



A Day at Mount Vernon

Intended Grade Level: Elementary School

Lesson Purpose: The student will listen to a story about daily life at George Washington's plantation, Mount Vernon, and recognize the connections between George Washington and his slaves.

Lesson Objectives:

- To compare and contrast life styles at four distinct sites at Mount Vernon.
- To become familiar with the people, places, and objects that were part of 18th century life at Mount Vernon.

National Standards:

NSS-USH.K-4.1 LIVING AND WORKING TOGETHER IN FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES, NOW AND LONG AGO

- Understands family life now and in the past, and family life in various places long ago
- Understands the history of the local community and how communities in North America varied long ago

NSS-USH.K-4.3 THE HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES: DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES AND VALUES AND THE PEOPLE FROM MANY CULTURES WHO CONTRIBUTED TO ITS CULTURAL, ECONOMIC, AND POLITICAL HERITAGE

- Understands how democratic values came to be, and how they have been exemplified by people, events, and symbols
- Understands the causes and nature of movements of large groups of people into and within the United States, now and long ago
- Understands the folklore and other cultural contributions from various regions of the United States and how they helped to form a national heritage

NL-ENG.K-12.1 READING FOR PERSPECTIVE

Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.



Background:

Based upon inventories taken in 1799, the year of Washington's death, there were 316 slaves on the Mount Vernon property, of which 123 were Washington's slaves and 153 were dower slaves belonging to Martha Washington's estate but not to Mrs. Washington herself. Washington also rented about 40 slaves from a neighbor. The slaves worked and lived on five separate farms, with the majority working and living on the plantation's four agriculture farms. Most of the agricultural field workers were women. Of the nearly 90 slaves who lived on the Mansion House farm, which was the seat of the plantation, only about 60 were of working age. The vast majority of the working-age slaves at Mansion House farm were skilled artisans or craftsmen, such as carpenters, blacksmiths, weavers, spinners, and cooks. About 42% of the total Mount Vernon slave population did not work because they were too young, too old, or infirm.

An exacting taskmaster, George Washington expected the Mount Vernon slaves to work hard and produce much. He was often disappointed. He tried both reward and punishment to induce compliance. However, there was no real incentive for slaves to work harder. Slaves resisted slavery through a variety of means from working slowly (or not at all), to theft or breaking of tools, to running away. Slaves were required to work from sunrise to sunset every day of the week except Sunday. This meant a 15-hour workday in the summer.

Many of Washington's slaves were married to dower slaves, and their freedom would inevitably separate families because the dower slaves could not be freed. Nonetheless, Washington made the provision in his will, written the summer before his death in 1799, to immediately free his former manservant, Billy Lee, and the remainder of his slaves upon the death of his wife. However, Mrs. Washington went ahead and freed all of Washington's slaves on January 1, 1801, more than a year before her own death in 1802. George Washington never publicly spoke out against slavery but certainly set an example he hoped others would follow. Of the nine American presidents who owned slaves, Washington was the only one to free his.

Timeframe: Approximately one class session

Procedure:

1. Discuss the background information with your students, making sure they understand what a slave is and that slavery no longer exists in the United States.



2. Review the “Mount Vernon People” (included below) with the class before they begin to read the narrative. The story is divided up by sites on George Washington’s Mount Vernon Estate. Each site description details an average day in the life of an individual who actually lived in the 18th century and was associated with Mount Vernon. While these site descriptions are fictional, they are based on archaeological investigations and information taken from primary documents. Read each of the four site descriptions carefully.

Note: This lesson works well in conjunction with “Discovering Slave Life at Mount Vernon through Archaeology.” While reading the story, have students look for clues as to what might be found in an archaeological excavation 200 years in the future at each site.

3. After reading the story, lead a class discussion about the relationship between the Washington family, their guests, white laborers, and slaves on the Mount Vernon estate. The class should understand the dependence that the Washington family had on their slaves and what daily life entailed for a slave at Mount Vernon.



*This has been adapted from a Jackdaws lesson by Nancy Hayward, Director of Programs,
and Esther White, Director of Archaeology.*



Mount Vernon People

George Washington: Virginia farmer, leader of the American forces during the Revolutionary War, and owner of Mount Vernon since 1761. General Washington is an energetic man with a penchant for rising early in the morning.

Martha Washington: As "first lady" of Mount Vernon, Mrs. Washington oversees the household. She and her two children from a previous marriage came to live at Mount Vernon in 1759, when she married George Washington.

Joshua Brooks: A young man from England who is a guest of the Washingtons at Mount Vernon.

John Bloxham: A white laborer from England who was hired in May 1786 as overseer, or manager, of the farms at Mount Vernon. Bloxham and his family are provided with a place to live at the Mansion House Farm, rations of food, a horse, and a salary of 50 guineas a year. Bloxham and his family provide for themselves and lead a working-class lifestyle that is simple but comfortable.

Peter and Caroline: Married slaves who live in the House for Families. Peter and Caroline share the residence with many of the other 39 adults and 26 children that belong to the Mansion Farm. Peter works in Washington's stables, while Caroline works as a maid in the Mansion House.

Frank: A slave who is butler at the Mansion House.

Lydia: A young slave who works in the fields at River Farm, the largest of the four outlying farms at Mount Vernon. Lydia is strong, healthy, and in the prime of her life. She is the mother of a three-year-old daughter and two older boys.

George: Lydia's husband, a slave and a blacksmith at Mansion House Farm.

Hannah: An old slave who can no longer work the fields. Hannah looks after the children of the slaves who work at River Farm.

Davy: A slave in charge of overseeing the field hands at River Farm and informing them of their duties for the day.



The Overseer's Quarters

John Bloxham's day begins before the sun rises. John works very closely with those slaves in his charge. Today will be spent recording the numbers and condition of the livestock – horses, cows, sheep, and hogs. Bloxham needs updated figures because next week he will be selling some cattle at market in Alexandria. To complete his task, he must visit all five farms and record figures in the pocket diary he carries in his waistcoat (vest). Keeping good records enables him to provide an accurate account for his required weekly report.

John begins at the Mansion House Farm. While counting the livestock, he checks to see that the animals are being properly tended. Two slaves were recently brought over from Muddy Hole Farm and he is not sure that they can perform their new duties. As part of his responsibilities, Bloxham must train slaves do various jobs at the Mansion House Farm. When he finishes his work, he sets out for the next farm to continue his tasks. By the end of the day, he will have finished counting the animals at all five farms.

In the evening, Bloxham returns home for supper. His quarters are small but adequate. The building's dimensions are 16' by 20', with rooms both upstairs and down. The house is built of timber planks and has a shingled roof. Upstairs there are two rope beds. Downstairs, a long wooden table and three roughly hewn chairs occupy the middle of the main room. A wooden bench sits below one of the glass-paned windows. Some iron cooking utensils hang near the brick fireplace. Earthenware plates and bowls are stacked in the small pantry along with a hand-made broom and a few bed linens.

John's wife has cooked their meal in a cast iron kettle. The pork is stewed with vegetables from the garden behind the house. Wheat bread from milled flour has been mixed in a wooden bowl and baked in the brick oven. The food is served in earthenware bowls and eaten with pewter spoons. The children drink cow's milk from stoneware mugs. The adults drink beer from stoneware tankards. A delicious cherry pie has been prepared for dessert. After the meal, Bloxham smokes his clay pipe while his wife sews a bone button onto his shirt.

Later, Bloxham makes his evening rounds. He travels by the slave quarters and past the storehouse and smokehouse. Last week someone broke into the storehouse and removed an iron hammer and chisel, as well as some wooden rakes and leather strapping. He opens the door with his keys and confirms that no mischief has taken place.

Continuing on his way, Bloxham meets a slave named Nat, a blacksmith, who is strolling down the lane. Slaves are expected to keep close to their quarters, but it is



Saturday night, and tomorrow there will be little work. Nat is going to visit his wife, Lucy, at Dogue Run Farm.

John Bloxham finishes his rounds late, near 10:00 p.m. He will be able to sleep in a bit tomorrow. Then he and his family will go to church in the morning. Sunday will pass at a slower pace, but John is never free from responsibilities. An overseer must always be ready to handle any unexpected problem.

Mansion House Slave Quarters — *House for Families*

The House for Families is a two-story building located along the North Lane, off the main circle. It is made of wood with a brick foundation. It has two brick chimneys and glass-paned windows. Many of the people living here are related. Everyone seems to get along well at the House for Families.

The slaves living at Mansion House Farm are mostly skilled workers. Some are spinners, carpenters, stablemen, dairy-maids, or house servants. In comparison to the field slaves who work on the outlying farms, their belongings seem to be of a higher quality. This is probably because they live and work close to the Mansion, and the Washingtons give them hand-me-downs.

But on the down side, the Mansion House Farm slaves lack privacy. They are rarely out of sight of the farm managers and overseers. They are on call 24 hours a day and generally work longer days than the field slaves.

Peter and his wife, Caroline, live in the House for Families. They rise early, well before sun-up, build the fire, and dress for the day. Peter will spend his day overseeing General Washington's stables. He is dressed simply in linen breeches (trousers), cotton shirt, and wool vest. On his shoes he wears new brass buckles — a gift from Caroline, who saved money from selling vegetables at the market in Alexandria.

While they are fixing breakfast, Frank, the butler, who has come over from his little apartment above the kitchen, asks Caroline to hurry because today is a busy day at the Mansion House. There are many guests for the weekend and much to do to get ready for their visit. As a house slave, Frank has a fancier outfit than the skilled workers. His attire is referred to as livery. He wears wool breeches and a linen shirt. The sleeves are fastened with brass cufflinks having glass insets. Over his shirt is a red waistcoat (vest) with shiny brass buttons and fine lace. His outer garment is a fine wool coat bearing the Washington family coat-of-arms. His shoes are of polished black leather with fancy brass buckles. His long hair is neatly pulled back and tied with a ribbon.

Caroline, a housemaid, wears a coarse linen shift under a calico dress. She also wears a pair of glass earrings and a glass-bead necklace. Her hair is neatly combed and



pulled back in a bun. Before she goes to the Mansion, she must get her shoes, which are being fixed by Billy Lee, the cobbler. Her shoe buckle came off yesterday and she cannot dress properly for work without her shoes.

Caroline and Peter have part of their weekly rations for breakfast – a simple meal of corn cakes and salted fish. With it, they drink buttermilk which Kitty, a neighbor who works in the dairy, brought home in a special milk pan. They must hurry, since the sun will soon be rising.

Caroline's first duty at the Mansion House is to light a fire in the master bedroom for Mrs. Washington. General Washington has been up for over an hour, and he usually lights the fire in his study himself. When Mrs. Washington wakes, Caroline will help her dress. Caroline likes this job, except for helping her mistress squeeze into a pair of tight, stiff stays. Caroline is glad she herself does not have to wear stays because she imagines they would make breathing difficult.

Soon the Washingtons join their guests for breakfast. Frank has carefully prepared the table. One of the butler's main duties is to make sure everything is properly placed on the table. He will oversee the waiters and serve the food as it comes from the kitchen. Later he will clean the table when the family and guests are finished.

While the guests are at breakfast, Caroline and the other housemaids, Sally and Molly, clean the rooms and make the beds. So many beds for one house! Luckily, Caroline is in charge of making only four beds.

After breakfast, Caroline and Frank spend the day cleaning the Mansion, polishing silver, arranging plates and glasses, waxing the tables and chairs, filling oil lamps, and replacing the candles. When the afternoon meal begins, Frank must stay on his toes to ensure all the guests are pleased and well-fed. Once the table is cleared, the dishes cleaned, and the furniture moved, Caroline returns to the House for Families to eat dinner.

Peter has waited to eat with Caroline. They dine on salted fish, beans, and cornbread, and enjoy a peach for dessert. Soon it will be winter, and fruit will be scarce. They drink rum from stoneware mugs. The rum is issued to Peter because of his status as supervisor of the stable. Occasionally they have wine, which is stored in green glass bottles.

After they eat, Caroline washes their chipped white plates and stoneware mugs. She dries and puts away their pewter spoons and bone-handled knives. Then she sweeps the dirt from the floor into an old root cellar that has become a trash pit. It would be nice if one day someone else would sweep. There are fifteen other adults present and not one offers to help or to control the dozen children running around.

When Caroline finishes it is late and both she and Peter are tired. They climb into their frame bed with the thin straw mattress and sleep soundly. Tomorrow is



Sunday, but unlike the other slaves, the house slaves will not rest until later that afternoon. Early Sunday mornings are business as usual.

The Mount Vernon Mansion

The Mansion is a 2-1/2 storied frame house made of pine boards that have been treated by a process called “rustication.” The rustication process made the wood look like stone. White paint and sand were applied to boards that had been cut in a stone-like shape. The Mansion’s roof is covered with cypress shingles painted brownish red.

Today is a typically busy day at the Mansion. Many guests are visiting, and a large dinner will be served. General Washington rose at 4:00 a.m. and has been working in his study. He is writing out an order for some things he needs to buy: cloth for the slaves’ clothing, a clock for Mrs. Washington, 25 pounds of almonds in the shell, Madeira wine, and an order of new tableware. A few years ago he ordered queen’s ware and gave some of his old, white salt-glazed stoneware to the slaves in the House for Families. White salt glaze had gone out of style, and queen’s ware had become the most popular tableware in England. Washington's everyday tableware is now blue and white porcelain from China.

Breakfast in the Mansion is served promptly at 7:00 a.m. General Washington joins his family and guests for a meal of hoecakes (cornmeal pancakes) served with honey and butter, ham, cold corned beef, cold chicken, red herring, cold mutton, green tea, coffee, and chocolate. Then he is off to inspect his five farms, and Mrs. Washington begins her day's work supervising the household.

Joshua Brooks, a guest at Mount Vernon, decides to stroll through the gardens that General Washington spoke of the evening before. The Upper Garden has boxwood hedges, flowers, and fruit trees. The Lower Garden supplies fruit and vegetables for the kitchen, including cauliflower, lima beans, peas, and melons.

Upon his return, Mr. Brooks peeks into a building south of the Mansion. Wonderful smells are wafting outside, and he realizes it must be the kitchen. The meal being prepared includes a leg of boiled pork, goose, roast beef, cold round boiled beef, mutton chops, fried tripe, hominy, cabbage, potatoes, onions, pickles, and rolls. For dessert there will be pies, fruit tarts, apples, raisins, and two kinds of nuts. All this will be served with cider, beer, and Madeira wine. As Mr. Brooks peers into the busy kitchen, one of the slaves empties the slop bucket full of food scraps and trash into the kitchen yard.

Mr. Brooks returns to the Mansion and joins other guests on the Piazza, the porch overlooking the Potomac River. Soon it is time to dress for dinner which will be served at 3:00 p.m. Mr. Brooks returns to his small but comfortable room on the second



floor. The walls of the room are painted white with blue trim around the glass windows. A small chest made of walnut stands against a wall. Atop the chest is a small brass candle holder and a marble game called "Nine-man Morris." In the corners sit Windsor chairs, with seat cushion covers that match the bedspread. The bed is narrow but long and covered with a thick feather mattress. A small corner fireplace is tended throughout the day by the house slaves.

Dressing for dinner requires formal clothing. Joshua puts on silk breeches, a fine linen dress shirt, a blue waistcoat with gilt buttons, and a black velvet dress coat with glass buttons. He checks his pocket watch that is secured to his waistcoat by a watch fob and chain. Joshua quickly slips on silk stockings and polished black leather shoes with silver-covered brass buckles before rushing downstairs for dinner.

Dinner is served in the large dining room, which is painted a vivid green and covered with paintings. Porcelain urns line the marble fireplace mantel. The meal is laid out grandly for twelve. Each place setting has Chinese blue and white porcelain, delicate wine glasses, and silver utensils.

After dinner, Mrs. Washington, her grandchildren, and their guests retire to the parlor for music and conversation. General Washington returns to his study to write letters until it is time for tea. At six o'clock he rejoins his family and guests for tea, bread, cold meats and tarts.

Joshua Brooks must leave early the next morning. After taking one last look at the Potomac River, he thanks his hosts and retires to his room for the evening. Mr. Brooks has enjoyed a wonderful stay at Mount Vernon and hopes to return someday.

Outlying Farms — Slaves' Quarters

Most of the slaves at Mount Vernon plantation live on the four outlying farms. Their chief duty on these farms is to tend the fields. An overseer lives at each farm to ensure that the work is done. Unlike the House for Families, where slaves live together, the slaves at outlying farms live in smaller structures that they build themselves. They work long hours, from dawn until dusk, and sometimes longer during the harvest. We will spend the day at River Farm, the largest of the four outlying farms.

The morning begins early for the slaves at River Farm. Lydia, a young mother, prepares for her day in the fields. It is harvest time and she may have to work past sunset. Lydia is a strong, healthy woman, a much needed asset in the fields. More than half of the field hands are women between 17 and 40 years old.

Lydia is running behind and must dress quickly. She wore her shift to bed the night before so she only has to put on her petticoat. Since it is a warm day, she decides



to go without shoes. As she leaves, Lydia grabs a cold hoecake from last night's meal to eat on her way.

Lydia takes her three-year-old daughter to old Hannah, a slave who can no longer work the fields. Some women take their infants into the field, but Lydia's daughter is too old now. Her two sons are old enough to look after themselves and do chores around the house. Lydia expects them to chop wood for the fire and feed the chickens. She knows that the oldest will have to start working for General Washington in the next year or so. She hopes that he will stay on River Farm.

As she reaches the field, the sun is just beginning to rise. Davy, the overseer and a slave himself, assembles the field hands to inform them of their day's duties. Since it is harvest, additional slaves have come from Mansion House Farm to help. Lydia hopes one of them is her husband George, a blacksmith, but unfortunately he is not among them.

Lydia is assigned to cut and pile corn stalks. The fall sun is hot and the work is slow. She is tired, but it is Saturday and she looks forward to George's visit tonight. As the mid-morning meal approaches, Davy tells Lydia that her daughter has taken ill, and she can go to her.

Lydia leaves the field, worried about her daughter and anxious to return to her small cabin. George and Lydia built the cabin in the early spring with the help of friends. It is a small, one room log house with the spaces between the logs filled with mud. The wooden chimney is made of stacks of wood, supporting by a long stick, that lean away from the house. In case of fire, the stick can be pulled away and the chimney will fall to the ground, away from the house. Two small windows covered with shutters offer the only light into the cabin. The fire keeps the inside of the house dark and smoky.

Lydia has few belongings — a pallet bed, a small wooden table, a bench, a chair, and a wooden stool. All the furniture is made of rough pine, and the floor is bare packed earth. A cast-iron pot sits by the fireplace with a large dipper made from a gourd. Lydia's clean clothes, the newest of the two sets of clothing she receives each year, hang from a peg on the wall alongside her daughter's.

Lydia must wait until Davy returns from the day's work to ask him to send for Dr. Craik. Perhaps by then her daughter's fever will break. In the meantime, Lydia decides to prepare a good stew for her family's evening meal. Next to the house is a small garden where she grows peas, squash, melons, beans, and yams. She uses this food to add some variety to her rationed diet of cornmeal and salted fish. She is lucky today though, because she has meat for the stew. She adds the squirrel meat that her neighbor, Johnny, gave her yesterday. Tonight they will have quite a feast. Lydia needs to make another colonoware bowl to replace the one she broke last week. It now lies in the cabin's yard in pieces.



GW

Lydia hopes that George will bring some rum tonight. The last time George visited he brought Lydia an iron hoe, which makes tending her garden much easier. George was allowed to go into town on Tuesday and bought himself a new clay pipe. Maybe he had some extra money for something special for her or the children.

Twilight falls and the field hands return. Lydia's daughter appears to be feeling better. Soon Joe arrives from the Mansion with some bad news. George has not been producing quality work so Mr. Bloxham will not allow him to travel. Lydia is upset, but she decides to invite her neighbors, Johnny and Esther, to join her for stew. After supper, some of the men play marbles and Johnny plays music on the jaw harp. As everyone relaxes after a long Saturday in the fields, they sigh with relief that tomorrow is a day of rest.