

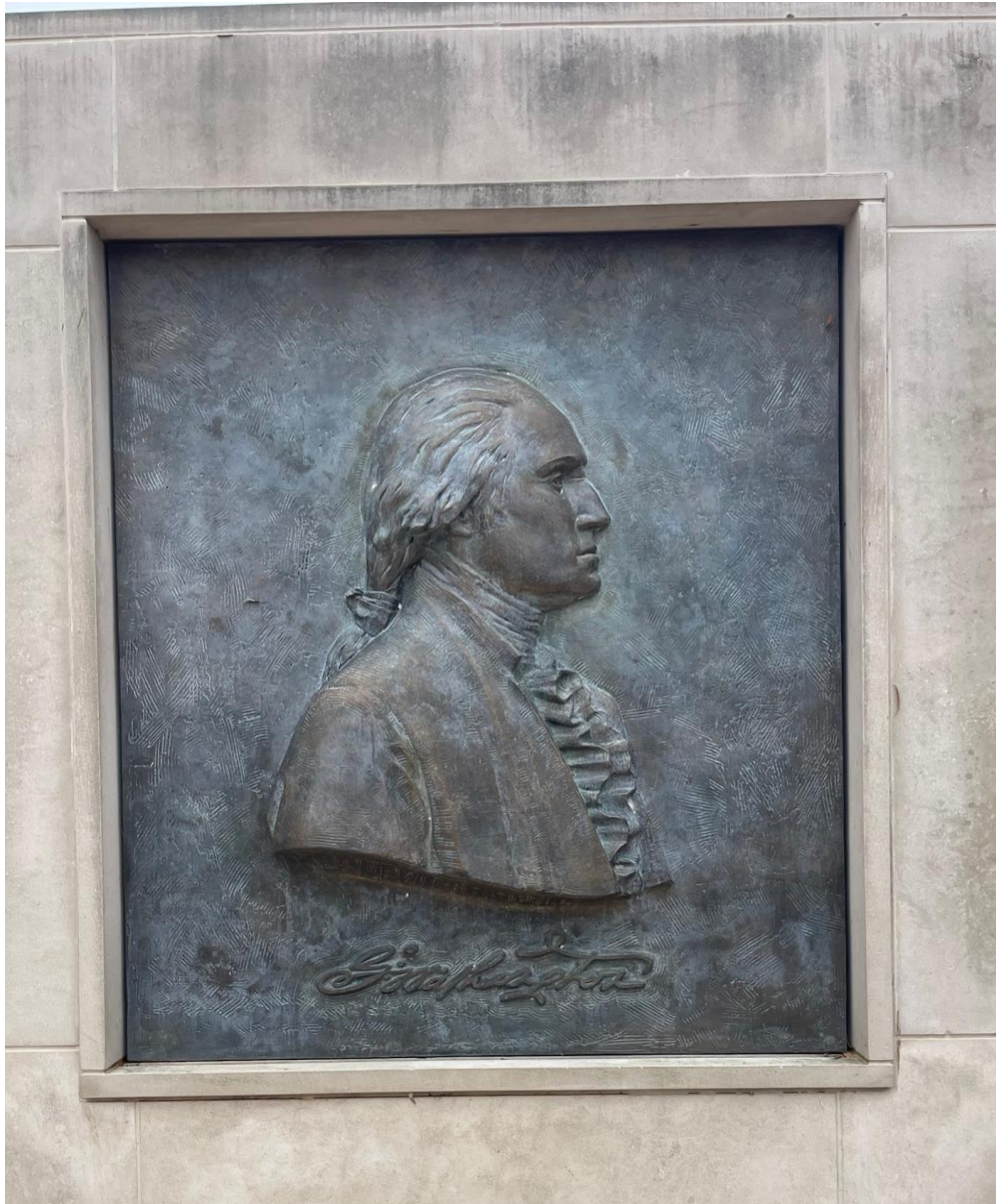
241127 MOUNT VERNON VIRGINIA; ATTRACTION IN TRANSITION



Mount Vernon is well-known to most Americans. We have grown up with the myth of George Washington and his plantation. The setting is picturesque. Situated high over the Potomac river it overlooks the Virginia landscape. Across the river is the national colonial Farm, which is a 220 acre expanse of wilderness. It's correct as is stated at the attraction that the scene from the porch of Mount Vernon is exactly the same now it was in George Washington time. The national colonial Farm was obviously created to preserve this view.



Of course, Mount Vernon is a great place to take children. The perfect age would be between 10 and 15 years old. At that point they've been exposed to American history, the myth of George Washington and will have formed an inquisitive nature which will prepare them for the displays.



If nothing else, George Washington was a complex man. If you read the history of the forming of the republic, there is no doubt that it never would have happened without the personal existence of George Washington. There is no debate that without his leadership, tenacity, and commitment the country would never have been formed.



And there are so many things at the plantation that are strange to us in the 21st-century. One of them is a riding chair. When you look at the contraption, it is in fact a chair that is riding on a coach. You would just imagine someone in 18th century garb, hat, and cape in tow, being driven down a road by horse. I think if you saw this today, it would make you laugh. But in fact back in the day, this was a sign of luxury and wealth. George Washington used this odd contraption to inspect his five farms, which was spread over 8000 acres.





When you first see Mount Vernon it is underwhelming. Today there was rehabilitation of the structure, but that is not why it is so striking. What is amazing is that such a great man has such a small and humble house. When you travel to other countries that have monarchies, pharaohs or Kings as historical government heads of state, the structures and palaces they leave behind are spectacular if not imposing. It is a testament to the United States, that someone of this stature, that was as famous and influential as he was in his own day, would have a house that is so plain.

The out houses and the other structures are of similar architectural finish and design. George Washington must have been a bit vain because he chose to construct his homes with a faux stone block finish. Wood panels

were beveled to look like stone blocks, and these were then painted with fresh paint. Before the paint could dry sand was thrown on the surface and made them look like stone. You could just imagine what a maintenance nightmare this would be as winter and summer, rain and sun would constantly erode and damage the finish. As it does today throughout its long history this finish takes a lot of maintenance.



Inside the home and the outbuildings, the contents are of period collection. There are plenty of examples of mid 18 century colonial life to look at. The collection in general is not that impressive and many of the rooms are empty or nearly devoid of artifacts. It is in fact, underwhelming on the interior as it is surprisingly, so on the exterior. This is not the case with many other colonial residences or attractions that you visit. Some of these are opulently furnished, maintained and equipped. Mount Vernon suffers from the reverse for some reason. It is not clear why it was allowed to deteriorate as it did until 1858 (explained in the museum), nor why the current facility is so sparsely furnished and poorly maintained.

There are tours that can be taken for an extra cost. One of them is the “through my eyes” tour. This involves a period actor leading the visitor around the site and talking about life on the plantation. Today the speaker was a Porter. He was explaining that his job involved working almost 365 days a year. In fact, he said it was almost sure that he worked all the holidays because this is when the Washington family was most likely on the move, or someone was likewise arriving for a visit. The problem we had was obtaining any of these tours as they were all sold out. This was a surprise to me because there were not many people at the site this day.

You can see in these images some of the furnishings. In my opinion, these rooms were somewhat stark and only adequately furnished, but not opulently equipped. You could imagine how much so they would have been in George Washington's day. Again, I don't have a reason or explanation for this, nor was one provided.





This was the overseers cabin. George Washington had five farms and each had its own manager. This manager was in charge of the main estate. His yearly salary was \$133.33 not including amenities. These would have been room and

board, food, transportation, and washing. It's interesting that washing would be listed separately as we learned that it was quite a process. The yearly salary allows you to understand the value of a dollar in the 18th century. This salary would've been \$1500 a year; this is significant later.

Other than the tour of the Porter as described, there were very few if any period actors at the site. There were two ladies that were employed to be blacksmiths. One of them was indeed



working the furnace, but neither one seem to be very animated or interested in what they were doing. You can see the one on the left was barely staying awake and spouted off some wrote memorized description of the activities, and then went back to her resting position.

Overall, I was not that impressed with how the attraction tried to replicate history. One example would've been to have the attraction employees in period dress. But they were not, and the only way you could tell them apart by tourist is that they had identification badges hanging on them or a distinctive shirt with an embroidered Mount Vernon emblem. More could've been done in this regard, but the site has chosen otherwise.



Overseer's Quarters

Because of his extended absences from Washington, George Washington relied on his overseers to help him run the plantation smoothly day-to-day. Each of the overseers had his own quarters and managed the labor, supervised livestock and crops, and submitted weekly reports. In 1799, Mansion House Farm and the surrounding lands were sold to the British. In return, the British agreed to supply the plantation with firewood, and repair fences with mutton. In return, the British received \$133.33 plus "board, bed lod



Slavery. You were constantly and ubiquitously reminded about this aspect of George Washington's colonial life. You could not turn or walk in any direction without being reminded of this. This is fair enough in that slavery was an abomination. But as in most of these colonial attractions in the United States it just is overwhelming. Indeed it has to be talked about, and historically it is a black mark on mankind, but it is not put into context. Nor is the visitor ever exposed to the fact that at this time, it was the norm worldwide and not an American exception. Regardless, it is made clear that George Washington could never have lived the lifestyle he had without indentured servants and slaves.



No mention is made of the 30% of the signers of the declaration of independence who immediately released their slaves. Nor is the movement for abolition which was strong at this

time, put into context.



There is a stark contrast between how the slaves that were affiliated directly with the family lived, and how those that worked in the fields existed. Shown below are the male and female quarters for the family slaves. These are luxurious when compared to how the field slaves lived.



I learned at a tour of a plantation in South Carolina that a slave was sold for astonishing amounts of money even in the 17th and 18th century. Abel bodied young man would've sold

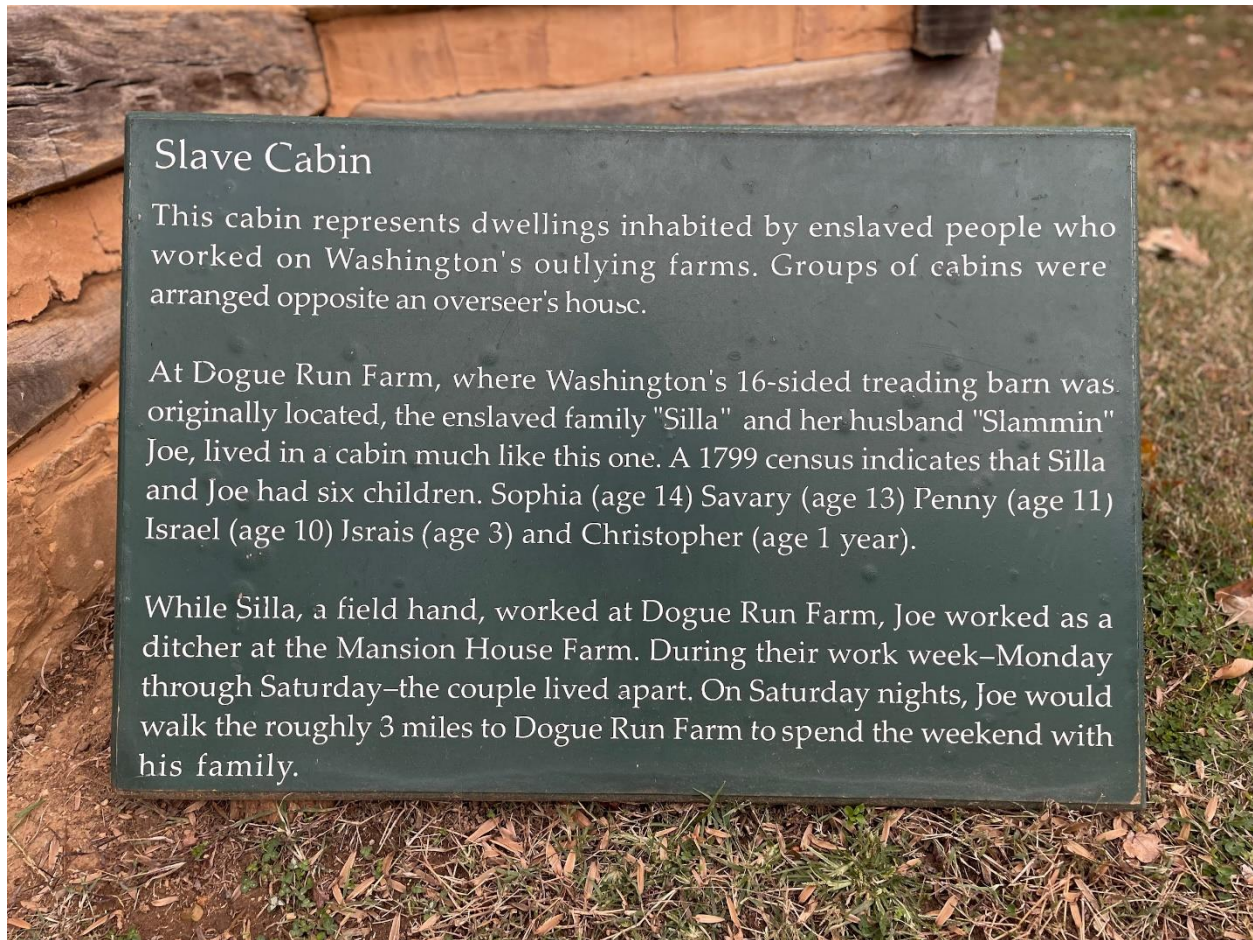
for \$36,000. A young teenage girl even higher going into the \$50,000s of dollars. This amounts seem astonishing until you look at what the white plantation manager earned for George Washington. His salary was \$1500 a year. When extrapolated over a 40 year. This is \$64,000. Therefore, you have to understand that slavery was the insidious purchase of the value of a man's labor over his entire life. You were purchasing this man's labor from his seller for the

value that it would've cost you to pay him. Of course, the slave, or in this case the unwilling employee, was an unwitting partner to a contract that he had no benefit from. It was a insidious and evil system that had to meet an end sooner or later. But it was also a worldwide phenomenon that stretches back to antiquity.



George Washington confirmed in his own words, as listed in one of the placards, that the field slaves quarters were “of their own hand.”. Adding insult to injury, not only were you enslaved as a laborer without salary, but you had to build your own shelter. As we found out in some of the plantations in the Carolinas, you also had to grow your own food. The owner would provide some basics such as flower, salt and meat, but many times this had to be paid for. This is definitely not a type of labor arrangement that makes any sense nor is it humane.

So there is no doubt or debate. Slavery was cruel and inhumane. But sadly, it was normal in the 16th 17th and 18th century. America was not exceptional in this regard other than in its founding documents. It is of interest that George Washington and his entire class were instrumental in ending their way of life when they signed the founding instruments of the American Republic. More of this aspect should be stated in these along with the fact that they as a Class did not have the courage or moral fortitude, as a good number of founders did, to end slavery.



Placards such as this are common at the site. You can stop and even scan some of the QR codes for a self tour. They do tell a good story and explain many of the artifacts or structures that you are looking at. In this case, it tells the life of a slave as he or she would've experienced it living in one of these cabins. On a cold November day you can only imagine.

As stated here, slavery was truly an abomination, and is a black mark on American history. The founders, all of the founders, should've known better, especially when the plain text of the declaration of



independence is read. I believe that they did and I also believe that they knew slavery was an institution, a peculiar institution, that was destined for the ash heap of history. But they were mortal and fallible as all men are and accustomed to their wealth and leisure did not have the courage to release their slaves from bondage. Sadly, they had all the financial assets they needed to reemploy these same men as Freeman. In fact, as Adam Smith later recount in the book The Wealth of Nations, it was far cheaper and more effective to employ a man than to enslave him.

George Washington and his wife Martha are buried at the Mount Vernon historical site. Again, as with the main family structure, you are underwhelmed with the simplicity of his mausoleum. It is very small and plain for such a great man. But I think this speaks to the nature of the Republic that he formed. It would've been unseamly and unacceptable for anyone, especially a founder, to have built an impressive monument to himself. They just were not those types of people. It is a tribute to him and to the country that his burial site is so plain.





I was reminded that George Washington's grave was desecrated twice. They stole his head, or

skull, on two occasions. The site is now

secured with iron grates, and there was

always a guard there during visiting

hours. There was a lady in attendance

during our visit and she was a downer

and sour in my opinion. Again, I did not

see a lot of people that were happy doing

their jobs here. Maybe they just had a

bad day.



I was wondering, as I tour the plantation,

slavery being a constant reminder of all

the economic model used for it

prosperity, what happened to it during

the civil war. During the War years, the

Mount Vernon site was neutral territory. It

was therefore respected as such by both

north and south. But, the owner and

direct descendent of George Washington

was a lieutenant colonel in the

confederate army. This is clearly stated

on the monument where George

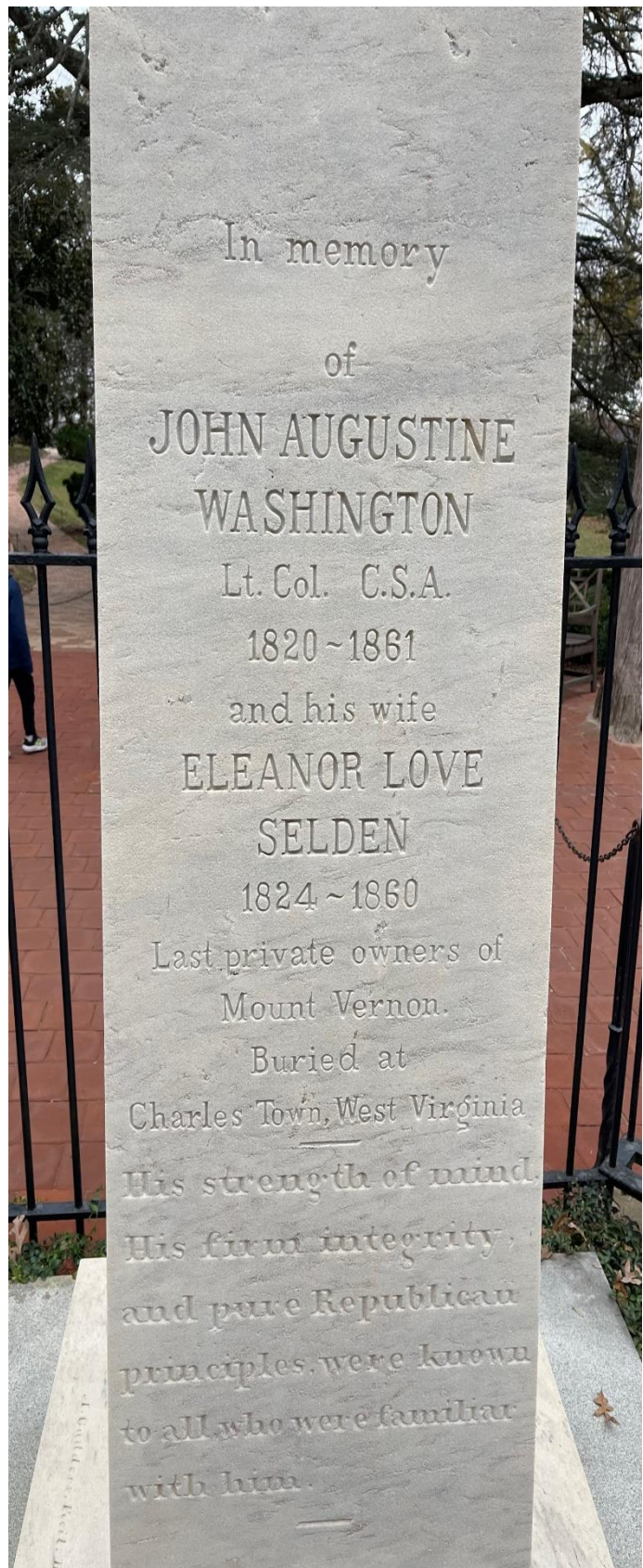
Washington's tomb is located. In this

case, the neutrality of the farm and

plantation should've been called in the

question. Regardless, I am glad that nothing happened to it or that it was not damaged by either union or confederate soldiers.

Mount Vernon is an exceptional and beautiful place. The structures that were built are humble and try to outsize their importance or their construction through architectural sleight-of-hand. They have required constant maintenance, which I think has been under performed. There is a multimillion dollar gift shop, restaurant, and snack facility at the entrance of the park, yet the outbuildings and main structure itself need desperate maintenance. The interiors of the facilities could also be better apportioned, furnished and equipped. I believe there's been a mismatch of interest in how the money is spent. This could be because the Foundation was left the cards that they're playing. It could also be because Mount Vernon is such a popular attraction that no matter what they do people will come. I don't know which is true. All I know is what I see and what I report here.



Regardless, Mount Vernon is a must see and visit destination for any American. They should take their children there to see this site. George Washington is integral to the formation of the republic. Sure he was a slave owner. Of course slavery was an abomination. But slavery does not diminish what he did, who he was, what he stood for and what he accomplished. Hopefully Mount Vernon will continue to be properly maintained and have a glorious future.



THE END