Colonial Life at Mount Vernon

What can you learn about the agricultural community Washington designed? What observations and inferences can you make about life on a plantation in the 1700s?

The Farm Site

George Washington was innovative and selective about the types of crops and products growing on his five farms.

- Discover more about tobacco, linens, and the 16-Sided Barn and create a T-chart of the crops that were grown by the enslaved individuals on Washington's plantation.
- Examine Washington’s crop rotation chart and look at the changes between years. Pick a specific year and draw a map of what crops were grown. Be sure to label the fields and list what year you chose.
- Read George Washington's letter to Robert Cary and highlight the challenges that Washington faced while managing his farm. Create a list of solutions for Washington, writing what he should do about these pressing problems.
- Think, Puzzle, Explore a picture of a fishing weight. Read about the fisheries and create a thesis statement arguing why the fisheries were the most essential operation at Mount Vernon.

Slave Cabin

- Explore a day in the life of an enslaved person assigned field work. Then, compare and contrast the biographies of Caesar, Davy Gray, and Priscilla & Penny to learn more about the people who lived and worked at Mount Vernon. Generate a list of questions for each. What do you want to know about their lives?
- Use filters within the Database of the Enslaved Community and create a mind map about the names, events, skills, and types of sources you notice. Write why it is important to know the names and stories of the people who labored at Mount Vernon, and where this information might be found.
- Watch the Lives Bound Together: Slavery at Mount Vernon virtual exhibit video; in small groups, research a person referenced in the video, presenting on their lives and the ways in which the person resisted enslavement.

This is a reproduction of where many enslaved families at Mount Vernon would have lived, usually holding six to ten individuals who labored on the plantation. Enslaved family members who were not assigned work, such as children under 8, would take care of the houses during the daytime. The cabins provided a space for community outside the work that defined much of their lives.

Kitchen

Enslaved individuals worked in this space seven days a week to create meals for both the Washingtons and their visitors at the Mansion.

- Look at a dinner menu from Washington's time. Circle the amount of foods you recognize, and search for pictures of the ones you do not. Predict how long you think it would take to make the meals listed in an enslaved kitchen.
- Analyze a Food Ledger, and review the recipes the enslaved cooks followed. Make a chart of the types of foods mentioned within the ledger, creating columns to organize local and imported ingredients.
- Martha Washington was in charge of planning meals at Mount Vernon. Read about hospitality, and use the recipe information and food supply ledger she referenced to plan a week of meals at Mount Vernon.
- Watch a video on Doll and draw a timeline of her life, starting with when she arrived at the Chesapeake. Be sure to include the different types of skills she must have had and record information about her family throughout.
- Explore the Dining Room. Create a list of objects within the room that the enslaved individuals would have interacted with while serving the Washingtons and their guests.
The American Revolution at Mount Vernon
When George Washington left for war, Mount Vernon’s role as a plantation did not change, despite the threat of British takeover. How is Mount Vernon an example of patriot life during the Revolutionary era?

Washington’s Bedchamber
Martha Washington followed George Washington to his military encampments every winter. When she was home, the bedchamber served as her office, work space and sanctuary. Here, she would have written to George about life at Mount Vernon, instructed enslaved house servants about duties, and connected to her large family through letters.

- Read about Martha’s presence during the Revolutionary War and analyze a letter she wrote to her children during encampment, using the five W’s (who, what, when, where, and why). Then, write a summary of Martha’s role in the camp, using both the primary source and articles.
- Watch a camp followers video. Create a Venn-Diagram comparing and contrasting Martha’s experience to the lives of the camp followers, and explain why this may be the case.
- Analyze Jacky’s letter to Martha and look for his description of the Battle of Yorktown. Then, read a letter from Henry Knox and watch a video about Yorktown. Journal about feelings that Jacky might have experienced at Yorktown, and how the environment at Yorktown would have affected the soldiers.

The Slave Quarters

- Explore a timeline about slavery in the United States and choose an event listed from the American Revolution (1770-1783) to research, examining how it impacted enslavement in America.
- Many enslaved peoples were heavily affected by the war. In small groups, Seek to See the stories of Billy Lee, James Lafayette, and Harry Washington, and create a presentation on their lives, highlighting how each individual resisted enslavement for themselves and their families.

Enslaved life at Mount Vernon continued throughout the Revolutionary War. The Slave Quarters housed the male and female enslaved populations that worked at the Mansion House Farm. Some individuals decided to seek their own freedom during the war, while others chose to remain to be with their families.

The Piazza
The Piazza overlooks the Potomac, which was a bustling highway at the time of the Revolution. This meant that Mount Vernon was vulnerable to British ships and troops. The HMS Savage was a British ship that approached Mount Vernon, and could be seen from the Piazza.

- Read Washington’s 1775 letter to Lund Washington and create a list of instructions for Lund to follow, if a British attack were to occur at Mount Vernon.
- Next, read what actually happened and compare it to your list. In a few sentences, determine - did Lund follow Washington’s instructions? What should he have done differently?
- View a list of 17 escaped individuals from 1781 who fled on the British warship that docked at Mount Vernon. See, Think, and Wonder about the impact on daily life at Mount Vernon and the enslaved community when these individuals escaped and some were returned.
- Read Washington’s response to the event. Then, using the sources above, write a newspaper article describing the H.M.S.’s arrival at Mount Vernon and Washington’s reaction to it.
The Presidency and Beyond

How is George Washington’s leadership and governing style represented at Mount Vernon?

The Central Passage

- Locate the Bastille Key and do a See, Wonder, Connect. Why do you think Washington would have this key hanging up in his house?
- Read about the Neutrality Crisis. Create a mind map exploring why the U.S. decided not to help France, despite Washington’s close friendship with Lafayette. Then, write a persuasive speech convincing Washington to side with the French or declare neutrality.
- Read Washington’s First Inaugural Address and think of reasons why Washington would want to give such an address to Congress. Write your own inaugural address - what advice would you give your fellow citizens based on what’s happening in your world today?

The Central Passage is the entryway to the Mansion. Visitors were often greeted and entertained by the Washington family within this space, especially after Washington’s presidency. It is one of the oldest spaces in the house, dating back to the 1730s.

The Study

- Read about the election process and Elizabeth Powel’s letter convincing Washington to run for president. Then, write your own letter or film a video that persuades Washington to run.
- Research items from Washington’s Presidency and select three to create your own museum exhibit. Write captions for each, explaining why you included them in your collection and what the objects say about Washington’s Presidency.
- Read about Thomas Paine and hypothesize why Washington had Paine’s Common Sense on his personal bookshelf. Brainstorm inspirational books that are on your personal bookshelf, and explain why.
- Make a historical bumper sticker based on Washington’s advice for the nation.
- Read the Constitution, then create a plan for a new form of class government and convince classmates that yours is the best. Why have you chosen your plan, and how might it succeed or fail?

This space was private to Washington; guests could only enter with his permission. Washington used his study to draft letters and other important documents (like his will) when living at Mount Vernon during the Founding Era.

The Slave Memorial

The Slave Memorial marks where both free and enslaved peoples were buried at Mount Vernon. George Washington freed over 100 enslaved individuals in his will. He was not legally able to free everyone, as over half were bound to Martha’s first husband’s estate.

- Research Ona Judge’s story (watch a video, research the Database of the Enslaved Community, or read an article). Create a flip book to tell her story, citing the evidence you found. Consider: why is she not buried at Mount Vernon?
- Look at Washington’s list of enslaved people and Washington’s Will (fourth paragraph). Use the Creative Question Starts to investigate what happened to the enslaved community at Mount Vernon after Washington’s death.
- Examine how Washington’s thoughts on enslavement changed over time. Then, debate the following question with classmates; were Washington’s beliefs about slavery public or private?