Colonial Life at Mount Vernon

George Washington’s Mount Vernon was a bustling southern plantation, home to a community of hundreds of enslaved individuals. What observations and inferences can you make about life on a plantation in the 18th century?

The Farm Site

Agriculture was an essential part of life since Mount Vernon contained a diverse agricultural environment within its five farms. Investigate Mansion House Farm in the Virtual Tour to see the livestock, crops, and work required to make Mount Vernon a productive and prosperous colonial plantation.

- Visit the Overseer’s Quarters to learn more about the people who managed Washington’s farms. Examine their farm reports, which were read and used by Washington.
  - Read about the type of work done on Washington’s farms. How do these roles in Virginia compare to the Northern and Southern colonial regions in the American Colonies?
  - Read Washington’s letter on farming. Create a one-pager to represent the impact of colonial mercantilism policies on the American colonies. How did these policies create problems for Washington as a farmer?
  - Watch a video on tobacco farming and engage in a Think, Pair Share to develop observations related to growing and harvesting tobacco, as well as Washington’s frustrations with English policies towards colonial goods.

The West Front

For the Washington family, Mount Vernon was considered a beloved home. George Washington initially inherited Mount Vernon from his half-brother Lawrence. The house grew as George renovated it throughout his life.

- Use Peter Wadell’s George Washington: Architect to show the beginnings of Mount Vernon. Print and cut the painting into multiple pieces (house, tree, landscape). Analyze the different pieces individually.
- Reveal that the painting is of George and Martha Washington in front of Mount Vernon. How does that change the interpretation? Compare the modern view of the mansion to Wadell’s depiction.
- Investigate the enslaved population that labored at Mount Vernon through the Database of Mount Vernon’s Enslaved Community. As you explore, generate a list of open and closed questions you have about enslavement at Mount Vernon.
- Explore the Blacksmith Shop, Gristmill and Distillery. Using the database above, find an individual who would have worked in one of the listed spaces, noting the evidence (or lack thereof) available. Create a poster detailing their life and the spaces they worked.

The Kitchen

- Examine a Day in the Life of an Enslaved Cook. Track a person within the timeline, and analyze what their day-to-day work might look like. What does their individual schedule tell you about their life? When were they not doing assigned labor?
- Analyze a Food Ledger, and review the recipes the Washingtons used. Make a chart of the foods mentioned within the ledger, creating columns to organize local versus imported ingredients.
- Visit the Salt House, Gristmill, and Distillery to see the production of other foods. Construct your own dinner menu with ingredients produced at Mount Vernon.

The enslaved people at Mount Vernon were vital to the everyday running of the plantation. Some worked in this space seven days a week to create meals for both the Washingtons and their guests.
The American Revolution at Mount Vernon
When George Washington left for war, Mount Vernon’s role as a plantation did not change, despite the constant threat of British takeover. How is Mount Vernon an example of patriot life during the Revolutionary period?

Washington’s Bedchamber
- Read George Washington’s 1775 letter to Martha Washington and write a series of diary entries from either George or Martha’s perspective about the coming war and the general’s new position. Use the letter to understand the Washingtons’ concerns.
- Watch a video on camp followers in the Revolutionary War. Compare and contrast the experiences of camp followers to Martha’s experience at war.
- View Martha’s letter to her “dear children.” Look at the context, audience, tone, and point of view to understand the purpose of the letter, as well as the relationship between Martha and her children.
- How does an analysis of Martha’s letter help us understand Martha’s role both at Mount Vernon and at the front during wartime?

Martha Washington followed George Washington to his military encampments for half of the war. When she was home, the Washington bedroom served as her office, work space and sanctuary. Here she would have written to George about life at Mount Vernon, instructed house servants about duties, and responded to other correspondences.

The Piazza
The Piazza overlooks the Potomac, which was a bustling highway at the time of the Revolution. This meant that Mount Vernon was vulnerable to British ships and troops. The H.M.S. Savage was a British ship that approached Mount Vernon and could be seen from the Piazza.

- View Washington’s 1775 letter to his farm manager. Think about the context and content. What is surprising about this letter? What is Washington concerned about while he is away from Mount Vernon?
- Read about the H.M.S. Savage. Write a newspaper article describing which hazards of war might impact the people of Mount Vernon.
- 17 enslaved individuals escaped with the H.M.S. Savage - some were later recaptured by the Washingtons and listed. Do a See, Think, Wonder routine to explore the impact on daily life at Mount Vernon and the enslaved community when these individuals escaped and returned.
- Compare and contrast Washington’s 1775 letter to Lund Washington to Washington’s 1781 letter, also to Lund Washington. Create a chart comparing Washington’s instructions before the British encounter to what actually happened.

The Front Parlor
- Read John Parke Custis’ (Jacky’s) letter to his mother, Martha Washington, describing Yorktown. Less than a month after Jacky sent the letter, he passed away from camp fever.
  - Print out the letter and create a blackout poem, underlining key pieces of information, experiences, and emotions that Jacky described.
  - See Henry Knox’s letter describing Jacky’s death. Write an I AM poem from the perspective of a Revolutionary War soldier or family about their experiences, and examine how this loss relates to other families.

The Front Parlor contains a painting of Martha’s young children, Jacky and Nelly. While Nelly died as a teenager, Jacky survived until the Battle of Yorktown, where he passed away from Camp Fever. This portrait is a reminder that the Washingtons, too, were deeply affected by war.

JACKY’S LETTER
HENRY’S LETTER
The Presidency and Beyond
After the Revolutionary War, George Washington would be elected the first President of the United States. President Washington would have to use his leadership skills to move through the challenges facing the new country. How is George Washington’s leadership and governing styles represented in Mount Vernon?

The Slave Quarters
Enslaved life at Mount Vernon continued throughout the Presidency. Washington brought enslaved peoples with him to Philadelphia and ensured they left Pennsylvania every six months so they could not assert their right to petition for freedom. The Slave Quarters housed the enslaved populations that remained to work at Mansion House Farm.

- Many enslaved peoples were heavily affected by the Presidency. In small groups, Seek to See the stories of Ona Judge, Hercules, and Billy Lee, and present to the class how each individual resisted enslavement.
- The enslaved population continued to labor at the mansion during the Presidency. Create a chart showing the types of people who lived, worked at, and visited Mount Vernon, whose stories are widely known, sidelined, or hidden.
- Read the Fugitive Slave Act and assign each section to a small group to discuss the meaning and consequences of the act.

Washington’s Study
This space was private to George Washington; guests could only enter with his permission. Washington used his study to draft letters and other important documents when living at Mount Vernon.

- Read about the election process and Elizabeth Powel’s letter convincing Washington to run for president. Then, write your own letter or film a video persuading Washington.
- View Washington’s First Address to Congress and create a Venn Diagram to compare it to a modern address, analyzing both on topics relating to expansion, troops, and foreign policy.
- Look at Washington’s Native American Policy and the Northwest Ordinance. Conduct a Step In, Step Out, Step Back thinking routine to consider indigenous perspectives.
- Read Washington’s letter from the French and Indian War and Washington’s 1796 letter; create a timeline to show colonial and founding policies towards indigenous peoples between 1754 and 1796.

The Lafayette Room
Washington fought alongside the Marquis de Lafayette, and considered him to be family. Lafayette stayed in this room while visiting in 1784. In addition to fighting with the Continental Army, Lafayette also played a major role in the French Revolution.

- Read the Neutrality Proclamation of 1793, as well as the overview. Identify the causes of conflict, and create a silent debate over whether the United States should have declared neutrality or helped France in their Revolution. Consider the cause and effects of the Proclamation and how it impacted future U.S. relationships with foreign powers.
- Compare the Lithograph of General Washington and Lafayette to a painting of Washington’s guests to better understand life at Mount Vernon during the founding years.
The New Room

After Washington's presidency, Mount Vernon received many visitors. Often, Washington entertained these visitors in the New Room, which was the newest and grandest room in the house.

- Chunk Washington's Farewell Address. Draw a political cartoon to represent a specific piece of advice that Washington gave. Consider the validity of his advice in 1796 and today.
  - Watch a video on the Farewell Address and construct a Double Bubble Map to compare Washington’s Farewell Address to that of the most recent President.
- Examine the landscape & river paintings in the New Room.
  - Divide into groups and conduct a Think, Pair, Share about the artwork. Theorize why the Washingtons choose to have those paintings in their New Room. Consider: what do these choices say about George and Martha Washington?
- Create a list of objects in your own room that communicates important information about you.

The Slave Memorial

- Visit the Slave Memorial and reflect on how the enslaved people of Mount Vernon are remembered.
  - Draft your own memorial for an historically marginalized individual or group of people, and provide evidence as to why they should be honored in addition to drawing or describing the artistic details of your memorial.
- How does the Slave Memorial compare to Washington’s New Tomb? Write an essay describing the similarities and differences in the nature, architecture, and materials that make up each place.
- Read about archaeology at Mount Vernon and look through the objects found both at the cemetery and other archaeological sites. Choose an object and create a poster about it, explaining what it might be and how it may have ended up in its location.

The Slave Memorial marks where both free and enslaved peoples were buried at Mount Vernon. George Washington freed over 100 enslaved individuals in his will. He was not legally able to free everyone, as over half were bound to Martha’s first husband’s estate.

Washington’s Tombs

Washington’s New Tomb is the final resting place for Washington and his direct family members. He was initially buried in the old family tomb, located just over the hillside, as was Martha Washington; they were both moved to this “new tomb” in 1831.

- Compare and contrast Washington’s old tomb and new tomb in a t-chart. Read George Washington's will, and list reasons why the Washingtons wanted to be moved to the new tomb.
- Research some of the visitors to Washington’s tomb and discuss the roles of memorials in American culture and society today.
- View the Bust of Washington and Trumbull’s painting, and describe the message each image portrays. Conduct a See, Think, Make, Discuss thinking routine to better comprehend how these images impact our understanding of the past.