



## THE ENSLAVED COMMUNITY

### 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 enslaved community. 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. Within the guide you will notice several silhouettes accompanying the stories of enslaved individuals who lived at Mount Vernon. These silhouettes are conjectural illustrations representing certain enslaved people. In most cases, we do not know exactly what they looked like. These silhouettes, along with fifteen others, are featured in the new exhibition, *Lives Bound Together: Slavery at George Washington's Mount Vernon*. We encourage you to visit the exhibition in the Donald W. Reynolds Museum.

The places you will visit today are numbered to correspond with their location on your visitor map. At the end of this 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

At one time, Mount Vernon was a large and bustling estate made up of five separate farms. Keeping Mount Vernon productive and successful required the labor of hundreds of individuals, most of whom were enslaved workers of African descent. At the time of George Washington's death, there were 317 enslaved individuals living and working 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 jobs. Those living at Mansion House Farm worked in the Mansion as servants and cooks, or were skilled tradespeople such as spinners, carpenters, and blacksmiths. Enslaved individuals on outlying farms worked as laborers to cultivate and harvest Mount Vernon's crops.

George Washington was a slave owner for most of his life. Over time, however, Washington came to question the economic stability and morality of slavery. Washington's thoughts on slavery culminated in his decision to free the slaves he legally owned in his will, making him the only slaveholding Founding Father to do so. Today, you will explore the sites around Mount Vernon where enslaved men, women, and children lived and worked to discover the jobs they did, the struggles they faced, and who they were as individuals and members of a community.

## #11 Slave Quarters –Women's Bunk Room

Many of the enslaved individuals who worked in or near the Mansion lived in the quarters attached to the greenhouse, which were originally built in the early 1790's. For a time, additional housing for families existed across the lane, where an office building now stands.

This bunk room could have been home to as many as 20 women and children. The women who lived here worked as seamstresses, spinners, washerwomen, or housemaids. Some of these women were single, but others were married with children. Young children in enslaved families usually lived with their mothers, as their fathers often lived and worked on a different farm. Enslaved children had jobs such as hauling water, weeding the family garden, and caring for younger siblings. At some point between the ages of 11 and 14, children began to assist other enslaved workers, and by their mid-teens, they were part of the enslaved work force.



### Can you spot...

#### **Cooking utensils?**

Using weekly food rations and any extra food they had from hunting or maintaining their gardens, the women who lived here likely cooked communal meals for themselves and their children. Meals were usually simple, made in one pot, and enough to share with everyone.

#### **Children's toys?**

While enslaved children had certain responsibilities, like chores and caring for younger siblings, they did entertain themselves with games, such as tag, and simple toys, such as cloth dolls and clay marbles, like the ones displayed near the bunks.

#### **Part of the brick wall that is darker than the rest?**

In the back corner of the room, you'll notice a cluster of bricks that are darker than the others. These bricks are all that remains of the original greenhouse, which burned down in 1835. The reconstruction you see today was built in the 1950s.

#### **A spinning wheel?**

Textile production was a major part of the work that happened at Mansion House Farm, and many of the women who lived here likely worked as spinners. Creating fabric and thread by hand was long and tedious work, and required spinning wheels like the one displayed here.

#### **Did you know?**

General Washington was just 11 years old when he inherited 10 enslaved individuals after his father died. Imagine that – as a child he *owned* grown-ups, the same way you might own toys or furniture.

# GEORGE WASHINGTON'S MOUNT ★ VERNON



## Meet Oney Judge

It is believed that Oney Judge, an enslaved personal servant to Martha Washington, may have lived here. She was born at Mount Vernon in 1773, the daughter of an enslaved woman named Betty and an indentured English tailor named Andrew Judge. Judge was trained as a seamstress, and eventually became a servant for Mrs. Washington. She was one of multiple enslaved workers who the Washingtons brought with them to Philadelphia for the presidency. On May 21, 1796, Judge walked out of the presidential mansion while the family ate dinner. Despite being contacted by Washington's aides, Oney Judge lived out the rest of her life in New Hampshire—a fugitive, but free.

### **Discussion questions:**

*How did enslaved children spend their time? What do you like to do in your free time?*

*How do the living conditions of the greenhouse slave quarters compare to the living conditions in the Mansion?*

## #14 Slave Quarters –Men's Bunk Room

Similar to the Women's Bunk Room next door, we believe this room was home to 15 to 20 enslaved men who worked on Mansion House Farm. These men were laborers, skilled tradesmen, such as blacksmiths and carpenters, or house servants. Most enslaved workers performed their jobs from sun up to sun down, six days a week. Sundays were their only day off during the week, and the men filled their time in a variety of ways. Some hunted or fished, while some may have been allowed to go to Alexandria to sell goods at market. Others visited their families on other farms, including Nat and George, the enslaved blacksmiths, who walked several miles to visit their wives on outlying farms. During this free time, members of the enslaved community likely told stories, played games, and made music.

### **Did you know?**

George Washington was the only slave-owning founding father to free of his slaves through his will. Although he was born into a way of life that depended on the labor of enslaved people, Washington changed his mind about the practice over time. Seeing African Americans bravely fight in the Revolutionary War was a major turning point for General Washington. Eventually, he discouraged physical forms of punishment, refused to split up families through sale, and considered ways to make Mount Vernon less dependent on slave labor.

The enslaved community at Mount Vernon left few written records behind, and their homes and belongings were not always carefully preserved. As a result, much of what we know and continue to learn about this community comes from *archaeology*, which is the study of human

## GEORGE WASHINGTON'S MOUNT ★ VERNON

history through the excavation of the material objects left behind. During digs, Mount Vernon's archaeology team has found a wide variety of items, including tools, shoe buckles, pottery, and clay pipe fragments. These items were owned by the enslaved men, women, and children who lived here, and help us understand how they lived.



**Can you find...**

### **Clothing?**

Enslaved workers received a basic allotment of clothing—usually a couple of linen shirts, a pair of linen breeches and a pair of wool breeches for men, women received a skirt, a wool jacket, and a pair of shoes—which were expected to last an entire year. Men who worked in high profile positions, such as waiters and servants, wore *livery*—a higher quality uniform that Washington specially designed and ordered.

### **A rabbit?**

Enslaved workers received food rations once a week from an overseer, but they were able to add to their diet by hunting, fishing, and growing small vegetable gardens. The men would have hunted small game, like birds and rabbits.

### **Bunk beds?**

The men who lived here might have slept two or three to a bunk, which likely helped them to keep warm during the cold winter months. Barracks-style bunks were somewhat unusual for slave quarters in the 18th century—most enslaved workers lived in cabins.



### **Meet Christopher Sheels**

Christopher Sheels may have lived here in the Men's Bunk Room. As a young boy, Christopher was trained as a carpenter, but he took over as Washington's valet—a personal servant—when the general's previous valet retired due to knee injuries. As a valet, Christopher worked in the Mansion and attended to Washington's every need. Christopher married an enslaved woman belonging to a friend of the Washingtons, and in September 1799, the couple wanted to run away, but their plans were discovered. It is unclear how Washington handled the situation, but at the time of the general's death, Christopher was still serving as his valet. He was present throughout Washington's final illness, and participated in the funeral.

### ***Discussion questions:***

*What kind of activities did members of the enslaved community do together? What do you like to do with your friends and family?*

*Why is archaeology so important when learning about the enslaved community at Mount Vernon? What types of objects do you think they find during an excavation?*

## #26 Storehouse

Members of the enslaved community found ways to resist their enslavement. Resistance took many forms, from the most risky and dangerous—running away—to more simple actions, like pretending to be sick, working slowly, or losing and breaking tools. By doing so, the enslaved workers cut down on Washington's productivity and cost him time and money.

In his writings, Washington described slow work and broken or lost tools as “carelessness” or “laziness.” To counteract these behaviors, Washington locked the storehouse, where valuable items, including tools, were kept, and implemented a system to keep track of these items. Enslaved workers received what they needed to do their jobs from the storehouse, and were required to return old tools before getting new ones. Overseers kept careful records of items coming out of and going into the storehouse.

### ***Discussion Questions:***

*What are some of the ways enslaved workers could resist Washington's total control over their lives?*

*What are some of the things kept in the storehouse?*

## #29 Wash House

Dolsey and Vina, two enslaved laundresses, worked up to six days a week washing, drying, and ironing laundry. They carried water from the well to fill the large tub, then the water was heated in a large pot in the fireplace. Dolsey and Vina were required to stir the laundry in the boiling soapy water with a long pole. Once it was clean, the laundry had to be rinsed and laid out to dry. When the laundry was dry, it had to be starched and ironed, a process which took another whole day of work. Finally, the folded clothing and linens were returned to the Mansion

### **Did you know?**

The buckets of water that the enslaved washerwomen had to carry from the well weighed around 20 pounds each. It took 30 buckets of water to fill the laundry tub!

## #39 Slave Memorial and Cemetery

This area served as the final resting place for many members of Mount Vernon's enslaved community. However, as you look around, you'll notice that there are no gravestones or markers among the trees. Time and erosion have removed them from view, making it difficult to know exactly who is buried here. Tradition and folklore tell us that they were buried facing east, toward Africa – the homeland of their ancestors.

## GEORGE WASHINGTON'S MOUNT ★ VERNON

Today, this important site is marked with a memorial dedicated to the enslaved people of Mount Vernon. The memorial, designed by students at Howard University, was dedicated in 1983. The memorial is inscribed with the words “faith,” “love,” and “hope.”

### **Did you know?**

In 2014, Mount Vernon began a multi-year archaeological study to learn more about the burial ground and the enslaved community at Mount Vernon. The project seeks to better document the number of burials in the cemetery and how they were interred. Out of respect, none of the remains will be disturbed.



### **Meet William Lee**

William Lee and his brother, Frank, were purchased by George Washington and brought to Mount Vernon in 1768. Both brothers worked in the Mansion—Frank, as the butler, and William as Washington’s valet. When George Washington accepted the position of Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army, William went with him to war. After the revolution, Lee suffered two severe knee injuries, forcing him to end his service as Washington’s valet. While performing the duties of shoemaker on the estate, he met with the many Revolutionary War veterans that traveled to Mount Vernon to pay their respects to the general. When Washington died in 1799, William Lee was the only enslaved worker who he freed outright in this will—the rest had to wait until Martha Washington freed them in 1801. William Lee lived the

remainder of his life as a free man at Mount Vernon, where he died in the 19th century. He is likely buried in the Slave Cemetery at Mount Vernon.

### **Discussion questions:**

*Why do you think the words “faith,” “hope,” and “love” were chosen for the Slave Memorial?*

*Why is it important to learn more about the Slave Cemetery and the individuals who are buried here?*

### **#43 Slave Cabin**

More than half of Mount Vernon’s enslaved work force lived and worked on one of Washington’s outlying farms as field laborers, the majority of whom were women. They worked from sun up to sun down, six days a week, planting, cultivating and harvesting Washington’s crops. This reconstructed cabin shows the living conditions of families on Washington’s outlying farms. It consists of a single room with a clay floor, a fireplace, and a loft above. The wooden walls were daubed with mud to keep out the elements.

# GEORGE WASHINGTON'S MOUNT ★ VERNON



## Meet Priscilla and Penny

Priscilla, also called Silla, worked as a laborer and plower on Dogue Run Farm. She was married to Joe, who worked as a ditcher on Mansion House Farm. Together, Silla and Joe had at least five children, including 10-year-old Penny, who lived with Silla in a cabin similar to the replica you see today. To see his wife and children, Joe had to walk several miles both ways from Mansion House Farm to Dogue Run Farm. Silla and her children belonged to General Washington, and would have been given their freedom under the conditions of Washington's will. Joe, however, belonged to the Custis estate, and would have remained in slavery after Martha and George Washington's deaths.

### Did you know?

Most of the slaves at Mount Vernon were owned by the estate of Martha Washington's first husband, Daniel Parke Custis. They were known as *dower* slaves. As a result, Washington could only legally free the 123 enslaved workers who belonged to him. In his will he wrote that they would be free upon Martha's death, but she freed them in 1801, a year before her death.

### Discussion questions:

*How do the living conditions in the cabin compare to those in the greenhouse slave quarters?*

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

### How to Continue your Experience

Thank you for visiting Mount Vernon and using the Enslaved Community Homeschool Guide! Attached to your guide are three activity sheets which are designed to further enhance your students' knowledge about the enslaved community at Mount Vernon. The activity sheets are designated for beginner, intermediate, and advanced learning levels. For additional homeschool resources, please visit Mount Vernon's website at:

**[www.mountvernon.org/homeschool](http://www.mountvernon.org/homeschool)**

### Discussion Question Answer Key

#### SLAVE QUARTERS- WOMEN'S BUNK ROOM

*How did enslaved children spend their time?*

An enslaved childhood was far from carefree. Children had responsibilities while their parents were at work, like hauling water, cleaning, gardening, and caring for younger children. However, they also played games similar to those played today, including tag and marbles.

*How do the living conditions of the greenhouse slave quarters compare to the living conditions in the Mansion?*

## GEORGE WASHINGTON'S MOUNT ★ VERNON

Martha Washington oversaw an enslaved staff that maintained the Mansion, which was clean, warm in the winter, and fully stocked with food and amenities to keep the Washingtons and their guests comfortable. Living conditions in the greenhouse slave quarters, however, were very minimal compared to those in the Mansion. Enslaved workers were given only the basic necessities of food, clothing, and shelter.

### **SLAVE QUARTERS- MEN'S BUNK ROOM**

*What kind of activities did members of the enslaved community do together?*

Members of the enslaved community participated in activities similar to those that communities do today. On Sundays, in the evenings, or on holidays like Christmas, men, women, and children got together to talk, celebrate, tell stories, and play games and music.

*Why is archaeology so important when learning about the enslaved community at Mount Vernon? What types of objects do you think we find during an excavation?*

Unlike George Washington, most members of the enslaved community did not have portraits made, nor did they leave behind detailed written records, or have their possessions preserved. The objects they did leave behind were often the things that those individuals discarded or left behind—what we might consider their trash. By looking at the things they used, such as tools, pieces of clothing, cooking utensils, and personal belongings, archaeologists can piece together what they did, owned, and ate.

### **STOREHOUSE**

*What are some of the ways enslaved workers could resist Washington's total control over their lives?*

Enslaved workers resisted their bondage in a number of ways. Running away is probably the most obvious, but it was also the most dangerous. They also resisted by pretending to be sick and breaking, losing, or stealing tools, all of which cut down on Washington's productivity and cost him time and money. Regardless of the form it took, resistance ran the risk of punishment.

*What are some of the things kept in the storehouse?*

Washington kept items in the storehouse that had to be imported to the estate, making them valuable and expensive to fix or replace. This included items that the enslaved workers needed to do their jobs, including tools, nails, and bolts of cloth. Overseers kept detailed records of the items kept here in order to cut down on loss and theft.

### **SLAVE MEMORIAL & CEMETERY**

*Why do you think the words "faith," "hope" and "love" were chosen for the Slave Memorial?*

Members of the enslaved community faced many challenges, hardships, and injustices due to their enslavement. Their ability to endure the circumstances forced upon them was strengthened by their hope for a better future, their faith, and their love for one another.

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S  
**MOUNT ★ VERNON**

*Why is it important to learn more about the Slave Cemetery and the individuals who are buried here?*

First and foremost, carefully and accurately documenting where each individual is buried in the cemetery will help us to better commemorate and honor them. Additionally, learning more about the burial ground may help historians and archaeologists to better understand the burial practices of the enslaved community at Mount Vernon, which hopefully will lead to a better understanding of their culture.

**SLAVE CABIN**

*How do the living conditions in the cabin compare to those in the greenhouse slave quarters?*

The greenhouse slave quarters were made of sturdier materials—brick and stone—rather than wood. However, the cabin would have provided slightly more privacy than the slave quarters in the greenhouse. The greenhouse quarters were communal, with 15 to 20 people in each bunkroom, but a slave cabin on an outlying farm would house two families, at most. Either way, the living conditions for most enslaved workers were very minimal.

*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 work. The cabins were very small, with only basic furniture and pallets on the floor for sleeping. In addition, the 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 they had a day off. He had to walk several miles in order to see them.