GEORGE WASHINGTON'S
MOUNT ★ VERNON

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 amongst your family 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, from the arguments surrounding declaring independence from Britain to the role of archaeology at Mount Vernon today.

The lettered stops here correspond to the letters featured on the Spring Homeschool Day Map. There is no correct order for these stops.

Stop A: The Family Hub

1776 was a year of brewing ideas that would eventually lead to a decision that would change the world. The Family Hub will explore the debates amongst colonists in the spring-summer of 1776, leading up to the drafting and signing of the Declaration of Independence, through primary sources and hands-on activities.

Station 1: Why Declare Independence

The war had been going on for about a year by the spring of 1776. Some delegates and a growing number of colonists felt like their grievances with Great Britain were irreconcilable; their best solution was to break away and establish a new government. Patriots were arguing for more than just an independent nation-state. They also defined personal independence and asserted that it was the role of government to protect it. Personal Independence was rooted in the Enlightenment ideas of: *Inherent* and *Inalienable rights*. These rights should apply to everyone, everywhere, and are attributed to God, nature, or reason.

Though the Patriots argued for personal liberties for all, the clear hypocrisy on enslavement, Indigenous peoples' rights, and women's rights was not ignored. Some African Americans and early abolitionists supported American independence, motivated by Revolutionary ideals of liberty and the belief that independence could weaken slavery and expand opportunities for freedom. Some Indigenous tribes that served and fought in the American Revolution for the American side believed that the American push for

liberty would also inspire regret for stripping Natives of land and freedoms, and that gaining independence would prevent future inequalities.

Station 2: Why Stay Loyal

By the spring of 1776, many colonists were deeply uneasy about the idea of independence. Breaking away from Great Britain meant rejecting a familiar political system, fighting a war with the most powerful empire in the world, and facing serious personal consequences. For many delegates, Loyalists, women, African Americans, and Indigenous peoples, independence offered uncertainty rather than security. For some, siding with Britain was even seen as the better option for equality and independence. Loyalists feared the loss of legal protection, economic stability, property, and personal safety. Moderates did not particularly care one way or another; they just did not want to live through the devastations of war or risk the collapse of the society they knew if independence failed.

Many women worried that war and political upheaval would bring hardship to families without granting them new rights. Some African Americans believed the British offered a more immediate path to freedom than the American Patriot cause. Indigenous nations made strategic decisions based on survival, diplomacy, and land protection. Many viewed British authority as a potential buffer against colonial expansion. This station explores why a large portion of the population believed remaining loyal to Britain or seeking reform rather than revolution was the safer and more just option.

Discussion questions:

What is something that surprised you about the debate for independence or The Declaration of Independence?

Why?

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Stop J: 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 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 tourists. 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 N/M: Upper Gardens

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 to 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.

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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?

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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.

Many of the tasks performed here were relatively mundane: making and especially repairing various farm tools. Washington purchased the majority of his ironwork 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?

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Stop H: Spinning House

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

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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. Washington always had to buy cloth to supplement what was made at Mount Vernon. Also, Washington's own clothes and those 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 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 all 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. At least one of Kitty's family members was sent to the homes of each of the four grandchildren. Even though 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.

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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 last 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, along with the remains of Martha Washington and other family members.

Discussion question:
What are some of George Washington's legacies?

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Stop JJ: Slave Memorial & 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.

Current 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 are created during Mount Vernon's *Lives, Loves, Loss: Remember the Families* program. The next one will be held on May 9, 2026.

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

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Stop MM: The Farm

Please note: the Farm will not be staffed for this Homeschool Day, and there will be no shuttle service. 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, Union, Dogue Run, Muddy Hole, and River. 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 were 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 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 one of George 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. 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.

Discussion question:
How do George Washington's views on farming relate to his views on leadership?

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Stop G: Encampment

Washington led an army that defeated the world's premier war machine of its day. Historians have praised Washington for his choice and supervision of the generals, how he encouraged morale, and held together the army. His close coordination with governors and state militias, his cooperative relations with Congress, and his professional attention to supplies, logistics, and training all contributed to the success of the Continental Army.

Washington, of course, did not work alone. In 1776, he had the help of over 20,000 enlisted soldiers and militiamen. The Encampment at Mount Vernon demonstrates what life was like for Continental soldiers and patriots during the Revolutionary War. The Encampment will feature interpretations of the daily life of soldiers, military officers, and the women and children who traveled with the army. For Homeschool Day, the Encampment will also be interpreting the Siege of Boston, Henry Knox, and "Evacuation Day".

On March 17, 1776, known afterward as "Evacuation Day," 11,000 British soldiers and hundreds of Loyalists left the city by boat, leaving significant amounts of artillery. This victory was crucial in preventing the British control of a major port from which to receive supplies and troops. Additionally, the victory boosted morale for American independence.

Discussion question:
Why do you think the American success at the Siege of Boston boosted morale for American Independence?

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Stop OO: Lives Bound Together Exhibit

Within the quarters of the historic area, learn about the 317 enslaved people who lived and worked at George Washington's five farms, gristmill, and distillery through archaeological artifacts, descendant stories, and interactive displays. This Exhibit tells us about their lives, their loves, and how they found ways to survive and thrive in a world that denied their freedom. It also introduces us to the evolution of George Washington's thinking about slavery, a system that he called his only avoidable subject of regret.

The exhibit explores the specialized skills, family life, and resilience of individuals such as Isaac, Kate, and Caroline Branham, while highlighting the legacy of George Washington's decision to free those he enslaved and the continuing efforts by the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association and community partners to honor and share this history.

Discussion question:
What does this exhibit tell you about the daily lives of the enslaved people at Mount Vernon?

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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 at 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
- Lives Bound Together
- Education Collections
- Database of the Enslaved Community
- Library Collections
- Secondary Sources
- Loyalists
- New York Campaign

Primary Sources:

- Crop Rotation Table
- Garden Hoe
- Fishing Weight

Education & Guest Services

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- Farm Report
- Bastille Key

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