

# Homeschool Day Adult Guide

## 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, plantation owner, and entrepreneur. You will also learn about the lives of the enslaved people who lived and worked on the farms and maintained the Mansion and grounds. The questions will encourage discussion and exploration during your visit. Suggested answers to each question are included to help you facilitate learning among the children in your group.

To continue the learning experience beyond your visit today, additional resources, including activities, games, and worksheets, are available on the Mount Vernon website.

The places you will visit today correspond with their locations on the Homeschool Day Explorer's Map. We encourage you to visit the stops on the farm in the order listed.

## Introduction: Growing Plants at Mount Vernon

George Washington held many important roles including military leader and president, but he saw himself first as a farmer. George Washington began renting Mount Vernon in 1754 from the widow of his older half-brother, Lawrence Washington. He inherited the plantation in 1761 when Lawrence's widow passed away. Washington devoted as much time as possible to turning Mount Vernon into a self-sustaining farm and thriving business, even though he was often away serving his country.

By the end of Washington's life, the Mount Vernon plantation was made up of five farms: Mansion House, Union, Dogue Run, Muddy Hole, and River. Washington's farming and business interests were vast and diverse. Whenever possible, Washington searched for ways to produce everything he needed at Mount Vernon. He was interested in improving efficiency and conducted experiments accordingly. He increased his farm acreage and investigated the best ways to produce more crops. Not only did Washington appreciate plants for their financial value, but he also valued them for their beauty. This is evident in the pleasure gardens, wandering tree-lined paths, and green lawns created at Mansion House Farm. By the time Washington died in 1799, Washington's Mount Vernon estate consisted of 8,000 acres that included a massive and successful enterprise.

Keeping Mount Vernon productive and successful depended on 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 tasks. Those living at Mansion House Farm worked in the Mansion as chambermaids, valets, and cooks. Other individuals worked in trades such as spinning, carpentry, and blacksmithing. Enslaved individuals on the four outlying farms, such as Priscilla and her children, worked as field laborers to cultivate and harvest Mount Vernon's crops.

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## Stop A: The Farms at Mount Vernon

This demonstration site recreates one of Washington's outlying properties where most of the enslaved individuals worked and lived. The outlying farms were his commercial farms, where crops were grown to sell for profit. These farms included Union, Dogue Run, Muddy Hole, and River. View the map of the five farms on the panel by the site entrance to see their locations.

George Washington grew tobacco as his "cash crop" for many years at Mount Vernon. However, his cash crop eventually changed to wheat because his soil was not well suited for growing tobacco and he could make a larger profit selling wheat products. During the colonial era, Great Britain did not restrict the wheat trade in the same way as it did tobacco. After the American Revolution, 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" since land was one of America's most highly sought after resources.

### *Why was switching to wheat a smart move for Washington?*

Switching from tobacco to wheat was a good decision for several reasons. Wheat could be ground into flour, which could be sold for a high price. Wheat is much easier to grow, is gentler on the soil, and gave Washington more control over the trade of his product.

However, while wheat required less labor to grow as a crop, it required more land, buildings, and equipment to ready it for sale. This created more demands on the enslaved workers. The labor associated with making Washington's vision for a new cash crop a reality fell to those enslaved at Mount Vernon whose assignments included clearing the land to ready it for cultivation, constructing more buildings, and manufacturing additional farming equipment.

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## Stop B: Bake Oven

This clay oven represents one of the most popular styles of ovens used in England and America during Washington's lifetime. In the 18th century, ovens like this were seen at military forts, plantations, and large mills (where wheat was ground into flour for sale).

To make bread, the baker opened the door and built a large fire inside the oven. It usually took 3-6 hours to preheat, depending on the weather. When the oven was hot, the baker shoveled the fire out and put the bread in. An experienced baker could tell the temperature of the oven simply by reaching in to feel. The thick walls of the oven allowed the oven to stay hot for a long time – long enough to bake up to three batches of bread before another fire had to be lit to reheat it. An oven similar to this one would typically fit 20-30 loaves at a time. A baker might be able to make 60-90 loaves just from one fire.

### *Do you think everyone had access to wheat bread?*

Most free people in early America could not afford white bread very often. They probably could afford brown bread, which was a mix of wheat flour, rye flour, water, molasses, salt, and yeast. Washington himself would have had access to white bread, but enjoyed other varieties of bread as well. His bread was baked in the brick oven inside the mansion kitchen.

Enslaved people typically received cornmeal rations instead of wheat flour, and did not have access to ovens. Instead, they made cornmeal pancakes called hoecakes, or they baked cornbread by wrapping the dough in leaves and burying it in the coals of a fire.

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## Stop C: Boat Shelter

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 Washington's time 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.

In the spring, the water of the Potomac River began to warm and fish like shad and herring returned to *spawn* (lay eggs) in the upper parts of the river. Primary sources from the 18<sup>th</sup> century reference the surface of the water "sparkling like silver" as millions of fish moved upriver. Washington set up a successful fishing operation on the Potomac. The income derived from the sale of the salted fish often accounted for half of the annual revenue for his estate. The spawning season lasted only four to six weeks. Enslaved and hired workers from across the estate worked around the clock to catch, clean, and preserve the huge quantities of fish by salt packing them. During those weeks, nearly all other work at Mount Vernon stopped. Every enslaved person that could be reassigned worked on 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, hired workers, and enslaved individuals. Washington also sold 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 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 in both directions. He imported finished goods from across the globe and exported flour and salted fish from his estate. Additionally, the fish from the river were a staple in the diet of the enslaved workers.

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

The fishing operations cut down on the amount of materials Washington had to purchase from the outside world, which helped make Mount Vernon a more self-sufficient plantation. 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 individuals' rations.

Explore! Visit the salt house at #20.

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## Stop D: Textiles

At this station you'll learn about the equipment needed to make textiles, which is another word for cloth or fabric. Washington's textiles industry produced clothing for the enslaved community and some household linens. 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. Up to, 1000 sheep produced fleece that was turned into wool.

Sheep were sheared once a year in the late spring. To turn a sheep's fleece into cloth, an enslaved woman, such as Dolshey, cleaned the fleece. Then the fleece was *carded*. Enslaved workers, or sometimes children, 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 by enslaved women, such as Kitty. In the 18th century, spinning thread and weaving cloth was time-consuming labor done completely by hand. Spinning was most often done by enslaved women. 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 trade and was done by both hired and enslaved people.

### Meet Kitty, an Enslaved Spinner

Kitty was between 40 and 50 years old in 1799. She labored as a dairy maid and a spinner. As a spinner, she turned sheep's wool into thread, which was used to make clothing for other enslaved people.

Kitty was married to Isaac, an enslaved carpenter. By 1801, they had nine daughters and seven grandchildren. Kitty's family was split twice while she was held in bondage at Mount Vernon. Isaac was owned by George Washington and received his freedom in 1801, as part of Washington's last will and testament. However, Kitty was a dower slave, which means she and all her children were owned by the Custis family estate from Martha Washington's first marriage. They remained enslaved at Mount Vernon.

In 1802, the family was separated again. When Martha Washington died, Kitty and her children were split among Martha's four grandchildren who lived in different parts of Virginia and Washington, DC. At least one of Kitty's family members was sent to the homes of each of the four grandchildren. All but one member—her husband, Isaac—remained enslaved. Even though Washington wanted to minimize the "painful sensations" of separating Mount Vernon's enslaved families, those like Kitty's still experienced them.

### Did you know?

It took about 2.5 miles of thread to make a single square yard of cloth. In 1778 alone, 2000 yards of cloth were made at Mount Vernon.

### *What was the role of textile production at Mount Vernon?*

Textile production at Mount Vernon was largely dedicated to producing fabric to clothe the enslaved workers on the estate. Each enslaved person 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.

Visit the Spinning House at #18 to see examples of a large spinning wheel and a loom.

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### Stop E: 16-Sided Barn

Wheat seeds, also known as grain, must be separated from the top of the stalk before they can be ground into flour. Washington designed this 16-sided treading barn as a “machine” that would improve this process called *threshing*. Bundles of wheat were spread on the top floor where horses or mules trotted on it. The weight and impact of their hooves separated the grain from the stalk. Look for the gaps in the floor where the wheat would fall to the floor below leaving the straw behind. The leftover straw could be used as bedding for horses or composted. Enslaved workers swept up the wheat from the bottom floor. Through a process called *winnowing*, the enslaved workers then removed any dust or leftover *chaff*, which is the paper-like husk that surrounds each seed. To winnow, the enslaved workers used baskets or fans to blow air through the grain to remove the chaff. Only after all of these steps are completed can the grain be ground into flour.

The treading barn was much more efficient than traditional methods that dated back thousands of years.

#### Did you know?

The roughly circular shape created curved path for the horses to move without stopping. This helped to keep the horses from urinating since they cannot do so while in motion. This kept the grain clean and dry. This 16-sided Barn is a replica of the original, which was located on Dogue Run Farm.

#### Discussion questions:

*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. For example, a common way to separate the seed from the stalk was to thresh the wheat with a flail. A laborer would beat the grain to separate it from the straw. Another way to thresh wheat was to use livestock. The animals would walk over the sheaves of wheat and the impact of their hooves would separate the grain from the straw. This was called treading. Treading was done outdoors, which exposed the wheat to the bad weather and dirt. A significant portion of the grain was ruined or lost as a result. The treading barn required less human labor and provided protection from bad weather, which cut Washington’s crop loss in half.

*Consider this...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?*

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## Stop F: Foodways of Enslaved People

Children and family members too old or injured to receive work assignments cooked a lot of the food that the enslaved population at Mount Vernon ate. The working adults and older children (ages 12 and older) did not always have time to cook because they worked sunrise to sunset. On the outlying farms, each family cooked for themselves. They used the fireplace in their cabin or they cooked at communal fire pits like the one demonstrated today. They usually made simple meals, like soups and stews, because they did not have many pots and pans or other cooking utensils.

Washington provided food rations, or set amounts of food, to each enslaved person. Most of the time, he issued them cornmeal and salted fish or pork. Sometimes, the ration included buttermilk, molasses, salt, and other kinds of fresh and salted meat. Still, enslaved people did not have a lot of variety in the food issued. Food traditions today illustrate the way 18th century cooking likely inspired creative flavors and techniques.

While the rations provided the bare minimum of calories needed for the day, they were not always filling and did not provide a wide range of vitamins and minerals. To supplement their diets, enslaved families grew their own gardens, kept chickens, trapped small animals, and searched the woods for edible wild plants. Often, the gardens that enslaved families grew had vegetables and fruits that their ancestors had grown in Africa. Eating West African foods helped them keep some of their traditions and culture alive.

In March, the availability of fresh vegetables was especially limited for enslaved people due to the cold weather. At this time, the vegetables available would have been hardy greens like collard greens, root vegetables like sweet potatoes, and dried legumes like black eyed peas. The winter stores of these items were also at their lowest supply.

*What are some traditions that your family has about food?*

Learn about food preservation by visiting the Smoke House #28.

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## Stop G: Slave Cabin

More than half of Mount Vernon's enslaved workforce lived and worked on Washington's outlying farms as field laborers. The majority of field workers were women. Those who were physically able worked from sun up to sun down, six days a week, planting, cultivating and harvesting Washington's crops. This reconstructed cabin shows where families lived on the outlying farms. It consists of a single room with a clay floor, a fireplace, a root cellar, and a loft

above. The wooden walls were daubed (an architectural word for coated) with mud to keep out the elements.

### Meet Priscilla and Penny

In 1799, Priscilla, also called Silla, was a field laborer and plow woman on Dogue Run Farm. She was married to Joe, who worked as a ditcher on Mansion House Farm. Together, Priscilla and Joe had six children, including 11-year-old Penny, who lived with Priscilla in a cabin similar to the replica you see today. Penny was not old enough for formal work assignments, but did many chores around her family's home and helped raise her younger brothers. To see his wife and children, Joe had to walk several miles both ways from Mansion House Farm to Dogue Run Farm. Priscilla and her children belonged to General Washington, and were eventually given their freedom under the conditions of Washington's will. Joe, however, belonged to the Custis estate from Martha's first husband, and remained in slavery after George and Martha Washington's deaths.

### Discussion questions:

*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 and the cabins did not offer much physical comfort. 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 he had no assigned labor. He walked several miles in order to see them. The inability to choose who they lived with and where they worked illustrates that lack of freedom that invaded so much of their daily lives.

Learn more about enslaved individuals and their communities by visiting the Greenhouse Slave Quarters at #11-14 and the Lives Bound Together exhibition at #46.

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### Introduction: Gardens

In addition to George Washington's commercial farms, plants were grown in gardens on Mansion House Farm. 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." However, as you explore the landscape you may notice that Washington's gardens were not only beautiful, but also practical, which speaks to Washington's love of efficiency.

The landscape you see at Mount Vernon today represents the vision George Washington had for his estate, but it took time to make his idea a reality. Washington began renting Mount Vernon in 1754, after the death of his older half-brother, Lawrence Washington. Even before he officially inherited the estate, Washington began to make changes. Over the next 45 years, he expanded the property, had buildings constructed or renovated, and altered the landscape design.

George Washington used enslaved labor to make his vision for Mount Vernon's landscape a

reality. 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.

### Meet George – An Enslaved Gardener

George was an enslaved gardener who was owned by Mary Ball Washington – George Washington's mother. Mary Washington rented George to her son during the 1770s at which time he was moved to Mount Vernon. George married an enslaved field worker from Dogue Run Farm, named Sall Twine. They had seven children. In 1787, Washington stopped renting enslaved people from his mother, but continued renting George since George did not want to leave his family and his skills as a gardener were valuable. When Mary Ball Washington died in 1789, she willed George to her son, which meant he stayed at Mount Vernon and was able to remain closer to his family.

Even though both George and Sall lived on the Mount Vernon plantation, work assignments, on different farms kept George and Sall's family separated during the week. Similar to Joe and Priscilla, both families' physical separation was typical for about two-thirds of the enslaved families at Mount Vernon. George likely would have visited his family on Sundays. Sall and the children were owned by the Custis estate, which meant that while George was freed after Washington's death, his wife and children remained enslaved and were separated among Martha's grandchildren.

**Explore! Visit Lives Bound Together to learn about the descendants of enslaved people who lived at Mount Vernon. Ann Chinn, a descendant of George and Sall tells the story of her family's history in the exhibition.**

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### #9 Greenhouse

The greenhouse is a reconstructed building with seven large windows. In this heated space, Washington's gardeners grew delicate tropical plants that would otherwise not withstand the 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 warm-climate plants alive. The fire came from a room on the other side of the building called the stove room. An enslaved boy or man slept in the room in order to tend the fire and make sure it continuously burned. Typical bedding would have been a pallet on the floor in front of the room's central fireplace.

In 1835, the greenhouse burned 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 18<sup>th</sup> century bricks used to build the White House in Washington D.C.

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## #7 Upper Garden

The upper garden beds were both beautiful and practical. The centers of the beds were filled with vegetable plants that provided produce needed to feed the Washingtons and their guests at Mount Vernon. In the late spring and summer, the garden had beautiful, sweet-smelling flowers around the edges of each bed.

### Parterres (pronounced paar-tehr)

Continuing his efforts in landscape design, Washington had *parterres* installed, 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?

This shape 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 American Revolution War, France served as America’s ally, helping Washington win the war. Washington also had a close friendship with the Marquis de Lafayette, a French aristocrat and a major general who served during the American Revolution.

### Discussion Questions:

#### *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 a working space where enslaved gardeners such as George were assigned to tasks such as pruning plants or harvesting cabbage. The gardeners maintained the beautiful flowers that lined the garden beds and cultivated the fruits and vegetables located in the middle that were used by enslaved cooks to feed the Washington household.

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

During the American Revolution, an alliance with France helped secure independence from Britain. Washington also had a close personal relationship with the Marquis de Lafayette, who was like an adoptive son to George Washington when he served as general during the American Revolution.

### Did you know?

Historically, flowers have been used both medicinally and in cooking. Have you ever eaten a flower? Rose petals were used to make rosewater, which was often used as a flavoring, much like today’s vanilla extract.

Doll was an enslaved woman who served as the estate’s cook for many years. As she aged, Doll no longer had formal work assignments. She continued to use the kitchen to distill mint and rosewater for household purposes. It is also possible she assisted with knitting and mending, tasks that Washington often assigned to elderly enslaved workers.

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### #34 Lower Garden

The lower garden contains a wide variety of fruits and vegetables. The Washingtons did not have access to a grocery store so many of their fruits and vegetables were grown by gardeners at Mount Vernon. Today, vegetables are still grown in the lower garden just as they were 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 require more warmth than other fruit trees, such as apples or pears. The espaliered apple and pear trees along the inner paths not only bore fruit, but also served as windbreaks to protect the vegetables growing on the other side.

#### Discussion questions:

*Why do you think the lower garden was called a kitchen garden?*

The lower garden was primarily used for food production by the enslaved gardeners for the Washington household. This garden, located near the kitchen where enslaved cooks such as Lucy or Nathan worked, provided much of the produce needed to feed the Washington family and their guests.

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

The high brick walls, glass bell jars (glass domes), and frames (sunken garden bed) 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. In contrast with the produce that enslaved people had access to, wealthier farmers like the George Washington had more access to equipment such as glass bell jars to ensure the availability of produce for his table throughout the year.

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## Activities & Worksheets

### Continue the Learning at Home

Visit Mount Vernon's website for more worksheets and activities related to today's activities: [www.mountvernon.org/HomeschoolDay](http://www.mountvernon.org/HomeschoolDay).