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American Legacy

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Torchy Brown, Comic-Strip Star

President Washington’s Slaves

Photo Finds: A Collector’s Treasures

One Hundred Years of Black Resort Life

$2.95
A new tour featuring the lives of slaves at Mount Vernon, George Washington’s plantation, addresses the troubling and paradoxical legacy of America’s early days.

I was in the third grade when I first visited Mount Vernon, George Washington’s Virginia estate, eighteen miles south of Washington, D.C. Mostly I remember playing on the broad, manicured lawn. For my classmates and me, this school trip to an American shrine was no more than an excuse for a long recess.

Certainly on that visit eighteen years ago no one bothered to tell us about the first President’s more than three hundred slaves and the lives they led. I didn’t hear about Sambo Anderson, who in the 1790s sold Washington honey and bought a barrel of flour from him. Nobody mentioned that after a dog had bitten...
Christopher Sheels, Washington's personal servant, the President sent him to Philadelphia for the best rabies treatment available. Nor did I learn that Peter Hardiman, a slave leased from Martha Washington's daughter-in-law, had the important job of breeding horses, which afforded him a certain degree of autonomy. All this was left for a future time.

Purchased from the Washington family by the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association in 1858, George Washington's estate is one of the nation's most popular historic sites. When the question arose in the 1860s of how to deal with the first President's extensive slaveholdings, Mount Vernon's administrators decided to leave the slave quarters standing, and they have continued since then to confront the estate's past. In 1929 the association dedicated a marble tablet "in memory of the many faithful colored servants of the Washington family buried at Mount Vernon from 1760 to 1860." (In plantation parlance the word servants was interchangeable with slaves.) By the 1940s, when archivists made transcripts of Washington's documents relating to his slaves, their stories became more accessible. During the 1950s Mount Vernon archeologists worked to reconstruct the greenhouse slave quarters, which had been destroyed by fire years earlier.

In a sketch made in 1858, children race through the courtyard.

In the spring of 1995, responding to visitor surveys that indicated tremendous interest in the lives of Washington's slaves, the curators introduced a tour called "Slave Life at Mount Vernon," addressing in a straightforward fashion a subject that for two centuries had been a source of embarrassment and confusion. "This new tour is an important addition to our educational programs," says James Reese, Mount Vernon's resident director. "We are committed to showing the true diversity of life on an authentic plantation. We want to communicate Washington's struggle with important social issues such as slavery and to show that even the father of our country did not have ready answers to these problems."

Curiosity about the new program brought me to Mount Vernon one day last summer. Joining other visitors in front of the mansion house near a sign that read SLAVE LIFE TOUR, I wondered if the guide would wear some approximation of a slave's clothing and speak in the voice of a slave. But when Gaye ("Dee") Curlee joined us, she was in a uniform of khaki skirt and white blouse, very much a present-day person leading us through a thirty-minute visit to the past.

Visitor surveys indicated tremendous interest in the lives of George Washington's slaves.

The aim of the tour is to acquaint visitors with individual members of the slave population at Mount Vernon and to show that they had enough stability in their lives to form a community with its own traditions and distinct cultural identity. For years scholars and archeologists have worked to turn up information for exhibits on slavery at the plantation.

Washington took over the estate in 1754, about two years after the death of his elder half-brother. First he leased it from his brother's widow; then, after she died, he owned it. During his tenure Mount Vernon grew from 2,500 to 8,000 acres. (Today 502 acres remain, about 40 of them devoted to the exhibit area.) At Washington's death, in 1799, 316 slaves lived at Mount Vernon, 123 of them belonging to him, 153 to Martha Washington's family, and the remaining 40 leased from a neighbor.

"That was a large number compared with the typical Virginia planter, who owned two or three slaves and farmed about a hundred acres," said Curlee. In fact Washington was the largest slaveholder in Fairfax County, though his holdings were small compared with those of other Virginia planters. "The Carters, their contemporaries, held a thousand slaves," our guide told us.
The Mount Vernon population consisted mainly of second- and third-generation slaves; only a handful are known to have been born in Africa. Of the highly skilled slaves, the men worked as carpenters, masons, plasterers, stablemen, and house servants. Some of the women were also house servants, spinners, and laundresses, but others—more than half—labored in the fields.

At the start of the tour Curlee asked her audience to “try to imagine the narrow green and gravel roadway filled with playing children, who run from houses located where the current administration building sits.” Although it was hard to picture children frolicking under the yoke of slavery, I tried to use the boisterous play of present-day children and the memory of my own childhood visit as substitutes. According to his biographer James Thomas Flexner, by 1799 “Washington’s total holdings rose, almost altogether by natural increase. . . . The most abundant product of the Mount Vernon plantation was, indeed, black children.”

Throughout the tour we often had to let imagination fill in where evidence no longer existed. The slave quarters that are part of the exhibit have no original furniture, but period pieces help tell the story. Woolen blankets cover bunk beds lined with a meager layer of hay. A table is set with metal plates containing plastic fish, eggs, vegetables, and fruits, to convey a typical slave diet, and a large fireplace overlooks a tidy brick floor. Gazing at this immaculate scene, I had to wonder whether it was intended for Washington’s slaves or his honored visitor the Marquis de Lafayette.

The guide explained that house slaves occupied quarters like these, whose recreations were based on a Mount Vernon painting and plantation records. C. J. Pumphrey, a visitor from Maryland, asked if the quarters we were in had been remodeled. He had visited Mount Vernon several years before and was back with two cousins, ages four and seven, to show them how slaves really lived. “This looks more like a Radisson hotel,” he said. “It is a shame that these people [the tourists] don’t see it the way it was. They say, ‘What are blacks complaining about? As slaves they had brick floors, fine china, and oak headboards on their beds.’”

As for the field hands’ quarters, in outbuildings, the testimony of Washington’s own guests is sobering. Julian Ursyn Niemczewicz, a Polish revolutionary and writer, visited Mount Vernon in the 1790s and observed cabins “more miserable than the most miserable of the cottages of our peasants. The husband and wife sleep on a mean pallet, the children on the ground, a very bad fireplace, some utensils for cooking, but in the middle of the poverty some cups and a teapot.” In a letter to a British landowner Washington admitted, “These buildings might not be thought good enough for the workmen or day laborers in your country.”

From the slave quarters we went to the greenhouse and the cobbler’s and blacksmith’s shops, which are close by. The cobbler’s shop had been run by Billy Lee, Washington’s personal servant during the years of the Revolution. Curlee told us, “Once Lee became crippled, he was assigned the important task of repairing shoes.” Why was that so important? “If the slave had no shoes, he wasn’t required to work.” Lee was the only slave freed outright upon Washington’s death, and he received an annuity as well.

Perhaps because the tour’s stated goal is to show the stable underpinnings of slave life at Mount Vernon, about three-quarters of the way through I began to wonder if we were being told that in some way this had been a fairly agreeable experience. All the details about the daily lives of slaves seemed to push the larger questions of the institution of slavery into the distance. We heard that slaves had time to do family chores, garden, hunt, visit friends, engage in storytelling, and even travel. “Washington occasionally gave slaves passes to the horse races in Alexandria,” said Curlee. Washington’s Polish visitor, Niemczewicz, wrote: “A very small garden planted with vegetables was close by, and five or six
the chief cook for many years and traveled to Philadelphia when Washington became President. Hercules, who was independent enough to sell leftovers, wear the finest silks, and get married, eventually escaped to freedom. Washington missed Hercules’s cooking and considered having his former chef apprehended, but in the end he did nothing. At Mount Vernon a foreign visitor asked Hercules’s six-year-old daughter if she missed her father. “Oh! sir,” the girl replied, “I am very glad, because he is free now.”

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What I found most surprising was that I was the only African-American on the tour—on three separate occasions. Black people on other Mount Vernon tours claimed to know nothing of this one. Claretha Timmons, who arrived by bus from Miami, was irritated to discover the slave-life tour only after she had walked through the exit gate. “They never mentioned it on the bus trip,” she told me. “Rather than leave informed, I leave annoyed.” While Mount Vernon can’t be blamed for this, I hope the word will spread.

I did run across one African-American who had taken the tour. David Strickland, a Virginia attorney, found it well organized and researched, but he shared my sense that the picture of slavery had been in some ways prettified. “If they are going to get this close to the historical realities, [they should] not soft-pedal the looks of the slave quarters,” he said.

Strickland and I agreed that we could
have seen more sites that show how the slaves' work contributed to the successful running of the plantation. In fact a separate botanical tour covers the vegetable garden, the work area, the stables, the riverbank where the slaves cast nets, and the overseers' and other slave quarters. Still, as a Mount Vernon representative explained, there is just so much ground you can cover in the thirty minutes allotted to the slave-life tour. Also, guides are instructed to take their cues from the level of enthusiasm of each group, adding stops when interest is high and cutting back when it seems to flag.

I found one of the most interesting places, the museum annex, on my own. It houses a display of cowrie shells, glass beads, and pierced coins that archeologists dug up at several sites. These ornaments possibly came from or were certainly influenced by the African homeland. Archeological digs have led to the surprising discovery that trash from the slave areas didn't particularly differ from trash from the main house. "They were living close to the mansion, and many were house servants and artisans," says Dennis Pogue, a Mount Vernon archeologist. Much of this material could have been handed down from the Washington family." Refuse also reveals a wide variety of animal bones and shells, indicating that slaves were able to add to their daily ration by hunting and fishing. "Their diet was probably better than we thought," says Pogue.

Such finds as a deer femur, a crab claw, a peach pit, a cherry stone, and a watermelon seed reveal more evidence of the slaves' varied diet. Gun flints and lead shot show that slaves were allowed to hunt. In the grounds around the blacksmith shop, archeologists have turned up slave-fashioned implements that are also on exhibit. The main museum contains other items that have come down from the Washington family, including dental instruments that, according to family testimony, were used in "attending Mount Vernon servants." A headband used for measuring hat sizes records the circumference of two slaves' heads. The headband is accompanied by a note in the hand of General Washington: "The whole length of this paper is the circumference of Giles cap measured at the bottom and on the inside being the exact band of the head...the black line drawn across the paper is the exact size of Paris' cap."

I went to the gift shop hoping to pick up a souvenir and add a twenty-minute round trip to the excursion. Our guide did tell us about it, and it is well worth seeking out on one's own. The site was chosen because it was thought that slaves had lived there. Later, using remote sensing equipment, archeologists found other unmarked graves holding unidentified bodies, indicating that this was a slave burial ground. The skeletons were aligned on an east-west axis, perhaps reflecting the slaves' belief that the eastward flowing Potomac River would carry their souls back to Africa.

In 1983 the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association commissioned a second monument to the African-Americans who labored on George Washington's farms. The work of Howard University architecture students, it consists of a granite column rising from three concentric circles incised with the words Love, Hope, and Faith. Unlike its 1929 predecessor, dedicated to the "faithful colored servants" who worked at the plantation, the newer monument carries a straightforward inscription that suggests the direction in which the association is surely moving. It reads, "In memory of the African-Americans who served as slaves at Mount Vernon."