



FARMER AND ENTREPRENEUR

How to Use this Guide

This guide is designed to enrich your visit to the estate and to provide supplemental information about George Washington as a farmer and entrepreneur. The questions will encourage discussion and exploration during your visit. Information provided in this guide and on interpretive panels throughout the estate will help you answer these questions.

The places you will visit today are numbered and correspond with their locations on the Homeschool Day map. At the end of this packet, you will find a helpful answer key to the discussion questions, as well as suggestions on how to continue your experience after you leave Mount Vernon.

Introduction

George Washington held many important jobs, including military leader and president, but he saw himself first as a farmer. Although George Washington began renting Mount Vernon from the widow of his older half-brother, Lawrence Washington, in 1754, he didn't officially inherit the plantation until 1761. Even though Washington was often away in service to his country, he devoted as much time as possible to turning Mount Vernon into a self-sustaining farm and a thriving business.

Washington's farming and business interests were vast and diverse. Whenever possible, Washington searched for ways to produce everything he needed right here at home, and he often experimented with the most efficient ways of doing so. He increased his farm acreage and investigated the best ways to grow more crops, he had outbuildings built for transforming raw materials into useable goods, and he diversified his business interests into fishing, milling, and distilling. By the time Washington died in 1799, Mount Vernon was 8,000 acres – a massive and successful enterprise.

Washington's success as a farmer was due to enslaved labor. By the time of his death in 1799, there were 317 enslaved people living on the estate. Throughout your visit, you will learn about enslaved people who worked on George Washington's farm.

Today, as you explore, you will learn more about George Washington, the farmer and entrepreneur.

The North and South Lane Outbuildings

Mount Vernon was not only George Washington's home, it was also his business. Throughout his life, Washington worked to make Mount Vernon a *self-sustaining* community, meaning that the people and animals living here could survive without outside help. Although not completely successful in this effort, Washington tried to produce as much food, tools, clothing and anything else needed right here at Mount Vernon. On the North and South Lanes you will find a number of buildings dedicated to this enterprise.

#15 Blacksmith Shop

The blacksmith shop did important work here at Mount Vernon. It included an adjoining fence yard, which served as a general work area. Two of the enslaved blacksmiths were Nat and George, who performed

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S MOUNT ★ VERNON

various tasks important to keep Mount Vernon running smoothly. They made hooks, tools, and repaired farm equipment such as plows and wagons.

Did you know?

This is the site of the blacksmith shop during Washington's time. It was demolished and may have been located in different areas of the estate over the years. Much of what we know today about the blacksmith shop comes from archaeology.

Discussion questions:

- *What kind of items were made at the blacksmith shop?*
- *How is the blacksmith shop an example of Mount Vernon being self-sustaining?*

#18 Spinning House

Inside this building is the equipment needed to make fabric for the clothing of the enslaved community, linens, and other functional textiles. 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. About 1,000 sheep produced fleece that was turned into wool.

Did you know?

Sheep were sheared once a year in the late spring. The fleece had to be cleaned before it could be used to make wool. After it was washed, the fleece was *carded*. Workers combed the fleece between brushes, called *cards*, to remove any leftover dirt and smooth the fleece. Finally, the fleece was spun on a spinning wheel that twisted the fiber into wool yarn.

In the 18th century, spinning thread and weaving cloth were time-consuming jobs done completely by hand. Spinning was most often done by enslaved women. Alce, Myrtilla, Kitty, and Winny were enslaved spinners at Mount Vernon. They used a large spinning wheel like the one you will see in the spinning house. We believe that much of the spinning happened alongside other tasks in the enslaved workers' living areas. Weaving fabric, on the other hand, was usually a man's job and often was done by hired workers. They used a loom like the one you will see today for weaving cloth. In 1778 alone, 2000 yards of cloth were made here!

Did you know?

Before America won its independence, the Washington family's clothing was ordered from England. However, when Washington was elected as the nation's first president, he decided it was important to promote American goods. He insisted that his inaugural suit be American made. The brown coat and breeches were made of cloth woven at the Hartford Woolen Manufactory in Connecticut. By wearing a suit of domestically-made cloth when most textiles were imported from abroad, Washington demonstrated his faith in American industry.

Discussion questions:

- *How is the spinning house an example of Mount Vernon being self-sustaining?*
- *Why do you think it was important that Washington wore American-made clothing to his inauguration?*

#17 Overseer's Quarters

This room is where Mount Vernon's farm overseer worked and slept. General Washington was away a lot of the time, so the overseer took care of everything here at the Mansion House Farm. He also had an overseer for each of his other four farms. Overseers could be either hired white or enslaved black men.

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S MOUNT ★ VERNON

Take a look around the room. The objects here would help the overseer do his job. Up in front is his writing desk, so that he could write reports for General Washington. On the wall above the bed, you'll see a large ring of black iron keys. The overseer was in charge of making sure everything ran smoothly at the Mansion House Farm, and he had the keys to every locked door.

Did you know?

There is a container of sand on the overseer's desk. Sand could be sprinkled on wet ink to help it dry.

Discussion questions:

- *How do the overseer's living conditions compare to those in the slave quarters? How do they compare to the Mansion?*
- *What were some of the overseer's responsibilities?*
- *What characteristics do you think Washington looked for in an overseer?*

#30 Coach House and #31 Stable

The coach house is where you will find a vehicle that is similar to one that General Washington owned. The *riding chair* consists of a wooden chair on a cart with two wheels that was pulled by a single horse. This type of vehicle was perfect for traveling along the narrow country lanes around Mount Vernon.

Did you know?

In the 18th century, taxes on carriages were calculated by the number of wheels. As a result, a two-wheeled riding chair could cost less than a four-wheeled coach.

The long building behind you is the stable, which would have been home to General Washington's horses. Peter Hardiman, an enslaved groom, looked after and cared for the animals in the stables. Today in the stable, you can also see the type of fashionable coach the Washingtons would have ridden to church on a Sunday morning. None of Washington's own coaches survive, but they would have featured the Washington family crest on the door panel. This coach, by the same builder who made Washington's coach, belonged to Samuel Powel, the mayor of Philadelphia and Washington's good friend. Before paved roads, journeys in a vehicle like this were bumpy, long, and tiring. Notice the passenger cab-- it hangs on leather straps, suspended from long metal springs, which acted as 18th-century shock absorbers that were state of the art for their time.

Did you know?

An enslaved worker who rode on one of the horses that drew the carriage was called a *postilion*. Along with the enslaved carriage drivers and Washington's valet, the postilion wore a distinctive *livery*, or a uniform. Washington special ordered these uniforms in buff and red colors.

Discussion questions:

- *If you didn't recognize the Washingtons sitting inside their carriage, how might you have recognized them by looking at the carriage or the driver?*
- *What challenges did travelers face in the 18th century?*

#32 Dung Repository

General Washington called this open-sided building "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 the stables. Always trying to perfect his farming techniques, Washington read that manure was a great fertilizer and he wanted to try it. Before adding it to crop fields or gardens, the

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S MOUNT ★ VERNON

dung needed to “cook” in the repository. Another name for this process is *composting*. Decomposing leaves, rotten vegetables, and fish heads are all things that might be stirred into the compost pile.

Discussion questions:

- *Do you have a compost at home? If so, what do you put in it?*
- *Why do you think Washington chose this location for the dung repository?*
- *How is the dung repository an example of Washington’s innovation as a farmer?*

#40 Wharf

Rivers were the highways of the 18th century. There were very few roads and they were not always safe or reliable, so people often traveled by water.

Although today we see very few boats on this part of the Potomac, in the 18th century it would have been filled with vessels sailing up and down the river. Many large plantations like Mount Vernon were built on rivers so that goods and crops produced there could be moved easily to market for sale in the United States, Europe, and the West Indies.

During the spring, the water of the Potomac River began to warm and fish such as shad and herring returned to *spawn*—lay eggs—in the upper parts of the river. In the writings of the day, there were references to the surface of the water “sparkling like silver” as thousands of fish moved up river. Washington set up a successful fishing operation on the Potomac. The spawning season was brief, only five to seven weeks, making it labor intensive to catch, clean, preserve, and pack the huge quantities of fish. In those several weeks, all other work at Mount Vernon stopped so the enslaved people could work in the fishing operation.

Did you know?

In one year, Mount Vernon’s enslaved workers brought in over 1 million fish, which were preserved with salt and then stored in large barrels. The fish were used to feed Mount Vernon’s residents, guests, and free and enslaved workers. Washington also sold the preserved fish in cities along the east coast of the United States and in the West Indies.

Discussion questions:

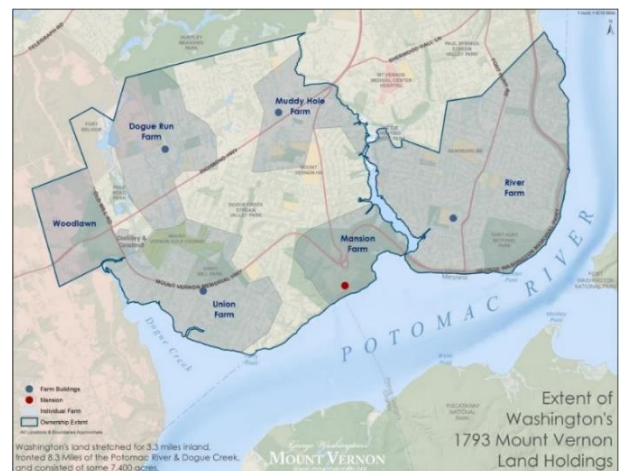
- *What important role did the river and the wharf play at Mount Vernon?*
- *How did the fishing operation contribute to making Mount Vernon self-sustaining?*

#41 Pioneer Farm

Mount Vernon was once made up of five different farms: Union Farm, Dogue Run Farm, Muddy Hole Farm, River Farm, and Mansion House Farm. The areas of Mount Vernon that you are visiting today are part of what was Mansion House Farm. The Pioneer Farm site recreates one of Washington’s outlying farms where most of his enslaved workforce lived and worked. It was also where most of his crop cultivation took place.

#42 16-sided Barn

George Washington grew tobacco as his “cash crop” for many years at Mount Vernon. However, his cash crop



GEORGE WASHINGTON'S MOUNT ★ VERNON

eventually changed to wheat because he could use it to feed workers on his estate, it did not take nutrients out of the soil like tobacco did, and he could make more profit from selling wheat products. 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.”

Grain, the useful part of the wheat, must be separated from the husk-like covering called the *chaff*. The grain can then be ground into flour. Washington designed this 16-sided treading barn as a “machine” that would improve this process. Wheat was spread on the top floor where horses or mules walked on it. The weight and friction from their hooves separated the grain from the chaff. Can you see the gaps in the floor? It was built that way so the wheat could fall to the floor below. Enslaved workers gathered up the wheat from the bottom floor, and then removed any dust or leftover chaff.

Did you know?

The roughly circular shape created an easier path for the horses, and because the barn is not actually a perfect circle, it was probably slightly easier to build. This 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?*
- *How did Washington's design for the 16-sided barn demonstrate innovation as a farmer?*
- *A granary is where wheat is stored, and Washington believed the United States could be a “granary to the world?” What do you think he meant?*

Continue your Experience!

Thank you for visiting Mount Vernon and using the Farmer and Entrepreneur Homeschool Guide! For additional homeschool resources, please visit Mount Vernon's website: mountvernon.org/homeschool

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS ANSWER KEY

BLACKSMITH SHOP

What kind of items were made at the blacksmith shop?

The enslaved blacksmiths made metal hooks and tools, and also repaired metal pieces on farm equipment, such as plows and wagons.

How is the blacksmith shop an example of Mount Vernon being self-sustaining?

Producing certain metal works at the blacksmith shop meant that Washington did not have to purchase those items from elsewhere. Similarly, if a metal item broke, Washington could have it fixed or replaced on site, rather than buying a new one and waiting for it to arrive.

SPINNING HOUSE

How is the spinning house an example of Mount Vernon being self-sustaining?

Textile production at Mount Vernon was largely dedicated to producing fabric to clothe the enslaved workers on the estate, who annually 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.

Why do you think it was important that Washington wear American-made clothing to his inauguration?

Before America gained its independence, Britain controlled the American economy. By wearing an American-made suit to his inauguration, Washington signaled his faith in American industry, free from the control of the British government.

OVERSEER'S QUARTERS

How do the overseer's living conditions compare to those in the slave quarters? To the Mansion?

The living conditions in the overseer's quarters are more comfortable than that of the slave quarters. Enslaved workers living in the greenhouse slave quarters likely shared the space with up to 20 people. The overseer, on the other hand, had the quarters to himself. The enslaved workers slept on rough pallets or barrack-style bunk beds, while the overseer slept on a rope bed with a mattress. Though nicer than the slave quarters, the overseer's quarters did not have the grandeur or the amenities enjoyed by those in the Mansion. For example, the furniture in the overseer's quarters is simple in comparison to the high quality pieces in the Mansion.

What were some of the overseer's responsibilities?

As the name implies, overseers were responsible for overseeing the daily operations of their specific farm, including free and enslaved labor, livestock, and crops. Overseers reported to the farm manager, who oversaw the entire plantation and reported directly to Washington, who expected both the overseers and farm managers to keep detailed accounts of the work done on the farms, along with a record of any incidents, such as conflicts, sicknesses, births, injuries, or deaths. The overseer of Mansion House Farm had the added responsibility of locking the storehouse and keeping track of the items stored there.

With that much responsibility, what characteristics do you think Washington would look for in an overseer?

More than anything, Washington needed someone he could trust to run the farms and handle situations appropriately in his absence. He likely would have looked for someone trustworthy, responsible, and detail-oriented.

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S MOUNT ★ VERNON

COACH HOUSE AND STABLE

If you didn't recognize the Washingtons sitting inside their carriage, how might you have known who they were by looking at the carriage or the driver?

The Washingtons' coach would have had their family crest on the door, which would have identified them. The enslaved postilion's red and buff uniform, which Washington had specially made, would also indicate who was riding in the carriage.

What challenges did travelers face in the 18th century?

Roads were not reliable in the 18th century, even under the best conditions. Few were paved, and sometimes there were no roads at all! This could mean a very bumpy and uncomfortable ride. Bad weather made roads worse. A lot of rain or snow could make even the best 18th-century roads impassable.

DUNG REPOSITORY

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 used the manure as fertilizer.

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

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.

WHARF

What important role did the river and the wharf 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. Washington's goods could easily move on the river—importing finished goods from as far away as London, and exporting raw materials from his farms. Additionally, the fish from the river were a staple in the diet of the enslaved workers, and Washington could sell the excess.

How did the fishing operation contribute to making Mount Vernon self-sustaining?

Like the other farm operations that made Mount Vernon self-sustaining, the fishing operations cut down on the amount of materials Washington had to purchase from the outside world. Feeding the hundreds of 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 enslaved workers' rations.

16-SIDED BARN

Why was switching to wheat a smart move for Washington?

Switching from tobacco to wheat was a good decision for several reasons. First, wheat could be ground into flour, which could be sold for a high price. Second, tobacco is very tough on soil. Over time, it drains the nutrients out of the soil and makes it harder for plants to thrive, causing the farms to be less productive. Wheat is much easier to grow and gentler on the soil.

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. The traditional way of separating wheat grain from the chaff, using a flail, was very labor intensive and took a lot of time. The 16-sided barn was a creative way to complete the same process, but it processed more wheat in less time.