

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S MOUNT ★ VERNON

GEORGE WASHINGTON AND SLAVERY

George Washington was born into a world in which slavery was accepted. He became a slave owner when his father died in 1743. At the age of eleven, he inherited ten slaves and 500 acres of land. When he began farming Mount Vernon eleven years later, at the age of 22, he had a work force of about 36 slaves. With his marriage to Martha Custis in 1759, 20 of her slaves came to Mount Vernon. After their marriage, Washington purchased even more slaves. The slave population also increased because the slaves were marrying and raising their own families. By 1799, when George Washington died, there were 316 slaves living on the estate.

The skilled and manual labor needed to run Mount Vernon was largely provided by slaves. Many of the working slaves were trained in crafts such as milling, coopering, blacksmithing, carpentry, and shoemaking. The others worked as house servants, boatmen, coachmen or field hands. Some female slaves were also taught skills, particularly spinning, weaving and sewing, while others worked as house servants or in the laundry, the dairy, or the kitchen. Many female slaves also worked in the fields. Almost three-quarters of the 184 working slaves at Mount Vernon worked in the fields, and of those, about 60% were women. The workday for slaves was from sun-up to sun-down, six days a week. Sunday was a day of rest.

Although George Washington was born into a world where slavery was accepted, his attitude toward slavery changed as he grew older. During the Revolution, as he and fellow patriots strove for liberty, Washington became increasingly conscious of the contradiction between this struggle and the system of slavery. By the time of his presidency, he seems to have believed that slavery was wrong and against the principles of the new nation.

As President, Washington did not lead a public fight against slavery because he believed it would tear the new nation apart. Abolition had many opponents, especially in the South. Washington seems to have feared that if he took such a public stand, the southern states would withdraw from the Union; a fear that was validated seventy years later, leading to the Civil War.

Privately, however, Washington could -- and did -- lead by example. Later in life, just two years before his death, Washington wrote to Lawrence Lewis (1797), "I wish my soul that the legislature of this State could see a policy of gradual abolition of slavery." George Washington died on December 14, 1799. Although he did not free his slaves during his lifetime, nor did he initiate emancipation plans as president, he privately encouraged those in the Congress to champion the effort through legislative action. He personally resolved the issue by providing for the emancipation of his slaves in his will. In addition to freedom, he left detailed instructions for their care and support of the newly freed people and records indicate that some lived at Mount Vernon as pensioners into the 1830s. Of the 316 slaves living at Mount Vernon in 1799, 123 belonged to George Washington and those 123 slaves were freed on January 1, 1801.

At the slave quarters now on the Mount Vernon estate, visitors see a reconstruction of one housing unit based on available records and archaeological findings. This one room might have housed an entire extended family or male tradesmen whose wives and families may have lived on one of the outlying farms or at another plantation. Two-thirds of the adult slaves were married (the unions were recognized by Washington, but not Virginia law) and, when possible, lived together as a family unit. The daily slave rations included one quart of cornmeal, and five ounces of fish, either salted or pickled. At times, the slaves were given fresh meat. The rations were supplemented by the slaves with vegetables from gardens they kept, chickens and ducks that they raised, as well as supplies obtained through hunting, trapping, and fishing. The slaves worked from sunrise to sunset, Monday through Saturday. Free time activities likely centered around their living quarters and included: family chores such as gardening and hunting; and entertainment such as visiting with one another, story-telling and music, traveling to Alexandria on the occasion of a horserace or to trade.

It appears from historic records that trading was quite common. Washington indicated that he bought chickens, eggs, melons, cucumbers and ducks from slaves. In fact, Sambo Anderson, an enslaved carpenter at Mount Vernon, sold honey to Washington and, in turn, bought from him a barrel of fine flour and later 162 pounds of pork.

To honor slaves, Mount Vernon built a slave memorial. The memorial was designed and built in 1983 by Howard University architecture students. The Mount Vernon Slave Memorial is believed to be the only such tribute at a plantation in the United States to the African Americans who were enslaved there. The granite column, on top of three circles with the words - *faith, hope and love* - engraved on them, is located approximately 50 yards southwest of George and Martha Washington's tomb, adjacent to the Association's 1929 marker noting the site of the 200-year old slave burial ground. This sacred ground was used as the cemetery for slaves and free blacks who worked at Mount Vernon during the 18th century, and those that worked as free blacks in the first half of the 19th century. The graves were either unmarked or the markings did not survive, and the identities and numbers of those buried remain largely unknown.