

Homeschool Day Adult Guide

How to Use this Guide:

This guide is designed to enrich your visit to Mount Vernon and provide supplemental information about the Washingtons and the enslaved community who lived here in the eighteenth century. This guide covers demonstrations by Mount Vernon staff, and additional unstaffed areas that provide good learning opportunities. The questions included are meant to encourage discussion and exploration during your visit. Additional information is included to help facilitate learning amongst the children in your group.

This Homeschool Day will include a wide array of topics, covering everything from Washington building the army in 1775, to the role of archaeology at Mount Vernon today.

The lettered stops here correspond to the letters featured on the Fall Homeschool Day Map. There is no correct order in which to make these stops.

Stop A: The Family Hub

In the fall of 1775, the Revolutionary War is in full swing and George Washington finds himself commanding soldiers in the Siege of Boston. War also necessitated the creation of the Continental Navy and Continental Marines.

Station 1: The State of Washington's Army

When Washington took command of the Continental forces in 1775, the soldiers weren't well-trained or well-armed for battle. His initial impression was that the Continental Army was unfit for combat. Most of the soldiers were ordinary citizens with no military experience and were only equipped with the clothes on their backs and their personal rifles. Their condition was more like a grassroots militia, yet they had to contend with one of the largest professional armies in the world.

Congress didn't provide a big enough budget to supply the troops, so alternative sources mobilized to support the American cause. George Washington and Continental Congress both authorized privateers to capture British ships to provide war materials to the Continental Army. Many wealthy people who believed in American Independence donated funds and supplies to the war effort. Many of these generous donors were French, Dutch, or Spanish.

Because the Continental Army wasn't as well-equipped as the British Army, leaders had to use every advantage to its fullest. In an attempt to stop the British from further encroaching on Massachusetts, Continental soldiers planned a blockade to confine the British inside the city of Boston. Washington had the soldiers placed strategically around

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Boston, up on higher ground known as Dorchester Heights. There, they'd cut off the British troops from receiving any supplies by land. In the water around the Boston Harbor, privateers captured merchant vessels carrying supplies intended for the British.

The Continental Army, however, didn't have any heavy artillery yet. Washington enlists the help of Henry Knox to retrieve abandoned cannons from the formerly British-controlled Fort Ticonderoga. Knox and his team hauled the cannons over 300 miles to Boston from Upstate New York. They used oxen and sleds to transport the cannons, which weighed up to 1 ton each, over the frozen expanse.

Knox delivered the cannons in January of 1776, giving Washington the upper hand over the British. Now vulnerable to bombardment and unable to fire their own artillery up over the hill, the British withdrew from Boston. Despite being underprepared for combat, the resilience and strategy of the Continental Army enabled them to secure a much-needed victory over the British Army.

Station 2: The Continental Navy and Continental Marines

Before the Continental Navy was established, privateers had the task of protecting American waterways. Privateers were private citizens who carried a Letter of Marque, which essentially functioned as a license for piracy. The Letter of Marque permitted them to raid enemy ships and confiscate any valuable goods onboard. The privateers would split the profits of the confiscated goods with whichever governing body issued their Letter of Marque. This would not only disrupt British supply lines, but also provide materials to the American market and Continental Army.

Even though privateers did sway the war effort, they weren't strong enough to take on the British Royal Navy. Americans needed warships of their own and sailors who could be commanded as a force. On October 13, 1775, Congress created a Continental Navy. Soon after, on November 10, Congress voted to create the Continental Marines.

The Navy and Marines had some trouble recruiting because people with sailing or fighting experience could have more lucrative careers as privateers. Nonetheless, many former privateers, like John Paul Jones and John Barry, joined the Navy. The Continental Marines recruited out of taverns in Philadelphia, such as the famed Tun Tavern.

Sailors and Marines fought in many monumental battles during the Revolutionary War, including Trenton and Yorktown. After the successes of the war, the Navy and Marines are temporarily disbanded as the Articles of Confederation couldn't support the branches. The US Navy is reinstated during George Washington's presidency and the US Marine Corps is reinstated during John Adams' presidency.

Discussion questions:

How was the Siege of Boston important for shaping the rest of the Revolutionary War?

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Notes:

Why do you think it was difficult to recruit sailors and marines?

Notes:

Stop B: Archaeology Hub

Archaeology is a crucial part of the preservation process at Mount Vernon. It has shaped our knowledge of the Washingtons' lives and the daily experience of the enslaved community. Archaeological excavations have occurred at Mount Vernon since the 1930s and have yielded over a million artifacts. Once recovered, artifacts are processed, analyzed, and housed in the archaeology laboratory. These artifacts are the keys to understanding and interpreting life at Mount Vernon during the eighteenth century. For example, by studying faunal and floral (animal and plant) remains, archaeologists learn more about the diet of Mount Vernon's residents; domestic, clothing, and personal objects inform archaeologists about daily life; architectural artifacts provide clues to the layout and appearance of the plantation.

Archaeologists have discovered evidence of human life from the Early Archaic period (beginning c. 8,000 B.C.E) on Mount Vernon's property and the presence of Native Americans for thousands of years prior to the Washingtons owning the land. Archaeologists have also found artifacts from the centuries after Washington's death and continue to keep track of artifacts left behind by visitors. All of this evidence plays a role in helping tell the entire history of the Mount Vernon property and all of the people who have visited and lived here.

To see Mount Vernon's archaeological collections and past excavations, click [here](#).

Discussion question:

How does archaeology help us learn about the past?

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Stop E/M: Upper Garden

George Washington had four separate gardens, each with a distinct purpose. The Upper Garden was intended to be a formal garden, meant for the Washingtons' many guests to enjoy. It contained a rich variety of plants divided into six planting beds that combined aesthetic landscaping and food production. Plants in the Upper Garden included ornamental and fruit trees and vegetables. Furthermore, Washington seemed to have highlighted America's revolutionary alliance with France as one of the beds contained a boxwood parterre "clipped and trimmed with infinite care into the form of a richly flourishing Fleur de Lis." This design can still be seen today.

The Upper Garden also held a Greenhouse where Washington had hired and enslaved gardeners cultivate tropical plants including lemons, limes, and oranges. It also 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.

This garden was not just for enjoyment, but also a display of wealth. It showed not only that Washington possessed the financial resources to obtain such plants, but also the labor force to maintain them.

Discussion question:

How do the seasons affect what can be grown? Why would the Greenhouse be important in Virginia winters?

Notes:

Stop J: Cooking Demonstration

Most people in the eighteenth century consumed food that came from their own farms, gardens, and livestock. The Washingtons were no exception to this. Much of the food eaten in the Washington Dining Room came from one of Washington's farms,

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gardens, or his fisheries.

Today, our Historic Trades Team will be conducting demonstrations that highlight food preservation techniques.

Meet [Hercules](#), an enslaved cook:

Hercules Posey was an enslaved cook for George Washington in the 1780s and 1790s. He would have learned to cook as an apprentice under the older enslaved chefs, Doll and Nathan. He likely started out doing scullery work—peeling vegetables, plucking fowl, fetching water—and worked his way up to master chef, laboring sixteen-hour days to produce sophisticated feasts for his enslavers. In November 1790, Washington summoned Hercules to cook diplomatic and personal meals for him in the President's house. In Philadelphia, Hercules gained public renown.

However, while on a trip with the Washingtons back to Mount Vernon, Hercules' son was accused of stealing money from a white servant, which Washington suspected he and Hercules wanted to use to escape. Therefore, Washington left him at Mount Vernon where he was reassigned to work other plantation jobs, such as brick making or digging ditches. Hercules self-emancipated on February 22, 1797. Washington died in 1799 having never found Hercules. Hercules was only seen once more in New York City in 1801.

Foodways of Enslaved Families:

Children and family members too old or injured to receive work assignments often cooked the food that the enslaved people at Mount Vernon ate. Working adults and older children (typically aged 12 and older) did not always have time to cook as their work day lasted from sunrise to sunset. On the outlying farms, families either cooked for themselves using the fireplace in their cabin or at communal fire pits. Meals were typically simple, such as soups and stews, due to lack of access to ingredients and cooking utensils.

Food rations, or set amounts of food, were issued to each enslaved person. A typical daily ration for an enslaved adult was 1 quart of cornmeal and 5-8 ounces of salted fish. Sometimes, the ration might include buttermilk, molasses, salt, or fresh and salted meat.

While the rations provided the bare minimum of calories needed for the day, they were not always filling, nor did they provide a wide range of vitamins and minerals. To supplement their diets, enslaved families cultivated 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 keep some of their traditions and culture alive.

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Discussion question:

What are some food traditions in your family?

Notes:

Stop I: Blacksmith Shop

The Blacksmith Shop was essential to the running of the plantation and vital to Washington's business endeavors. Records indicate that as early as 1755 a blacksmith shop was located along the north lane, about 200 feet from the Mansion. Most of the smiths who worked for Washington were enslaved, except for a German immigrant named Dominicus Gubner.

The blacksmiths spent most of their time making and especially repairing various farm tools. Washington purchased the majority of the iron tools and materials from England, where specialized shops could make items faster and cheaper than his all-purpose shop. Washington occasionally challenged his blacksmiths to create a plow he had designed and to make intricate parts for pistols and rifles.

Discussion question:

Why do you think Washington would want a blacksmith shop on his property?

Notes:

Stop H: Spinning House

Washington's textiles industry produced clothing for the enslaved community. 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 and up to 800 sheep produced the fleece that was turned into wool. Still, Washington often had to buy cloth to supplement what was made at Mount Vernon. Washington's own clothes and that of his family were made from fine cloth imported from Europe.

Sheep were sheared once a year in the late spring. To turn a sheep's fleece into

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cloth, an enslaved woman such as Dolshey, first cleaned the fleece. The fleece was then carded by enslaved people, most likely children, who combed the fleece between special brushes called cards to remove any leftover dirt and smooth the fleece.

Once cleaned, the fleece was spun using a spinning wheel that twisted the fiber into wool yarn. In the 18th century, spinning thread and weaving cloth was time-consuming labor. At Mount Vernon, the task was completed by enslaved women such as Kitty. Current research shows that much of the spinning at Mount Vernon happened alongside other tasks in the enslaved workers' living areas. Weaving fabric, on the other hand, was considered a man's trade and was done by both hired and enslaved men at the Spinning House.

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 winter clothing for other enslaved people.

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

In 1802, Kitty's family was forced to separate again upon Martha Washington's death. Kitty and her children were split among Martha's four grandchildren who lived in different parts of Virginia and Washington, D.C. Kitty's family members were split up between Martha Washington's four grandchildren. Even though George Washington wanted to minimize the "painful sensations" of separating Mount Vernon's enslaved families, many enslaved families still experienced the tragedy of separation.

Did you know?

It took about 2.5 miles of thread to make a single square yard of cloth. In 1778, 2,000 yards of cloth were made at Mount Vernon.

Discussion question:

What was the role of textile production at Mount Vernon?

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Stop II: Washington's Tomb

George Washington died in his bedchamber at Mount Vernon on December 14, 1799. His will outlined his desire to be buried at home at Mount Vernon. Washington additionally made provisions for a new brick tomb to be constructed after his death, which would replace the original yet quickly deteriorating family burial vault. His will directed the building of the present vault in the following words:

"The family Vault at Mount Vernon requiring repairs, and being improperly situated besides, I desire that a new one of Brick, and upon a larger Scale, may be built at the foot of what is commonly called the Vineyard Inclosure. . . In which my remains, with those of my deceased relatives (now in the old Vault) and such others of my family as may chuse to be entombed there, may be deposited."

In 1831, Washington's body was transferred to the new tomb and reinterred, along with the remains of Martha Washington and other family members.

Discussion question:

What are some of George Washington's legacies?

Notes:

Stop JJ: Slave Memorial & African American Burial Ground

Mount Vernon staff are conducting an ongoing archaeological survey of the Slave Cemetery on the estate. From an archaeological standpoint, the best way to commemorate the lives of those free and enslaved individuals who lived and died at Mount Vernon is to thoroughly document the locations of individual burials on the landscape. Therefore, the primary goal of this project is to create a map that shows exactly where individuals are interred on the ridge just southwest of Washington's tomb. To ensure utmost respect is paid to the people interred here, the remains will not be excavated. As of right now, Mount Vernon archaeologists know of the location of 86 graves; however, nineteenth-century accounts estimate anywhere from 100 to 150 graves.

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Currently-known grave shafts are marked out with string. Although archaeologists do not know for sure who is buried where, painted rocks bearing the names of individuals held in bondage at Mount Vernon can be found throughout the burial ground. These rocks were created during Mount Vernon's *Lives, Loves, Loss: Remember the Families* program in May.

Discussion question:

What do you notice about this space? How does being here make you feel?

Notes:

Stop MM: The Farm

Please note: the Farm will not be staffed for this Homeschool Day. However, visitors are still welcome to walk down and explore.

George Washington held many important roles including military leader and president, but he saw himself first as a farmer. He thought farming was the best way to make America successful because it produced goods that could be peacefully traded to other countries. He 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 cultivating a successful farm and a 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 8,000 acres, divided into five farms: Mansion House Farm, Union Farm, Dogue Run Farm, Muddy Hole Farm, and River Farm. Washington's farming and business interests were vast and diverse. Washington used the scientific method to investigate all aspects of farming. His goals were to find the best ways to produce more crops and the most efficient ways for enslaved people to do farm work. He also wanted to share his knowledge with other people. Two of the key ways that Washington sought to better his farms was through the use of crop rotation and the use of compost and manure to improve soil health.

To keep Mount Vernon running, Washington depended on the labor of hundreds of enslaved individuals. At the time of George Washington's death in 1799, 317 enslaved people lived and worked 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

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spinning, carpentry, and blacksmithing. Enslaved people on the four outlying farms, such as Priscilla and her children, worked as field laborers to cultivate and harvest Mount Vernon's crops.

The Farm demonstration site recreates a miniature version of George Washington's outlying farms 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. They are no longer part of the estate today. View the map of the five farms on the panel by the site entrance to see their locations.

Notes:

Stop NN: Patriot's Path

Patriot's Path is a newer addition to Mount Vernon. It's recreating a Continental Army encampment featuring several enlisted soldiers' tents, an officer's tent, and various other points of interest. Patriot's Path exhibits the daily lives of soldiers during the Revolutionary War, as well as the lives of civilian followers.

This is an immersive space where visitors are encouraged to explore history through touching objects, asking the historical interpreters questions, and experiencing history come to life.

Discussion question:

Would life have been very comfortable for a soldier in the Continental Army?

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Stop OO: Lives Bound Together

Lives Bound Together is a reinstalled exhibit featuring the lives of the people enslaved at Mount Vernon and the surrounding farms. It includes an interactive map, interviews of descendants of the enslaved, and artifacts relating to the daily lives of enslaved people. This is a staffed exhibit and there will be a staff member or volunteer present to answer any questions you might have.

Hundreds of people were enslaved at Mount Vernon and Lives Bound Together highlights the aspects of their lives that have previously been omitted from history. The purpose of the exhibit is to humanize enslaved people and acknowledge the impact of enslavement at Mount Vernon. It features themes of family, faith, resistance, and freedom.

Discussion question:

We learn a lot of information through oral history, or storytelling. Does your family have their own oral histories?

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Extra Resources:

Although this guide covers a variety of topics upon which this Homeschool Day is based, there are many resources on the Mount Vernon that may be helpful for other homeschool lessons. Be sure to check out the [For Home Educators](#) page, too!

Activities:

- [20 Questions](#) Evaluating Primary Source Lessons
- [Map of Mount Vernon](#) Worksheet
- [A Grub Hoe](#) Primary and Secondary Source Lesson
- [Be an Archaeologist](#) Artifact Lesson
- [Make Your Own Exhibition](#) Lesson

Webpages:

- [STEAM](#) at Mount Vernon
- [Imperial Trade in 18th Century British North America](#) Infographic
- [Museum Collections](#)
- [Education Collections](#)
- [Database of the Enslaved Community](#)
- [Library Collections](#)
- [Secondary Sources](#)

Primary Sources:

- [Crop Rotation Table](#)
- [Garden Hoe](#)
- [Fishing Weight](#)
- [Farm Report](#)
- [Bastille Key](#)

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