



travel

First president's estate reveals much about the man

Mount Vernon Estate and Garden



A bronze sculpture of George and Martha Washington and their grandchildren is a focal point of the Ford Education Center.

by Gale Horton Gay
Photos by Gale Horton Gay

"I can truly say I had rather be at home at Mount Vernon with a friend or two about me, than to be attended at the seat of government by the officers of State and the representa-

tives of every power in Europe."

- George Washington

At a time when so much attention is focused on the presidency (current and future), it seems fitting to consider a travel destination

devoted to America's first commander in chief.

The Mount Vernon Estate and Gardens in Mount Vernon, Va., is where **George Washington** lived for most of his life. After the death of his half-brother, Washington acquired Mount Vernon. He expanded the plantation and groomed it to be a farm, base for his fishing business and the home he would return to after an eight-year absence due to the American Revolution and a six-year absence while serving as the nation's first president.

Visitors are given nearly free rein to explore the 8,000-acre site with guided tours of Washington's three-story mansion, self tours of upper and lower gardens, pioneer farm and numerous outbuildings such as storehouse, smokehouse, wash house, gardener's house, kitchen, coach house and salt house, to name a few. The structures are furnished with period tools, fixtures and equipment and information plaques detailing the activities that took place there. Livestock—sheep, horses, mules and other farm animals—graze in penned pastures on the property too.

Much of what visitors see is what Washington created or directed to be created as he was quite hands on in developing the property, according to the estate's overseers. Inside the formal dining room of his home, for instance, a guide points out that relief designs of farm tools can be found in the ceiling as Washington was fond of farm life. The fruit

garden and nursery is where Washington grew cherry, apple and pear trees. He also practiced what was considered at the time innovative farming methods such as crop rotation and the use of fertilizers.

The lives of Washington's 316 slaves are explored during slave life tours held three times a day (April through October). Slave quarters as well as a memorial to slaves who are buried on the property are also open to visitors.

Guides stationed at various points on the property provide insightful commentary about Washington and his involvement in the estate. A guide on the mansion's first floor noted that the formal dining room was the room in which Washington received the news that he would be the country's first president, and a second floor guide pointed out that George and **Martha Washington** hosted 677 overnight guests in their home and that the elder statesman died in 1799 in the upstairs bedroom he shared with his wife.

Both George and Martha are buried on the property and tribute ceremonies take place twice daily April through October at their tomb.

Two of the newest buildings on the rolling property with a stunning view of Potomac River are the Ford Orientation Center and the Donald W. Reynolds Museum and Education Center, both opened in 2006. The two



contemporary facilities bring state-of-the-art technologies that enhance the telling of Washington's story and his place in history.

A good way to start one's visit is to take in the 18-minute movie *We Fight to Be Free*, which was shot primarily at Mount Vernon. The film covers defining moments of the French and Indian War, Washington's development as a leader and how he met and married the woman who would become his wife.

Other exhibits worth noting include 23 galleries that focus on chapters in George Washington's life, America's fight for independence and the evolution of Washington's views on slavery; life-size representations of Washington at various points in his life; colonial period fine and decorative arts and there's even a gallery dedicated to Washington's dentures (which were not made of wood).

As there is a good deal of territory to cover at the estate, it's advisable that visitors wear comfortable shoes.

A modern-day food court, gift shop that includes the largest George Washington bookstore in the world and a restaurant with six dining rooms and three fireplaces are also located on the grounds near the front of the property.

Admission is \$6 to \$13, children 5 and younger are free.

Mount Vernon, Va., is located 14 miles from Washington, D.C. and 54 miles from Baltimore, Md.

For more information on Mount Vernon Estate and Gardens, visit www.mountvernon.org and for travel information on visiting Fairfax County, go to www.faxva.com.

If You Go:

By Air: Multiple airlines offer flights daily to Dulles and Reagan airports in Washington, D.C. and Baltimore-Washington International Airport in Baltimore.

Where to Stay: I can recommend the 316-room Crowne Plaza Hotel in McLean, Va., located 25 miles from Mount Vernon and in an area replete with two major shopping malls and not far from other outdoor recreation and historic spots such as Great Falls Park, Claude Moore Colonial Farm and George Washington Memorial Parkway. The hotel has a restaurant, sports bar, indoor pool and fitness center. Visit www.crowneplaza.com.

