guide is designed to enrich your visit to the estate and provide supplemental information about George Washington as an 18th-century farmer, plantation owner, and entrepreneur. You will also learn about the lives of the enslaved people who lived and worked on the farms and maintained the Mansion and grounds. The questions included are meant to encourage discussion and exploration during your visit. Additional information and suggested answers are included to help facilitate learning amongst the children in your group.

Additional resources to continue the learning experience beyond your visit, including activities, games, and worksheets, are available at www.mountvernon.org/homeschoolday.

The places you will visit today correspond with their locations on the Homeschool Day Explorer's Map. We encourage you to visit the stops on the Farm in the order listed.

Introduction: Farming at Mount Vernon

George Washington held many important roles including military leader and president, but he saw himself first as a farmer. He began renting Mount Vernon in 1754 from the widow of his older half-brother, Lawrence Washington. He inherited the plantation in 1761 when Lawrence's widow passed away. Washington devoted as much time as possible to cultivating a successful farm and a thriving business, even though he was often away serving his country.

By the end of Washington's life, the Mount Vernon plantation was made up of five farms: Mansion House, Union, Dogue Run, Muddy Hole, and River. Washington's farming and business interests were vast and diverse. By the end of Washington's life, the Mount Vernon estate consisted of 8,000 acres that included a massive and successful enterprise. Washington searched for ways to get supplies for Mount Vernon as inexpensively as possible. Sometimes that meant producing them on his plantation, but sometimes it meant buying them from overseas. He was interested in improving efficiency and conducted experiments accordingly. Many of his experiments took place in the Botanical Garden (stop #19). He increased his farm acreage and investigated the best ways to produce more crops. One of the key ways that Washington sought to improve his farms was through the use of compost and manure to improve soil health.

To keep Mount Vernon running, Washington depended on the labor of hundreds of enslaved individuals. At the time of George Washington's death in 1799, 317 enslaved individuals lived and worked at Mount Vernon. The enslaved community was large and diverse, consisting of men, women, and children who lived on all five farms and performed a wide variety of tasks. Those living at Mansion House Farm worked in the Mansion as chambermaids, valets, and cooks. Other individuals worked in trades such as spinning, carpentry, and blacksmithing. Enslaved individuals on the four outlying farms, such as Priscilla and her children, worked as

Education & Guest Services

MOUNT VERNON LADIES' ASSOCIATION

P.O. Box 110, Mount Vernon, VA 22121
703.780.2000 | mountvernon.org



GEORGE WASHINGTON'S
MOUNT ★ VERNON

field laborers to cultivate and harvest Mount Vernon's crops.

Notes:

Stop A: The Farm & Foodways of Enslaved Families

The Farm demonstration site recreates one of George Washington's outlying properties where most of the enslaved individuals worked and lived. The outlying farms were his commercial farms, where crops were grown to sell for profit. These farms included Union, Dogue Run, Muddy Hole, and River. View the map of the five farms on the panel by the site entrance to see their locations.

Foodways of Enslaved Families

Children and family members too old or injured to receive work assignments often cooked the food that the enslaved people at Mount Vernon ate. Working adults and older children (typically aged 12 and older) did not always have time to cook as their work day lasted from sunrise to sunset. On the outlying farms, families either cooked for themselves using the fireplace in their cabin or at communal fire pits. Meals were typically simple, such as soups and stews, due to lack of access to ingredients and cooking utensils.

Food rations, or set amounts of food, were issued to each enslaved person. A typical daily ration for an enslaved adult was 1 quart of cornmeal and 5-8 ounces of salted fish. Sometimes, the ration might include buttermilk, molasses, salt, or fresh and salted meat.

While the rations provided the bare minimum of calories needed for the day, they were not always filling, nor did they provide a wide range of vitamins and minerals. To supplement their diets, enslaved families cultivated their own gardens, kept chickens, trapped small animals, and searched the woods for edible wild plants. Often, the gardens that enslaved families grew had vegetables and fruits that their ancestors had grown in Africa. Eating West African foods helped keep some of their traditions and culture alive.

Discussion question:

What are some food traditions in your family?

Learn about food preservation by visiting the Smoke House #28.

Notes:

Education & Guest Services

MOUNT VERNON LADIES' ASSOCIATION
P.O. Box 110, Mount Vernon, VA 22121
703.780.2000 | mountvernon.org



Stop B: Bake Oven

This clay oven represents one of the most popular styles of ovens used in England and America during Washington's lifetime. In the 18th century, ovens like this were seen at military forts, plantations, and large mills (where wheat was ground into flour for sale).

To make bread, the baker opened the door and built a large fire inside the oven. It usually took 1-3 hours to preheat, depending on the weather. When the oven was hot, the baker shoveled the fire out and put the bread in. An experienced baker could tell the temperature of the oven simply by reaching in to feel. The thick walls of the oven allowed it to stay hot for a long time – long enough to bake up to three batches of bread before another fire had to be lit to reheat it. An oven similar to this one would typically fit 20-30 loaves at a time. A baker might be able to make 60-90 loaves from just one fire.

Do you think everyone had access to wheat bread?

Most free people in early America could not afford white bread very often. They probably could afford brown bread, which was a mix of wheat flour, rye flour, water, molasses, salt, yeast and sometimes other cheap flours like barley, oat, and cornmeal. Washington himself would have had access to white bread, but enjoyed other varieties of bread as well. His bread was baked in the brick oven inside the mansion kitchen. Enslaved people typically received cornmeal rations instead of wheat flour and did not have access to ovens. Instead, they made cornmeal pancakes called hoe cakes, or they baked cornbread by wrapping the dough in leaves and burying it in the coals of a fire.

Notes:

Stop C: Fisheries (Display only)

Rivers were the highways of the 18th century. There were very few roads and those that did exist were not always safe or reliable. Although today we see very few boats on this part of the Potomac River, in Washington's time it would have been filled with vessels sailing up and down the river. Many large plantations like Mount Vernon were built adjacent to rivers so goods and crops could be moved to market for sale in the



GEORGE WASHINGTON'S MOUNT ★ VERNON

United States, Europe, and the West Indies.

In the spring, as the water of the Potomac River began to warm, shad and herring returned to lay eggs, or spawn, in the upper parts of the river. Primary sources from the 18th century reference the surface of the water “sparkling like silver” as millions of fish moved upriver. The spawning season lasted only four to six weeks, and each year Washington set up a successful fishing operation on the Potomac that relied on enslaved labor. Enslaved and hired workers from across the estate worked around the clock to catch, clean, and preserve the huge quantities of fish. During spawning season, nearly all other work at Mount Vernon stopped and enslaved workers were reassigned to work on the fishing operation.

Did you know?

During the brief fishing season, Mount Vernon’s enslaved workers typically brought in over 1 million herring and tens of thousands of shad, which were preserved with salt and then stored in large barrels. Salted fish was not only a staple of the food rations for Mount Vernon’s enslaved population, but the sale of Mount Vernon’s preserved fish locally and internationally often accounted for half of the annual revenue for Washington’s estate.

Discussion questions:

What important role did the river play at Mount Vernon?

The Potomac River connected Mount Vernon to the outside world, supplied the estate with one of its most important food sources, and provided Washington with one of his most successful business ventures (fishing). Washington’s goods could easily move on the river in both directions. He imported finished goods from across the globe and exported flour and salted fish from his estate. Additionally, the fish from the river were a staple in the diet of the enslaved workers.

How did the fishing operation contribute to making Mount Vernon a successful plantation?

The fishing operations cut down on the amount of materials Washington had to purchase from the outside world, which helped make Mount Vernon a more profitable plantation. Feeding the hundreds of enslaved workers at Mount Vernon could have been very expensive for Washington, but the supply of shad and herring caught during the fishing season served as a major contribution to the rations provided to the enslaved population.

Explore! Visit the salt house at #20 to learn more.

Notes:

Education & Guest Services

MOUNT VERNON LADIES' ASSOCIATION

P.O. Box 110, Mount Vernon, VA 22121

703.780.2000 | mountvernon.org



Stop D: Composting (display only)

Washington, who was always trying to perfect his farming techniques, read that manure was a great fertilizer and he wanted to try it on his farms. Before adding it to crop fields or gardens, the dung needed to “cook.” Another name for this process is *composting*. Today, composting is often associated with decomposing leaves and vegetable scraps, but in the 18th century manure and plant materials were used to enhance soil nutrients.

Washington built an open-sided structure called “the Stercorary,” which is a fancy name for a very large pile of dung or manure. Many different animals contributed to the dung repository, which partially explains its location near Mount Vernon’s stables. Enslaved women gathered and spread the manure on the fields. Their older children may have also hauled manure as part of their assigned work.

Washington and other farmers of his time understood that by rotating crops their fields would not become “exhausted” or depleted of nourishment. Based on his studies of English farming methods, Washington expanded a three-year crop rotation into a seven-year schedule. Under this system, no crop, except clover or grass, was planted in the same field for more than one year in a row. Also by pasturing livestock on fields planted with grass, their manure helped to replace valuable nutrients in the soil. Buckwheat was plowed under while still green to serve as a natural soil enhancer, or “green manure.”

Green manures were a new concept during Washington’s lifetime. Today we know them as nitrogen fixers. Gardeners and farmers still use compost piles and often prefer this rich and fragrant fertilizer to the chemical-based solutions sold in most stores.

Explore! Visit the Dung Repository at #32, to learn more about compost today as well as the role of animals and their care on an 18th century farm!

Discussion questions:

Why do you think Washington chose this location for the dung repository?

Washington experimented with the manure from many different animals on his farm, including horses. Since many of the horses were housed in the stables, this location for the dung repository may have been the most convenient. It is also located fairly close to the gardens, which utilized the manure as fertilizer.

How is the dung repository an example of Washington’s innovation as a farmer?

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S MOUNT ★ VERNON

Part of what made Washington an innovative farmer was his willingness to experiment with new methods. The dung repository served as a place for Washington to experiment with the best combinations of manure to create the best possible fertilizer.

Notes:

Stop E: Textiles

Washington's textiles industry produced clothing for the enslaved community and some household linens. Much of the raw material used to make cloth also came from Mount Vernon. Fields of flax, which was used to make linen, grew on the outlying farms and up to 800 sheep produced fleece that was turned into wool.

Sheep were sheared once a year in the late spring. To turn a sheep's fleece into cloth, an enslaved woman such as Dolshey, first cleaned the fleece. The fleece was then *carded* by enslaved people, sometimes children, who combed the fleece between special brushes called *cards* to remove any leftover dirt and smooth the fleece.

Once cleaned, the fleece was spun using a spinning wheel that twisted the fiber into wool yarn. In the 18th century, spinning thread and weaving cloth was time-consuming labor. At Mount Vernon, the task was completed by enslaved women such as Kitty. Current research shows that much of the spinning at Mount Vernon happened alongside other tasks in the enslaved workers' living areas. Weaving fabric, on the other hand, was a man's trade and was completed by both hired and enslaved men.

Meet Kitty, an Enslaved Spinner

Kitty was between 40 and 50 years old in 1799. She labored as a dairy maid and a spinner. As a spinner, she turned sheep's wool into thread, which was used to make clothing for other enslaved people.

Kitty was married to Isaac, an enslaved carpenter. By 1801, they had nine daughters and seven grandchildren. Kitty's family was separated twice while she was held in bondage at Mount Vernon. Isaac was owned by George Washington and received his freedom in 1801, as part of Washington's last will and testament. Kitty was a dower slave, which meant she and all her children were owned by the Custis family estate from Martha Washington's first marriage. After George Washington's death, Kitty and her children remained enslaved at Mount Vernon.

Education & Guest Services

MOUNT VERNON LADIES' ASSOCIATION
P.O. Box 110, Mount Vernon, VA 22121
703.780.2000 | mountvernon.org



GEORGE WASHINGTON'S MOUNT ★ VERNON

In 1802, Kitty's family was forced to separate again upon Martha Washington's death. Kitty and her children were part of the inheritance of Martha's four grandchildren who lived in different parts of Virginia and Washington, D.C. At least one of Kitty's family members was sent to the homes of each of the four grandchildren. Even though Washington wanted to minimize the "painful sensations" of separating Mount Vernon's enslaved families, many enslaved families still experienced the tragedy of separation.

Did you know?

It took about 2.5 miles of thread to make a single square yard of cloth. In 1778, 2,000 yards of cloth were made at Mount Vernon.

Discussion question:

What was the role of textile production at Mount Vernon?

Textile production at Mount Vernon was largely dedicated to producing fabric to clothe the enslaved workers on the estate. Each enslaved person received one set of clothing for the winter, and one for the summer. By producing some of this material on the estate, Washington did not have to purchase it elsewhere.

Visit the Spinning House at #18 to see examples of a large spinning wheel and a loom.

Notes:

Stop F: 16-Sided Barn

For many years, George Washington grew tobacco as his "cash crop" at Mount Vernon. However, his cash crop eventually changed to wheat because the soil was not well-suited for growing tobacco, and he could make a larger profit selling wheat products. During the colonial era, Great Britain did not restrict the wheat trade in the same way as it did tobacco. After the American Revolution, Washington believed that farming was very important for the prosperity of the new country and that the United States had the potential to become a "granary to the world" since land was one of America's most highly sought after resources.

Wheat seeds, also known as grain, must be separated from the top of the stalk before they can be ground into flour. Washington designed his 16-sided treading barn as a "machine" that would improve this process, known

Education & Guest Services

MOUNT VERNON LADIES' ASSOCIATION

P.O. Box 110, Mount Vernon, VA 22121
703.780.2000 | mountvernon.org



GEORGE WASHINGTON'S MOUNT ★ VERNON

as *threshing*. Bundles of wheat were spread on the top floor where horses or mules trotted on it. The weight and impact of their hooves separated the grain from the stalk. Look for the gaps in the floor where the wheat would fall to the floor below leaving the straw behind. The leftover straw could be used as bedding for horses or composted. Enslaved workers swept up the wheat from the bottom floor. Through a process called *winnowing*, the enslaved workers then removed any dust or leftover *chaff*, which is the paper-like husk that surrounds each seed. To winnow, enslaved workers used baskets or fans to blow air through the grain to remove the chaff. Only after all these steps were completed was the grain ready to be ground into flour.

The treading barn was much more efficient than traditional threshing methods that dated back thousands of years.

Did you know?

The roughly circular shape of the treading barn created a curved path that allowed the horses to move without stopping. This helped to keep the horses from urinating, since they cannot do so while in motion, which in turn kept the grain clean and dry. Mount Vernon's 16-sided barn is a replica of the original, which was located on Dogue Run Farm.

Discussion questions:

Why was switching to wheat a smart move for Washington?

Switching from tobacco to wheat was a good decision for several reasons. Wheat was gentler on the soil, could be ground into flour and sold for a high price, and it gave Washington more control over the trade of his product.

Though wheat required less labor to grow as a crop, it did need more land, buildings, and equipment to ready it for sale, which created more demands on enslaved workers. The labor associated with making Washington's vision for a new cash crop a reality fell to those enslaved at Mount Vernon whose assignments included clearing land to ready it for cultivation, plowing fields repeatedly to prepare the soil, constructing buildings for processing the wheat, and manufacturing additional farming equipment.

How does Washington's design for the 16-sided barn demonstrate innovation as a farmer?

Washington was always looking for ways to increase his farms' production, while decreasing time and labor. For example, a common way to separate the seed from the stalk was to thresh the wheat with a flail. A laborer would beat the grain to separate it from the straw. Another way to thresh wheat was to use livestock. The animals would walk over the sheaves of wheat and the impact of their hooves would separate the grain from the straw. This was called treading. Treading was done outdoors, which exposed the wheat to the bad weather and dirt. A significant portion of the grain was ruined or lost as a result. The treading barn required less human labor and provided protection from bad weather, which cut Washington's crop loss in half.

Consider this...a granary is where wheat is stored, and Washington believed the United States could be a

Education & Guest Services

MOUNT VERNON LADIES' ASSOCIATION

P.O. Box 110, Mount Vernon, VA 22121
703.780.2000 | mountvernon.org



GEORGE WASHINGTON'S
MOUNT ★ VERNON

“granary to the world.” What do you think he meant?

Notes:

Stop G: Candle making

Candle making was a vital skill in the 18th century. Beeswax candles were the preferred form of candle because they had a very high melting point, which meant they lasted longer. They also had a bright, clear flame and did not produce as much smoke as other varieties of candles. Beeswax candles also had a pleasant smell. While they did have many advantages, beeswax candles were also expensive. Many people could not afford to use them regularly.

Another variety of candles were tallow candles. Tallow candles were made using animal fat. They were much more readily available, and much more affordable than beeswax. They were by far the most widely used type of candle. There were a few disadvantages to using tallow candles. They did not smell very good, produced a lot of smoke, and had a much lower melting point, which meant they did not last as long. Due to the amount of heat they produced while burning, tallow candles would sometimes bend while burning.

Explore! Visit any of the historic structures where people might have worked at night.

Notes:

Stop H: Slave Cabin

More than half of Mount Vernon’s enslaved community lived and worked on Washington’s outlying farms as field laborers. The majority of field workers were women. Those who were physically able worked from sunrise to sunset, six days a week, planting, cultivating and harvesting Washington’s crops. This reconstructed cabin shows the typical living conditions of families who lived on the outlying farms. It consists of a single room with a clay floor, a fireplace, a root cellar, and a loft above. The wooden walls were daubed (an architectural word for coated) with mud to insulate against the elements.

Education & Guest Services

MOUNT VERNON LADIES’ ASSOCIATION
P.O. Box 110, Mount Vernon, VA 22121
703.780.2000 | mountvernon.org



GEORGE WASHINGTON'S MOUNT ★ VERNON

Meet Priscilla and Penny

In 1799, Priscilla, also called Silla, was an enslaved field laborer and plow woman on Dogue Run Farm. She was married to Joe, who worked as an enslaved ditcher on Mansion House Farm. Together, Priscilla and Joe had six children, including 11-year-old Penny, who lived with Priscilla in a cabin similar to the one you can see today. Penny was not old enough for formal work assignments, but likely did many chores around her family's home and helped raise her younger siblings. To see his wife and children, Joe had to walk several miles both ways from Mansion House Farm to Dogue Run Farm.

Priscilla and her children were eventually granted their freedom under the conditions of George Washington's will. Joe, however, was a dower slave owned by the Custis family estate from Martha Washington's first marriage. He remained enslaved after Washington's death and was inherited by one of Martha Washington's grandchildren following her death.

Discussion question:

What challenges would an enslaved family face living in a cabin on an outlying farm?

Working as a laborer on an outlying farm was back breaking and the cabins did not offer much physical comfort. The cabins were very small with only basic furniture and pallets on the floor for sleeping.

In addition, families who lived in cabins like these were often separated from other family members. For example, Joe, whose wife and children lived in a cabin like this on Dogue Run Farm, only saw his family on Sundays when he had no assigned labor and was able to walk several miles in order to see them. The inability to choose who they lived with and where they worked illustrates the lack of freedom that invaded so much of their daily lives.

Learn more about enslaved individuals and their communities by visiting the Greenhouse Slave Quarters at #11-14.

Notes:

Education & Guest Services

MOUNT VERNON LADIES' ASSOCIATION
P.O. Box 110, Mount Vernon, VA 22121
703.780.2000 | mountvernon.org

