

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S  
**MOUNT ★ VERNON**



**GARDENS AND LANDSCAPES**

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**How to Use this Guide**

This guide is designed to enrich your visit to the estate and to provide supplemental information about Mount Vernon's gardens and landscapes. 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.

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**Introduction**

Imagine being one of the thousands of visitors who travelled to Mount Vernon to meet George Washington in the years following the American Revolution. What would you see? Washington wanted his gardens and landscapes to showcase the natural beauty of his beloved home. Washington once wrote that "No estate in United America is more pleasantly situated than this."

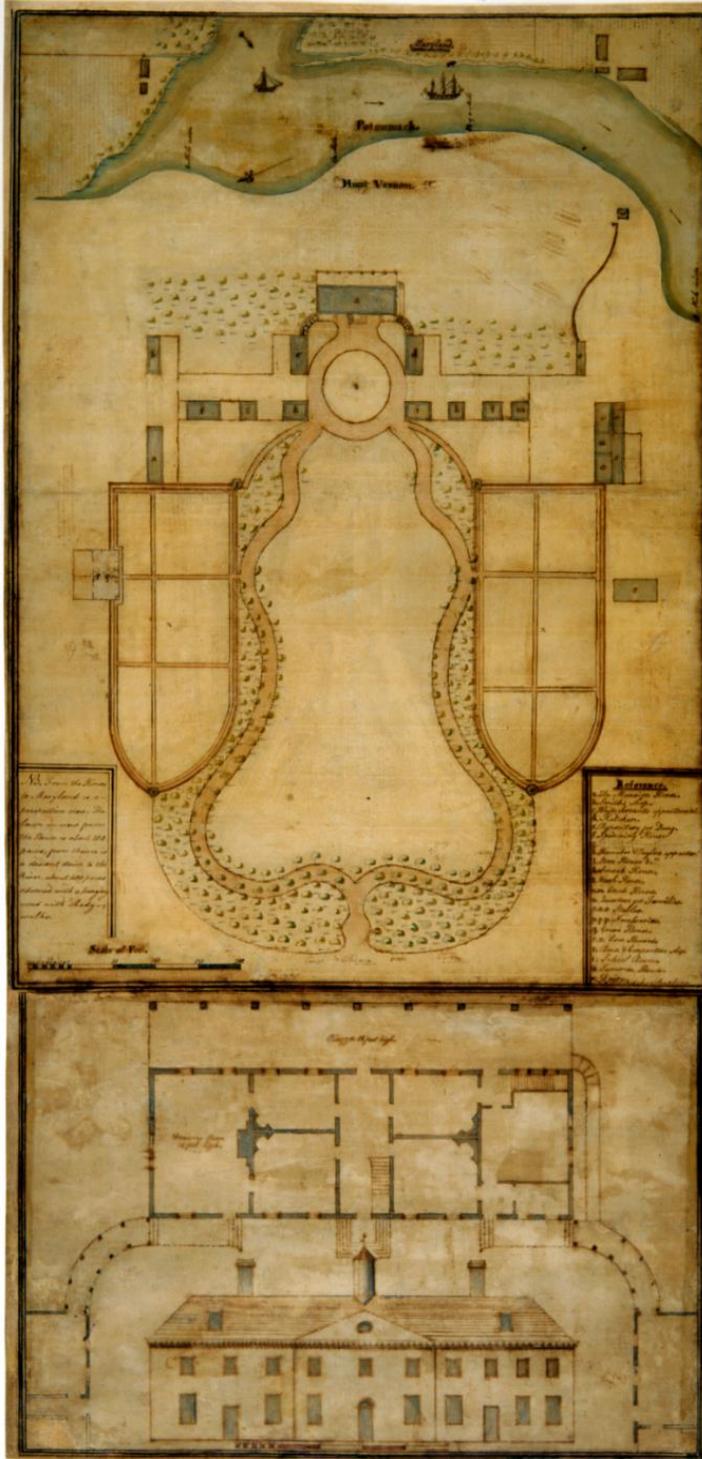
The landscape you see at Mount Vernon today represents the vision George Washington had for his beloved estate, but it took time to make his idea a reality. Washington did not take control of Mount Vernon until 1754, after the death of his older half-brother, Lawrence Washington. George Washington was 22 years old! Over the following 45 years, Washington expanded and changed the estate, including the landscape surrounding the Mansion.

Enslaved workers did most of the work to create Washington's landscape and gardens. 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 cultivated George Washington's gardens.

Today, as you explore, you will learn about George Washington, the garden and landscape designer.

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## The Samuel Vaughan Drawing



Washington was very particular about the way everything looked at Mount Vernon. He carefully redesigned the landscape and gardens in the 1780s. Washington's English friend, Samuel Vaughan, drew this diagram of the gardens and land around the Mansion in 1787. This "bird's eye view" of the landscape is quite an amazing image because there was no aerial photography at that time. Eighteenth-century documents like this are very valuable to historians who want to know how things looked when Washington lived here. We will refer to it several times while looking at the gardens and landscape.

The Vaughan Drawing is a *primary source*. A primary source is a document or object that was created in a particular time period. Think of it like an eye witness!

*What are some other examples of a primary source?*

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## #4 Bowling Green Gate & #5 Bowling Green

The large lawn in front of you is called the bowling green. Washington created this space as part of his landscape redesign that he began in the 1780s. While we may be used to large areas of evenly trimmed grass, to 18th-century visitors, an area of grass this large would be extremely impressive, since lawns were expensive to plant and required extensive labor to maintain. This space is called a bowling green, but the Washingtons and their guests would not have bowled in the way the game of bowling is played today. The game played here on the lawn by the Washingtons was somewhat like croquet or bocce. One rolls a ball along the green and tries to knock other balls aside.

### Discussion Questions:

- Why would Washington include a bowling green in his landscape design?
- What types of games do you like to play outside?



### Did you know?

Without the lawnmowers we have today, maintaining an even surface and uniform height required skill. Enslaved workers rolled the grass with a heavy roller and then cut it with a scythe (pictured to the right). Only the most experienced enslaved gardeners were assigned to cut the grass.

## Ha-ha Walls

The sunken brick walls on either side of the bowling green gate are called ha-ha walls. These “invisible” walls kept farm animals away from the Mansion but did not disturb the scenic view for the Washingtons and their guests.

### Discussion Questions:

- Why do you think they were called ha-ha walls? (Hint: What would happen if you walked to the edge of the bowling green without realizing the ha-ha wall was there?)



**Can you spy...** other ha ha walls around Mount Vernon?

## Serpentine Paths

The gently curving gravel walkway along the bowling green guided visitors through Mount Vernon's pleasure grounds, revealing carefully arranged scenes around every bend. The S-shape of the serpentine pathways gave the landscape a more natural appearance instead of the straight, formal walks seen in most 18th-century outdoor designs. However, these pathways mirrored one another, providing some symmetry to the bowling green. They were designed by Washington, but it was enslaved workers who laid out the paths and performed the difficult task of carting pebbles gathered from the Potomac River up the hillside to gravel the walkways' surfaces.

Enslaved workers planted trees from the forest along the path to shade guests. The trees also framed views of the Mansion. There were more trees along the path during Washington's lifetime than there are today. Walking along these paths coming west from the Mansion (the side facing the bowling green), guests would have seen small flowering shrubs in the foreground, taller flowering shrubs in the middle, then trees in the background, and finally the gates to the upper garden. Further along the paths, evergreen trees filled the “wilderness area” on the east side (the side facing the Mansion) of the bowling green gate.

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## Discussion questions:

- Can you name a type of tree that lines the serpentine paths?
- Can you find a tree planted during Washington's time at Mount Vernon (1752-1799)?

## #9 Greenhouse

As you enter through the gate, look across the garden at the building with seven large windows. In this heated space, Washington and his gardeners grew delicate tropical plants that could not withstand cold Virginia winters. In addition to providing lemons, limes, and oranges for Mrs. Washington's dining table, the building served as a gallery for exhibiting rare and unusual plants imported from around the globe, including an aloe vera from North Africa and sago palm from the East Indies.



During the winter months, a fire was kept burning to heat the floor of the building and keep these exotic plants alive. On a cold night in 1835, the fire got out of control and burned the greenhouse to the ground. The structure you see today was built in 1950, on the foundation of the original greenhouse. Some of the bricks used in the reconstruction came from the White House in Washington D.C.

## #7 Upper Garden

Depending on the time of the year you visit Mount Vernon, the garden may have beautiful, sweet-smelling flowers around the edges of each bed. The upper garden beds were both practical and beautiful. The centers of the beds were filled with vegetable plants that provided produce needed to feed the people at Mount Vernon.

## Parterres

Continuing his efforts in landscape design, Washington installed *parterres*, which are level spaces in a garden filled with decorative arrangements of flower beds or shrubs.

Can you find the parterres trimmed into the shape to the right?  
It is called a *Fleur de Lis*, which means "flower of the lily" in French.



## Did you know?

The Fleur de Lis is a symbol often associated with France. During the Revolutionary War, France served as America's ally, helping Washington win the war. Washington also had a close personal relationship with the Marquis de Lafayette, a French aristocrat and military officer who spent time at Mount Vernon.

## Discussion Questions:

- What purpose did the upper garden serve at Mount Vernon?
- Why do you think Washington included a Fleur de Lis design in the upper garden?
- If you were designing a garden, what special symbol or shape might you include? Why?

## Did you know?

Flower blossoms and petals were often part of colonial dishes and recipes. Have you ever eaten a flower? Rosewater, made from rose petals, was used as a flavoring much like today's vanilla.

The manuscript cookbook Martha Washington inherited from the family of her first husband, Daniel Parke Custis, contains the following recipe for rose water:

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"Take ye buds of red roses & clip of[f] all ye whites at ye bottom & a little of the tops. & pick out all ye seeds. then [sic] take treble their weight in good loafe [sic] sugar, beat them together in an alleblaster [sic] mortar [sic], & strow in ye sugar by degrees. b[eat it v]ery finely, & then pot them."

## #34 Lower Garden

The Lower Garden contains a wide variety of fruits and vegetables. The Washingtons did not have access to a grocery store such as we have today, so they grew all of their fruits and vegetables at Mount Vernon. Today, vegetables grow in the Lower Garden just as they did in Washington's time.

### Did you know?

Mount Vernon's gardeners added extra height to the garden walls, which kept the garden slightly warmer than other areas of the estate. The few extra degrees of heat meant that seeds could be sown earlier in the season, and were better protected from frosts. Trees bearing fruit with a pit or stone like peaches and apricots were planted next to the wall because they required more warmth than other fruit trees like apples or pears. The espaliered apple and pear trees along the inner paths not only bore fruit, but also served as windbreaks, protecting the vegetables growing on the other side.

### Can you spy...

#### Cistern

Look for the circular brick structure resembling a well. Eighteenth-century gardeners knew that cold water straight from the well would be too much of a shock for growing vegetables. Instead, they poured the cold water into a cistern, and waited until the sun rays warmed it before putting on plants. It is unknown whether Mount Vernon's original kitchen garden included a cistern.

#### Glass bell jars

Mount Vernon's gardeners placed glass bell jars over tender or young plants to protect them from the elements and allow them to be planted earlier or later in the season. This meant the lower garden could produce vegetables during more months of the year.

#### Miniature greenhouses

These are called *frames*, and they allowed Mount Vernon's gardeners to plant vegetables year round. The frames covered a *hot bed*, which was a section of soil layered with composted manure. The manure kept the top soil at an almost constant 70 to 80 degrees, so the gardeners could plant summer vegetables as early as January.

#### Discussion questions:

- Why would the lower garden also be called a kitchen garden?
- How did Washington's gardeners protect plants in colder weather? Why was that important?

#### How to Continue your Experience

Thank you for visiting Mount Vernon and using the Gardens and Landscape Homeschool Guide! For additional homeschool resources, please visit Mount Vernon's website at:

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

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## DISCUSSION QUESTION ANSWER KEY

### THE SAMUEL VAUGHAN DRAWING

*What are some other examples of a primary source?*

Newspapers, diaries, maps, photographs, paintings, audio recordings, and books are just some examples of primary sources.

### BOWLING GREEN GATE AND BOWLING GREEN

*Why would Washington include a bowling green in his landscape design?*

The bowling green created a welcoming foreground for visitors approaching the Mansion from the west, and having such a wide expanse of grass would have impressed visitors who rarely saw such a space.

### HA-HA WALLS

*Why do you think they were called ha-ha walls?*

If someone approached a ha-ha wall and was not paying attention, they could easily fall off the edge. That might be a pretty funny sight!

### SERPENTINE PATHS

*Can you name a type of tree that lines the serpentine paths?*

Tulip poplar, elm, holly, locust and ash are all types of trees that line the serpentine paths.

*Can you find a tree planted during Washington's time at Mount Vernon?*

A pair of tulip poplars were planted in 1785 and survive to the present day. They stand on opposite sides of the bowling green, one near the gate to the upper garden, and one near the gate to the lower garden.

### UPPER GARDEN

*Why do you think Washington included a Fleur de Lis design in the upper garden?*

During the Revolutionary War, the French alliance helped to secure American independence. Washington also had a close personal relationship with the Marquis de Lafayette, who was like an adoptive son to the General.

*What purpose did the upper garden serve at Mount Vernon?*

The purpose of the upper garden was two-fold. It was an inviting space for Washington's guests to stroll and enjoy, but it was also productive. While the beds were lined with beautiful flowers, the middle of the beds were filled with plants that produced fruits and vegetables for Washington's table.

### LOWER GARDEN

*Why would the lower garden also be called a kitchen garden?*

The lower garden was primarily about food production. Closest to the kitchen for convenience, the lower garden was where a great deal of the fresh produce was grown for the Washington family's table.

*How did Washington's gardeners protect plants in colder weather? Why was that important?*

The high brick walls, glass bell jars, and frames all helped to keep the plants in the lower garden warmer and protected from the elements, which meant that the gardeners could begin planting earlier in the season. This was important because it gave the Washingtons access to fresh produce throughout much of the year. Without access to modern grocery stores, this was necessary for the Washingtons' survival!