

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S MOUNT ★ VERNON



ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN

How to Use this Guide

Welcome to George Washington's Mount Vernon! This guide is part of a series of booklets designed to enrich your visit to the estate. All of the information in this guide pertains to Mount Vernon's architecture and design. In it, you will find questions intended to encourage discussion and exploration during your visit. Information provided in the guide and on interpretive panels throughout the estate will help you answer these questions.

The places you will visit today are numbered to correspond with their location on your visitor map. At the end of the booklet, you will find a helpful answer key to the discussion questions as well as directions on how to continue your experience after you leave the estate.

Introduction

In 1735, George Washington's father, Augustine Washington, built a simple, but substantial farmhouse on his property near Little Hunting Creek. When Augustine died, he passed on the property to his oldest son, George Washington's half-brother, Lawrence Washington. Lawrence renamed the farm Mount Vernon, and began living in the house that his father built. George Washington spent much of his adolescence visiting his half-brother in that same house, but he did not inherit the land and the home until 1754, after Lawrence's death.

Over the next 45 years, Washington expanded and redecorated the home, transforming it into a mansion worthy of a gentleman of his fame and social standing. Although he was not specially trained as an architect, Washington was influenced by the architectural and design greats of his time. Using design books he ordered from London as inspiration, Washington managed to bring the architectural styles of Europe to his farm in Virginia, creating one of the most beautiful and striking estates in America.

Today, you will explore Mount Vernon's buildings and structures as you learn more about George Washington, the architect and designer.

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S MOUNT ★ VERNON

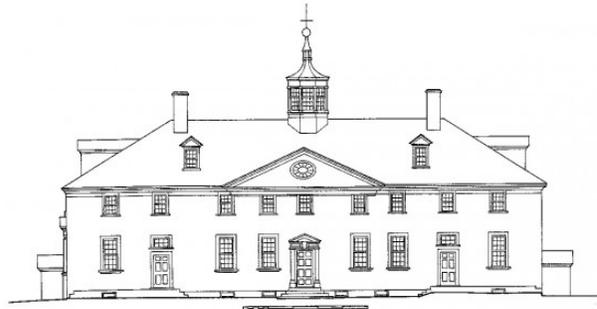
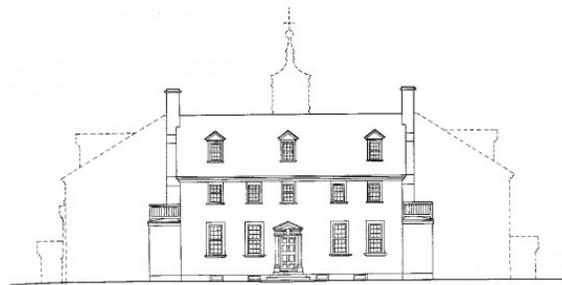
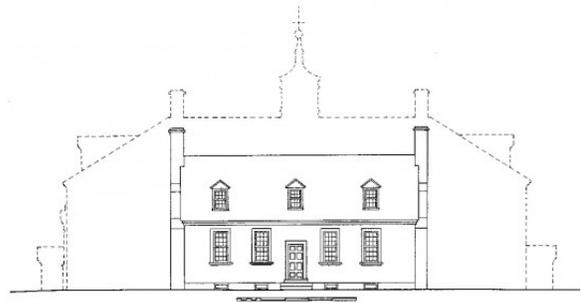
#23 Mansion Circle

The Mansion you see today did not always look this way. In 1735, Washington's father, Augustine Washington, built a substantial farmhouse, which probably looked similar to the top image on the right.

George Washington's older half-brother, Lawrence, inherited Mount Vernon from their father, Augustine. Washington took over Mount Vernon after Lawrence's death, and over the next 45 years, he expanded and changed the house into the Mansion you see today.

After his marriage, Washington lived here with his wife Martha and her two children, Jacky and Patsy. Later, the Washingtons also raised Jacky's two youngest children, George Washington Parke Custis and Eleanor Parke Custis at Mount Vernon.

To the right, you can see the evolution of the Mansion's architecture as Washington renovated and expanded it. Take some time to look at the outside of the Mansion!



Did you know?

The house is actually constructed of wood even though it appears to be stone. This was done through a process called *rustication*. First, long pine boards were grooved and beveled to create the appearance of masonry blocks. Then, the boards were varnished and painted, and fine sand was thrown onto the wet paint, giving the surface a rough texture. When you get near the house, take another look and see if it still appears to be stone.

Discussion questions:

Why do you think George Washington expanded the Mansion?

Can you spot the architectural elements that Washington added?

#6 Mansion Tour

As you tour the Mansion, take notice of the different architectural and design elements that Washington chose for each of the rooms. The way that someone decorates their home can tell you a lot about that person! Following your tour, review the discussion questions as a group.

Servants' Hall

The Washingtons had many overnight guests at Mount Vernon. In one year alone, there were over 600 over-night visits to the estate. These guests often brought servants such as valets and coachmen with them to Mount Vernon. This building was used to accommodate the servants of Washington's guests. There are two additional rooms upstairs.

Did you know?

The large fireplace in this room was actually a mistake! Washington continued remodeling projects at Mount Vernon even while he was away fighting the Revolutionary War. He sent extremely detailed letters to his cousin and farm manager, Lund Washington, providing instructions on various projects. Lund mistakenly thought this building would be used for laundry, which would require a large fireplace for boiling water. By the time Washington got a letter to Lund correcting his mistake, the fireplace had already been built.

Discussion questions:

Why do you think so many people came to visit George Washington at Mount Vernon?

While he was away fighting the war, Washington was constantly writing letters home directing the renovations at Mount Vernon. What do you think this says about Washington and what was important to him?

Colonnade

As you walk along the colonnade to enter the Mansion, you can see another colonnade across the lawn. The two colonnades function as arms reaching out from the Mansion and connecting with the servants' hall and the kitchen. The open curves of the colonnade beautifully frame views of the landscape and the river beyond. Their open design was also practical- allowing ventilation and cool breezes, while providing shelter from the weather.

New Room

George Washington called this his New Room because it was the last room he added to the Mansion. The room took almost 13 years to finish! General Washington carefully planned this space and he knew exactly how he wanted the room to look.

The Washingtons used this impressive space as a multipurpose room for special guests and formal occasions. The green walls and north light coming in the Palladian window create an ideal setting for Washington's paintings and prints which are hung salon-style. The way Washington chose to decorate the room tells us a lot about him.

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S MOUNT ★ VERNON

Be sure to notice the paintings on the walls, as well as the carved mantelpiece and decorative plaster on the ceiling. The fireplace mantle was given to Washington by Samuel Vaughan. He removed the mantle from his own home in England.

Did you know?

In the 18th century, most Virginia homes would have fit into Washington's New Room!

Discussion questions:

What is the first thing you noticed about the New Room?

What is the common theme of the decorative fireplace and the plaster ceiling? What can this tell us about Washington?

Why would Washington want such a large room? What message would that convey to guests?

Piazza

George Washington designed the piazza specifically with the view of the Potomac River in mind. The river is about one mile wide at this point, and the view overlooks the opposite shore of Maryland. The Washington family enjoyed the piazza in pleasant weather and often used it as another entertaining area. Washington wanted everything about his home to be beautiful, and he created the vista you see from the piazza. Look toward the river - down the hill at one time was a park populated with tame deer for his guests to pet. There was also what Washington called a "hanging wood" with flowering trees. Washington also planted trees and shrubs to obscure his guests' view of the working areas of the estate. Finally, when planning the piazza itself, Washington broke the rules of classical architecture by designing and incorporating very thin, square columns that obstructed the view of the landscape and river as little as possible.

Discussion Questions:

What kind of activities do you think took place on the piazza? What would you do if you had a big back porch like the piazza?

Did you know?

In the 1950s, the Mount Vernon Vice Regent from Ohio, U.S. Congresswoman Frances Bolton, was instrumental in saving the land across the river from being developed into an oil storage facility. Today, 4,000 acres across the river has been conserved as Piscataway National Park, preserving the beautiful view that the Washingtons enjoyed from the piazza.

Central Passage

This is the oldest part of the house which was built by George Washington's father in 1735. George Washington expanded his home around these rooms. This is where the Washingtons' many guests and family gathered to talk and socialize; to play games, read books, enjoy music, and perhaps dance. Most guests would have entered through the west door, on the opposite side

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S
MOUNT ★ VERNON

of the room from which we entered, beside the staircase. Carriages pulled up right in front of the doorway and then continued around the circular drive down the south lane to the stables. Visitors were greeted at the door by Frank Lee, the enslaved butler, who then determined, based on 18th-century etiquette, the appropriate place for them to wait for General or Mrs. Washington.

Parlor

A *parlor* is a room that is used as a gathering space for a variety of activities. Today, you might call it a family room or a living room. Notice how this room is decorated—this was considered a rather informal space.

West Parlor

Take notice of how the west parlor is different from the other parlor. It was considered more formal, and could have been an excellent place for card games, chess, or backgammon.

Washington also read newspaper articles out loud in order to spark discussion. After meals, the ladies would retire to this room while the men would remain in the dining room you see to the left.

Discussion questions:

What kind of activities took place in the parlors?

How were the parlors used similarly or differently?

What kind of activities do you do in your living room or family room? Are they similar or different from how the Washingtons used their parlors?

Dining Room

This is the room where the Washingtons took most of their meals and entertained guests. It was intended to be a very formal room, with its bright colored walls and decorative ceiling. It took an expert plasterer five months to complete the ceiling!

Downstairs Bedchamber

This is the only bedchamber located on the first floor of the Mansion. It was most likely used for guests. Remember, the Washingtons had hundreds of visitors throughout the year. Many of these guests came from very far away, and in most cases it would have been considered rude if the Washingtons did not invite them to stay the night.

Did you know?

Have you noticed the vivid paint colors? Today, you can buy paint of any imaginable color, but in the 18th century, paint colors this intense were rare and expensive. The paints had to be mixed by hand, and the ingredients were kept under lock and key. The dining room is painted in a deep green color called *verdigris*, and the west parlor is painted in *Prussian blue*.

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S MOUNT ★ VERNON

The Bastille Key

Find the large metal key in a glass case between the doorways to the dining room and downstairs bedchamber. This is a key to the Bastille—a French prison that was torn down during the French Revolution. The Marquis de Lafayette gave Washington the key as a symbol of liberty for the “Father of All Liberty.” It still hangs prominently in the exact place where Washington placed it.

Discussion questions:

Why would the Marquis de Lafayette send Washington the key to the Bastille? What does a key to a prison symbolize?

If you wanted to send a symbol of your nation today to a friend in another country – what would you choose?

Upper Hall

There are five bedchambers visible from the upper hall. Some would have been used by guests, others would have been used by family members. In the first bedroom to your left is a trundle bed. This type of bed, often stored on the third floor, was for latecomers; adults as well as children slept on these.

There are a lot of bedchambers in the Mansion, but where are the bathrooms? You may have walked by the necessaries (outdoor bathrooms) on your way to the Mansion. However, the necessaries are quite a distance the Mansion, so each bedroom had a chamber pot that served as a bathroom during the night. In the morning, enslaved workers such as Caroline Branham and Molly would come into the bedrooms and not only take the chamber pots, but also bring water, start the fires, and gather up any garments that needed to be laundried.

Who was the Marquis de Lafayette?

The room on the left facing the river is sometimes called the Lafayette Room. We know that the Marquis de Lafayette stayed here, and his portrait hangs on the wall. Lafayette served with General Washington during the American Revolution and thought of him as a second father. He also gave Washington the key to the Bastille, which you saw in the central passage.



The Chintz Room

It is believed that Nelly Custis, Martha Washington’s granddaughter, had her first child in the bedroom on the right side of the hall. Nelly and her brother, George Washington Parke Custis, were raised by General and Mrs. Washington here at Mount Vernon. As an adult, Nelly returned to Mount Vernon with her husband while their home was being constructed at their plantation, Woodlawn. This room is decorated in a style known as Chintz—which blended bold floral designs with Asian decorative influences.

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S
MOUNT ★ VERNON

Yellow Bedchamber

With all of the many visitors in their house, you can imagine that the Washingtons liked to have privacy when they could. Walk through the yellow room to enter their private area of the house. Notice the wire that runs across the wall near the ceiling. This connects to a bell that could be rung from Nelly's bedroom to summon the enslaved servants from outside the Mansion.

Did you know?

The puffy down comforters and the canopies over the beds give the illusion that they are shorter than the beds we use today. However, they are actually the same length.

Discussion questions:

The Washingtons had to be ready at any moment to welcome overnight guests. What do you and your family do to prepare for guests at your house?

What objects in the Chintz Room suggest that Nelly had a baby there?

The Washingtons' Bedchamber

This is the bedchamber shared by the Washingtons, but Martha also used the room to conduct her daily business as mistress of Mount Vernon. The portraits are of Mrs. Washington's four grandchildren.

Mrs. Washington ordered the bed when the couple lived in Philadelphia during the presidency. This is the bed where General Washington died on December 14, 1799, from a severe throat inflammation. Mrs. Washington was by his side, and four enslaved workers were nearby. Three doctors were called to treat him, but they could not save the general's life. After his death, Mrs. Washington closed their bedroom and moved to one on the third floor.

Washington's friend, Henry "Light Horse Harry" Lee, said in his funeral oration that Washington was "First in War, First in Peace, and First in the Hearts of his Countrymen."

Did you know?

After Washington's death, Martha burned almost all of her letters to and from the general. Only two full letters survive from their forty years together.

Discussion questions:

What do you see in the Washingtons' bedchamber that indicates the room was also used as Mrs. Washington's office?

What do you think some of her duties as the mistress of a large plantation might have been?

What do you think the phrase, "First in War, First in Peace, and First in the Hearts of his Countrymen" means?

Study

No one was allowed in this room unless they were invited by General Washington. In the study, Washington shaved and dressed, conducted business, wrote letters, and read. The objects in this room can tell us a lot about General Washington's life.



Can you spot...

A portrait of a man in a red jacket

In the study, George Washington kept a portrait of his older half-brother, Lawrence. As his mentor, Lawrence taught his younger half-brother everything he needed to know to become an important Virginia gentleman.

A piece of coral

Young Washington accompanied his brother Lawrence to Barbados in hopes that the warm weather there would help Lawrence's tuberculosis. It was Washington's only trip outside of America.

A fan chair

In 1787, while attending the Constitutional Convention, Washington purchased a fan chair like the one you see here. While sitting in the chair, you could move the paddles with your feet, causing the fan to move back and forth and produce a breeze above your head.

Book shelves

Unlike some Virginia gentlemen in his time, George Washington never received an advanced formal education. To make up for that, Washington became an avid reader, and owned books about a variety of topics. When he lived here, these shelves were filled with books.

Discussion questions:

Do you have a special place or room that is just for you? What do you do there?

What might people learn about you by visiting your special place?

What can we learn about George Washington from his belongings?

Kitchen

The kitchen was one of the busiest places on the plantation. Notice that it is a separate building. Cooking was hot, smelly, and smoky, so the Washingtons wanted it as far away from them and their guests as possible.

Here you can see the *smoke jack*, which was powered by rising heat to turn the spit on which meat roasted over the fire. Although there is no stove, there *is* an oven. Can you find it? Look at the wall on the right side of the fireplace. There aren't any knobs to turn on this oven. The

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S MOUNT ★ VERNON

enslaved cook made a fire inside and waited for it to die down. Then, he or she scraped out all the wood and coals, and—quickly before it cooled off – put in the bread or pastry dough. The Washingtons didn't eat pizza, but they had the perfect oven for cooking it!

It was the enslaved cooks including Lucy, Nathan, and Hercules, who prepared meals for family members and guests. They were busy all day long—even during holidays—because of all the people visiting Mount Vernon.

Through the doorway on the right is the *scullery*, where ingredients were prepared and dishes washed. All the water came from a well just outside the kitchen. If you were an enslaved child whose parent worked as a cook, it might be your job to bring in water from the well to the kitchens. The narrow staircase on the right side of the scullery leads upstairs to living quarters.

The other doorway opens to the *larder*, which is used to store food. The floor is dug out into a mini-basement so the cool earth could keep fresh food from spoiling. The clay pots held preserved and potted meats and vegetables, as well as jellies, pickles, and condiments.

Did you know?

Every morning, General Washington had three hoe cakes with butter and honey and tea for breakfast. As with many of the foods served here, all the ingredients came from Mount Vernon.

Discussion questions:

Why do you think the floors of the kitchen are made of brick?

What appliance in your kitchen does the same job as the larder?

How is this kitchen different from the one you have at home? How is it the same?

#38 Washington's Tomb

Inside this brick enclosure rest the remains of George Washington and his wife Martha. In his will, Washington directed the construction of the tomb in front of you in the following words: "The family Vault at Mount Vernon requiring repairs, and being improperly situated besides, I desire that a new one of Brick, and upon a larger Scale, may be built at the foot of what is commonly called the Vineyard Inclosure... In which my remains, with those of my deceased relatives (now in the old Vault) and such others of my family as may chuse to be entombed there, may be deposited." The marble sarcophagus on the right, decorated with an eagle, is Washington's, and the simpler one on the left, is Mrs. Washington's. The door on the back wall leads to another room of the mausoleum, where other members of the family are buried.

Washington died on December 14, 1799 from a severe throat infection. Four days later, a funeral was held at Mount Vernon, and Washington's body was placed in the **Old Tomb (#37)** until the

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S MOUNT ★ VERNON

New Tomb could be completed. Across the country, citizens attended sermons and mock funerals. The nation's army wore black armbands for thirty days. In fact, black fabric was in such demand that many stores across the nation simply ran out. In 1831, the New Tomb was completed on this site, and George and Martha Washington, along with other family members were moved here.

Every day, visitors to Mount Vernon come to the tomb to pay their respects to George Washington. While you are here, take a second to think about George Washington's *legacy*— the important things he did for which we remember him.

Did you know?

Congress asked that George Washington be buried below the new Capitol building, which was under construction at the time of his death. Mrs. Washington initially agreed to this, but disagreements within Congress about the vault's design delayed the process for decades. In the end, the surviving members of the Washington family chose to honor his wishes of being buried at Mount Vernon. The completed vault in the basement of the Capitol building remains empty to this day.

Discussion questions:

What is a legacy?

What is George Washington's legacy?

What do you think the eagle on Washington's sarcophagus symbolizes?

Why would Washington want to be buried at Mount Vernon? What does that tell us about how he felt about this place?

How to Continue your Experience

Thank you for visiting Mount Vernon and using the Architecture and Design Homeschool Guide! Attached to your guide are three activity sheets which are designed to further enhance your students' knowledge about George Washington, architect and designer. The activity sheets are designated for beginning, intermediate, and advanced learning levels. For additional homeschool resources, please visit Mount Vernon's website at:

www.mountvernon.org/homeschool

DISCUSSION QUESTION ANSWER KEY

MANSION CIRCLE

Why do you think Washington expanded the Mansion?

George Washington began expanding the Mansion when he married Martha Dandridge Custis. She moved to Mount Vernon with her two children, Jacky and Patsy, so the Washingtons needed more space. As George Washington became wealthier and a more prominent citizen, he continued to expand the house so it would match his social standing.

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S MOUNT ★ VERNON

Can you spot the architectural elements that George Washington added?

During the 45 years that he owned Mount Vernon, George Washington made significant changes to the Mansion. He added one and a half floors, expanded the building with wings to the north and south, and added a cupola. He also added decorative features, like the pediment and the elliptical window in the front of the house, and the piazza on the back. Washington also connected the Mansion with the servants' hall and the kitchen with colonnades.

MANSION TOUR

Why do you think so many people came to visit George Washington at Mount Vernon?

In the 18th century, it was common to stop at people's homes while traveling, and those people were expected to greet you and make you feel comfortable. Following the American Revolution, George Washington was the most famous man in America, and everyone wanted to meet him. Other prominent citizens, foreign travelers, army veterans, and complete strangers often visited Mount Vernon to have the honor of meeting Washington.

New Room

What is the common theme of the decorative fireplace and the plaster ceiling in the New Room? What can this tell us about Washington?

The common theme between the fireplace and the ceiling in the New Room is farming. Despite being famous for his role as a military leader and a politician, George Washington considered himself first and foremost to be a farmer. Washington's choice to include this in the New Room reveals how Washington viewed himself, and expressed his passion for farming to his visitors.

Why would Washington want or need such a large room? What message would that send to his guests?

In the 18th century, having a room that large in your house was a symbol of your wealth and status. Washington used the room as a gallery for some of his art, and the room could also be used as a gathering space or dining room for large events. The Washingtons probably used the New Room for formal occasions and important guests.

Piazza

What kind of activities do you think took place on the piazza?

The Washingtons enjoyed a number of activities on the piazza, but perhaps the most common was entertaining guests and enjoying the beautiful view of the river. Many guests noted that the Washingtons like to take tea on the piazza when the weather was nice.

Central Passage

What kind of activities took place in the parlors?

The Washingtons did a variety of things in their parlors, including entertaining guests and spending time together as a family. The West Parlor was the more formal parlor, and would have been used for entertaining. The Washingtons and their guests likely played cards, chess, or backgammon.

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S MOUNT ★ VERNON

Chintz Room

What objects in the Chintz Room suggest that Nelly had a baby there?

The most obvious clue that a baby was present is the crib. This crib is original, family tradition maintains that it was a gift to Nelly Custis Lewis from her grandmother, Martha Washington.

Washington's Bedchamber

What do you see in the Washingtons' bedchamber that indicates the room was also used as Mrs. Washington's office?

The desk in the back of the room was used by Mrs. Washington to conduct her daily business. She wrote letters there, and may have gone over recipes as she planned the daily meals. One of the small rooms was used as a dressing area, the other as linen storage.

What do you think some of her duties as the mistress of a large plantation might have been?

Martha had many important responsibilities at Mount Vernon. She oversaw all of the enslaved Mansion staff, including the butler, the servers, and the housemaids, and she supervised the work of the estate's seamstresses. Much of her time was spent being a hostess, greeting the Washingtons' many guests, planning the daily meals, and making sure that the Mansion was prepared to receive overnight guests.

What do you think the phrase, "First in War, First in Peace, and First in the Hearts of his Countrymen" means?

This phrase references the important roles that Washington played throughout his lifetime. "First in War" is a reference to his role as Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army. "First in Peace" speaks to his role as president, guiding the country through the years after the revolution, but also references his role as one of the country's most innovative farmers. Due to the important roles he played and the impact he made on this country, Americans hold Washington in high esteem and keep him in their hearts, even today.

Study

What can we learn about Washington from the belongings he kept in his study?

Many of the items that Washington kept in his study represent his hobbies, his jobs, places he had been, or people he knew. For example, Washington's study held his collection of books, which tells us he liked to read, and the subjects of the books also tell us about his interests. The surveyor's chains represent his early career as a surveyor, the fan chair represents his love of technology, and the trunk is from his time in the army. The portrait of his half-brother tells us that Washington looked up to him, and the piece of coral represents their trip to Barbados together.

Kitchen

Why do you think the floors in the kitchen are made of brick?

With no fire trucks and hoses like we have today, fire was a serious threat in the 18th century. A fire burned in the kitchen fireplace throughout most of the day, so having brick floors cut down on the risk that a stray ember or spark might cause damage.

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S
MOUNT ★ VERNON

What appliance in your kitchen does the same job as the larder?

The larder served as a cool place to store food temporarily. It did a similar job to your refrigerator!

WASHINGTON'S TOMB

What is a legacy?

A legacy is made up of the important things that someone did during their lifetime and the things they left behind to benefit future generations. These are the things we remember them for once they are gone.

What is George Washington's legacy?

In many ways, the United States is George Washington's legacy. George Washington made sacrifices and worked hard to create this country, and for that reason he is often called the Father of his Country. Washington led by example and helped to shape many of the building blocks of this country, like the Constitution and the presidency. His impact is still being felt today, and at Mount Vernon we celebrate and honor that legacy.

What do you think the eagle on Washington's sarcophagus symbolizes?

The eagle is often associated with the United States, and George Washington is often referred to as the Father of his Country.

Why would Washington want to be buried at Mount Vernon? What does that tell us about how we felt about this place?

Mount Vernon was George Washington's home for almost 45 years. He was very devoted to Mount Vernon and he spent most of his life making his vision for it a reality. Washington was often forced by duty to his country to be away from his beloved estate during his lifetime, so it makes sense that he would want to be laid to rest here.