

Homeschool Day Adult Guide Fall 2026

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 offer valuable 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, all related to Revolutionary War espionage, George Washington, and how the actions of brave civilians continue to impact the country we know today.

The Family Hub

A defeated British intelligence officer once said, "Washington did not really outfight the British. He simply out-spied us." Spies and spy-craft played a crucial role in the American Revolutionary War. Espionage was important even before the war began in April 1775. A patriot intelligence ring in Boston, suspicious of the British, secretly gathered information on British military movements. They observed the British troops preparing to march to Concord to capture rebel leaders and seize weapons. This intel allowed riders like Paul Revere to sound the alarm.

Just like Paul Revere's daring ride and the intelligence network that provided information to stop the British at Lexington and Concord, there were many daring and courageous spies throughout the Revolutionary War. Most Spies were ordinary people. People who could "fly under the radar," such as women, enslaved people, tavern owners, farmers, etc., At the time, women and enslaved people were seen as incapable of understanding the complicated matters of war. Though both sides held this prejudice, both the British and Americans utilized them as spies.

Station 1: Who Were the Spies

The most well-known and well-documented spies of the American Revolution were the members of the Culper Spy ring. For most of the war, the work of the Culper

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Ring far surpassed anything that the British developed. The Culper Ring was led by Benjamin Tallmadge, Washington's Chief Intelligence Officer. Tallmadge recruited his childhood friends from Setauket, NY, to work for his spy ring. None of them had ever spied before.

Other Spies included women such as Anna Strong of the Culper Ring and Patience Lovell Wright, a Patriot sculptor based in London who hid secret messages in her art. Enslaved African Americans who served as Patriot Spies include men like James Lafayette, a double agent, and Cato, whose intelligence saved George Washington's life.

Station 2: Spy Techniques

Secret information falling into the wrong hands during the Revolutionary War had devastating consequences, so Revolutionary War Spies used complicated and innovative methods to disguise information and prevent intel from falling into the wrong hands.

Spies used methods such as invisible ink, cipher codes, book codes, and much more.

Discussion questions:

Why do you think ordinary people made the best spies? Why would people with the most to lose choose to risk their lives to be spies?

Notes:

Upper Gardens

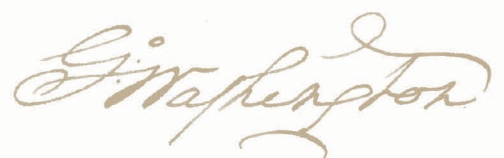
George Washington had four separate gardens, each with a distinct purpose. The Upper Garden was intended to be a formal garden, meant for the Washingtons' many guests to enjoy. It contained a rich variety of plants divided into six planting beds that combined aesthetic landscaping and food production. 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

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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:

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.

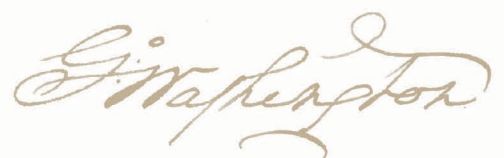
Discussion question:

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

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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?

Notes:

Memorial & African American Burial Ground

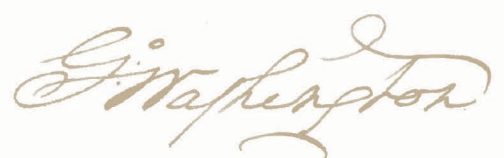
Mount Vernon staff are conducting an ongoing archaeological survey of the African American Burial Grounds on the estate. From an archaeological standpoint, the best way to commemorate the lives of those free and enslaved individuals who lived and died at Mount Vernon is to thoroughly document the locations 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.

Discussion question:

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

Notes:

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, 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.

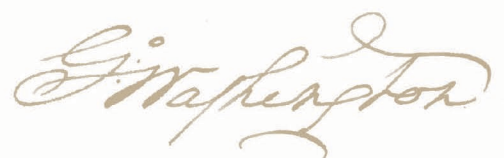
To keep Mount Vernon running, Washington depended on the labor of hundreds of enslaved individuals. At the time of George Washington's death in 1799, 317 enslaved people lived and worked at Mount Vernon. The enslaved community was large and diverse, consisting of men, women, and children who lived on 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

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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?

Notes:

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 spies in the American Revolution and demonstrating how to use a book cipher.

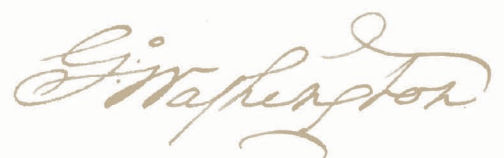
Discussion question:

What did daily life look like in a Revolutionary War encampment? What are some things soldiers did?

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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?

Notes:

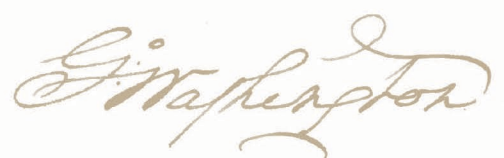
Extra Resources:

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:

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- [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](#)
- [Farm Report](#)
- [Bastille Key](#)

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