



An Open Home: Eighteenth Century Visitors at Mount Vernon

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In today's world of security checkpoints and secret service it is difficult to imagine a time when anyone could be welcomed into the home of a United States president without an invitation. But in the eighteenth century, Americans opened their homes to travelers and visitors and prominent figures like George Washington were no exception. Conversely, Washington attracted numerous visitors because of his position as a public figure and because of his generosity and adherence to southern hospitality, displayed in the gracious manner in which he received his guests. During Washington's lifetime, and even after his death, his home at Mount Vernon was a revolving door of family, friends, acquaintances, and strangers. The visitors recorded their experiences at Mount Vernon in diaries and letters to friends; from these accounts one can get a glimpse of what it was like to be a guest in the home of the first president.

In his diary, George Washington recorded the names of dinner guests and overnight guests whenever he could. Based on these records, historians have compiled data on the number of visitors per year. Even before Washington gained notoriety as the Commander in Chief during the Revolutionary War, Mount Vernon had become familiar with hosting many visitors. As Mary Thompson calculates, in 1768 there were



dinner guests 82 days out of 291 days for which there are records, roughly 28% of the time. In the same year, overnight guests stayed at Mount Vernon 130 of the 291 recorded days (45%). By 1774, these numbers increased to the presence of dinner guests on 136 of 207 recorded days (66%) and overnight guests on 125 of the 207 days (61%).¹ This increase in percentages reflect a fact that the historians Robert and Lee Dalzell determined: in April of 1774, “four or five guests joined the Washingtons every time they sat down to dinner.”² They add that in that month, George and Martha Washington ate at home by themselves on only three evenings.

After the war, the Washingtons hosted guests more frequently. In 1785 they had dinner guests on 225 days of 365 (64%). Guests stayed overnight in 1785 on 235 of 365 days (65%).³ These percentages seem similar to those before the war in 1774 but one should note that the total number of days for which there are records is much higher in 1785; the percentage is derived from 365 days rather than the 207 available days in 1774. The percentages of days in which dinner and overnight guests came to Mount Vernon after Washington’s presidency remained around 65%, as in the years after the Revolutionary War. However, the numbers of guests were much higher. “In terms of total numbers, in 1798, the Washingtons had at least 656 guests for dinner and at least

¹ Mary Thompson. “That Hospitable Mansion: Hospitality at George Washington’s Mount Vernon.” November 7, 2003-November 24, 2004. < <http://www.mountvernon.org/pdf/Foodways-Hospitality11.pdf>>. 12.

² Robert F. Dalzell Jr. and Lee Baldwin Dalzell. George Washington’s Mount Vernon: At Home in Revolutionary America. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). 192.

³ Mary Thompson. “That Hospitable Mansion.” 12.



677 overnight guests with them at Mount Vernon.”⁴ Thus, Mount Vernon seemed to be constantly entertaining outsiders.

There were several categories of visitors to Mount Vernon including family, friends, business acquaintances, and admirers of Washington. Extended family members from the Dandridge, Custis, Washington, and other families would visit Mount Vernon often, especially since many family members lived in the area. The Bassett family, related to the Washingtons through Martha’s sister, repeatedly visited. When Martha’s sister, Anna Maria Dandridge Bassett, died in 1777 leaving her daughter Fanny motherless, Martha wrote to Fanny’s father, Burwell, to have Fanny live with the Washingtons. She wrote, “my dear sister in her life time often mentioned my taking my dear Fanny if she should be taken before she grew up – If you will lett her come to live with me, I will with the greatest plasure take her and be a parent and mother to her as long as I live.”⁵ Fanny, whose proper name was Frances, moved into Mount Vernon in 1784 where she met and later married Washington’s nephew, George Augustine Washington.

Similar to their familial guests, the Washingtons’ closest friends, and therefore most frequent visitors, lived in the area. Two other prominent Virginia families were the Lees and the Fairfaxes. Members of both often came to Mount Vernon.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Martha Washington to Burwell Bassett. December 22, 1777. “Worthy Partner:” The Papers of Martha Washington. Compiled by Joseph E. Fields. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994). 175.



Washington's closest friends were always welcomed in his home; such is the case of the Marquis de Lafayette. Many historians refer to the opening lines of Washington's letter to Lafayette on February 1, 1784, in which he proclaimed his retirement from public affairs to "the shadow of my own vine and my own fig tree."⁶ However, the end of this letter is more revealing in terms of Washington's friendship and hospitality. After inviting him to visit, Washington elaborates, "I have often told you, & I repeat it again, that no man could receive you in them [wishes for Lafayette's visit] with more friendship & affection than I should do."⁷ Washington ensured that one of his closest friends knew they were welcome at Mount Vernon.

The visit of the Marquis de Lafayette's son, George Washington Motier Lafayette, in 1797 provides evidence of the extent to which Washington embraced his friends as guests. The Marquis de Lafayette was captured and imprisoned in Austria after he attempted to flee the Jacobins during the French Revolution. When his family escaped France, young George Washington Motier Lafayette went to America. He arrived in Philadelphia in 1797 and left the city with Washington for Mount Vernon at the close of his final term as president. In a letter to Comte Gabriel-Mathieu Dumas, Washington wrote, "His [the Marquis de Lafayette's] son (with a Mr Frestal,⁸ who appears to have been his Mentor [tutor]) are, and have been residents in my family since their arrival in

⁶ George Washington to Lafayette. February 1, 1784. The Papers of George Washington, Confederation Series. 1:87.

⁷ *Ibid* 1: 89.

⁸ Washington is referring to Felix Frestel.



this country...and a modest, sensible, & well disposed youth he is.”⁹ Young Lafayette and his tutor stayed from April 1797 until the following October, when they returned to France, hoping to reunite with Lafayette’s family. Washington extended his hospitality from his good friend Lafayette to his son, who spent a considerable amount of time at Mount Vernon. Interestingly, when Washington wrote to young Lafayette a few months later, his manner was much like that of a parent relaying information about a child’s hometown after that child has moved away. Washington wrote of the weather and the ice on the rivers and creeks and also of news about the family and neighbors.¹⁰ In being a guest for such a long period, young Lafayette’s reception became equal to that of family members.

In addition to family and friends, business acquaintances regularly visited to discuss military or political matters. Perhaps the most important business meeting at Mount Vernon took place on April 14, 1789, when Charles Thomson, the secretary of the Confederation Congress, arrived to inform Washington of his election to the presidency. At the meeting, Thomson delivered an address in which he stated, “I have now Sir to inform you that the proofs you have given of your patriotism and of your readiness to sacrifice domestic ease and private enjoyments to preserve the liberty...did not permit the two houses to harbour a doubt of your undertaking this great this

⁹ George Washington to Dumas. June 24, 1797. The Papers of George Washington, Retirement Series 1:204.

¹⁰ George Washington to George Washington Motier Lafayette. December 5, 1797 The Papers of George Washington, Retirement Series. 1:505.



important Office.”¹¹ In Washington’s affirmative reply he said, “I cannot find myself at liberty to delay my Journey... [I] shall be happy in the pleasure of your company. For you will permit me to say that it was a peculiar gratification to have received the communication from you.”¹² This last comment likely refers to a previous relationship between the two men, but it could also be a reflection on Thomson as a guest at Mount Vernon. Thomson only visited once, in which he spent the night and left the following morning with Washington. The importance of his visit is seen clearly through an exaggerated, retrospective account by Washington’s step-grandson and adopted son, George Washington Parke Custis. Insinuating that Thomson visited many times, he mistakenly recalled that Thomson was among Mount Vernon’s preferred guests: “The tall attenuated form, the simple yet dignified manners of Secretary Thomson, made him a most favored guest at a board where had been welcomed many of the wise, the good, the brave, and renowned.”¹³ Thomson brought good news with him and the evening was likely enjoyable for all, but his status as a most favored guest is inaccurate.

All visitors were welcome at Mount Vernon, whether Washington knew them or not and sometimes strangers came to him with their business matters because of his influence in politics. Another well-known meeting occurred in May of 1785. If visitors

¹¹ Address by Charles Thomson. April 14, 1789. *The Papers of George Washington, Presidential Series*. 14 volumes to date. Edited by W.W. Abbot and Dorothy Twohig. (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1987-2008). 2:55.

¹² Address to Charles Thomson. April 14, 1789. *The Papers of George Washington, Presidential Series*. 2:56.

¹³ George Washington Parke Custis. *Recollections and Private Memoirs of Washington*. (Washington, DC: Printed by William H. Moore, 1859). 71.



had never met Washington, they usually arrived with a letter of introduction from one of Washington's contacts. In the meeting on May 26, 1785, which historians interested in Washington's perspective on slavery commonly refer to, Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury visited with an introduction from General Daniel Roberdeau, who knew Washington through his work in the Revolutionary War and in the Continental Congress. Because of this connection, Washington had been expecting the two English, Methodist preachers the previous day.¹⁴ In the meeting, Coke and Asbury asked Washington to sign a petition to emancipate the slaves. According to Coke, Washington responded, "that he was of our sentiments, and had signified his thoughts on the subject to most of the great men of the State [but] he did not see it proper to sign the petition."¹⁵ Coke and Asbury were invited to stay overnight at Mount Vernon, which is a testament to Washington's hospitality, but they could not, as they had to continue on with their business.

As Washington's prominence increased, many visitors at Mount Vernon were simply admirers who wanted to see him and his home. In 1785, two different artists came to portray Washington and his family. In April, Washington noted in his diary,

¹⁴ Diary entry for May 25, 1785. *The Diaries of George Washington*. 6 volumes. edited by Donald Jackson and Dorothy Twohig. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976-1979). 4:145.

¹⁵ John A. Vickers, ed. *The Journals of Dr. Thomas Coke*. (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, an Imprint of Abingdon Press, 2005). 63. See Also: Elmer T. Clark, ed. *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*. 3 volumes. (London: Epworth Press and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958). 1:489.



“To dinner Mr. Pine¹⁶ a pretty eminent Portrait, & Historian Painter arrived in order to take my picture from the life.”¹⁷ Pine was a well-known painter and more than one person had recommended him to Washington. One month after Pine’s visit, Washington wrote to Francis Hopkinson confirming Hopkinson’s (and others’) praises for Pine: “an Artist of acknowledged eminence” and “one who had discovered a friendly disposition towards this Country.”¹⁸ In October, Jean Antoine Houdon arrived after the Washingtons had retired to bed.¹⁹ Houdon had been sent from Paris by Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson to mold a bust of Washington. Jefferson, the American minister to France, had written, “I sent for him [Houdon] & had some conversation with him on the subject. he thinks it cannot be perfectly done from a picture, & is so enthusiastically fond of being the executor of this work that he offers to go himself to America for the purpose of forming your bust from the life.”²⁰ Houdon’s bust has survived and is on display at the Mount Vernon Estate. These two artists were among the best of their time and both were eager to personally visit Washington at Mount Vernon.

Another artistic admirer that went to Mount Vernon was John Searson. Searson was a semi-successful writer in the eighteenth century. In August and September of

¹⁶ Washington is referring to Robert Edge Pine (1730-1788).

¹⁷ Diary entry for April 28, 1785. The Diaries of George Washington. 4:129-130.

¹⁸ George Washington to Francis Hopkinson. The Papers of George Washington, Confederation Series. 2:562.

¹⁹ Diary entry for October 2, 1785. The Diaries of George Washington. 4:200.

²⁰ Thomas Jefferson to George Washington. The Papers of George Washington, Confederation Series. 2: 177.



1797 he and Washington corresponded briefly – Searson was seeking financial or career aid from Washington.²¹ In April 1799, Searson wrote to Washington again requesting, “As I am not so near Mount Vernon, I hope in a little time to do my Self the Honor of waiting on your Excellency, so as to Obtain an Adequate Idea of Mount-Vernon, and should I return to Europe, Publish a Poem on it there.”²² On May 15, 1799 Searson went to Mount Vernon.²³ In 1800, he published a small book of poems. The book included short poems on Georgetown and Alexandria, but its main focus was a euphoric 372-line poem for which the book was named: “Mount Vernon, Being the Seat of his Excellency George Washington, in the State of Virginia.”²⁴

In addition to artistic admirer of Washington, some visitors came because they respected Washington’s inclination towards agricultural and engineering innovations. In 1779, Philip Mazzei communicated with Washington about his ideas on implementing vineyards in Virginia to produce wine as well as experimenting with growing olives and lemons.²⁵ Washington replied with an interest in Mazzei’s account of his farming efforts and “a safe return to your adopted Country, in which & rural life I

²¹ John Searson to George Washington, August 2, 1797; George Washington to John Searson, August 20, 1797; John Searson to George Washington, September 13, 1797. The Papers of George Washington, Retirement Series. 1: 283, 311, 347, respectively.

²² John Searson to George Washington, April 18, 1799. The Papers of George Washington, Retirement Series. 3:485-486.

²³ Diary entry for May 15, 1799. The Diaries of George Washington. 6:348.

²⁴ John Searson. Mount Vernon: A Poem. (Philadelphia: Printed for the Author by Fowell, 1800).

²⁵ Philip Mazzei to George Washington, January 27, 1779. Philip Mazzei: Selected Writings and Correspondence. ed by Margherita Marchione. (Italy: Casa di Risparmi e Depositi di Prato, 1983) vol 1. 141.



should be happy to meet you.”²⁶ Six years later, Mazzei visited Mount Vernon. He only stayed for breakfast, but one can imagine Mazzei and Washington discussing their agricultural experiments.²⁷

Another visitor in 1785 was interested in Washington’s curiosities for innovation. Washington noted in his diary, “In the Evening a Mr. Jno. [John] Fitch came in, to propose a draft & Model of a Machine for promoting Navigation, by means of a Steam.”²⁸ The editors of Washington’s diary include a small illustration of the proposed steamboat. The caption notes that “A plan of one of John Fitch’s early steamboats appeared in this December 1786 issue of *Columbian Magazine*, which Washington had in his library.”²⁹ Fitch’s idea must have intrigued Washington because he saved the magazine article, but he favored another inventor, James Rumsey who was working on the Potomac.

Despite the quantity and variety of visitors, Washington stuck to a rigid schedule that did not allow much time to spend with guests. George Washington Parke Custis outlined Washington’s average day. Washington would wake up one to two hours before sunrise during the winter or at sunrise in the summers; around four o’clock in the morning. He would spend his time until daybreak in his library and then his valet, Billy Lee would comb his hair and Washington would shave, and dress. At sunrise he

²⁶ George Washington to Philip Mazzei. July 1, 1779. Philip Mazzei. 155.

²⁷ Diary entry from May 16, 1785. The Diaries of George Washington. 4: 140.

²⁸ Diary Entry for November 4, 1785. The Diaries of George Washington. 4:218.

²⁹ Ibid.



visited and inspected the stables. Washington's breakfast meal was the same every day: Indian cakes, honey and tea. Washington rode ten to fifteen miles per day around his property checking up on the status of his farms and fishery. In the winter, if the weather was too bad for riding he exercised by walking for an hour on the portico. Around 2:30 or 2:45pm Washington returned to the mansion where he would wash and dress for the 3:00pm dinner. He ate "heartily," as would be expected of a farmer, rarely ate dessert, and had about four glasses of Madeira wine. After the meal, Washington usually returned to his study. At night he joined the family at the "tea-table" for supper, but he would only have a single cup of tea. At exactly 9:00pm, as many guests record, Washington retired to bed.³⁰

Because of his strict adherence to schedule, Martha Washington usually took over the hostess position of entertaining guests. Not one visitor remarked negatively on Martha's entertaining abilities, especially her captivating conversation. Edmund Pendleton, a Virginian politician, observed in 1774:

I was much pleased with Mrs. Washington and her spirit. She seemed ready to make any sacrifice and was cheerful though I knew she felt anxious. She talked like a Spartan mother to her son on going to battle. 'I hope you will stand firm - I know George will,' she said. The dear little woman was busy from morning until night with domestic duties, but she gave us much time in conversation and affording us entertainment. When

³⁰ George Washington Parke Custis. [Recollections and Private Memoirs.](#)



we set off in the morning, she stood in the door and cheered us with the good words, 'God be with you gentlemen.'³¹

In a letter to her sister in which she describes her visit to Mount Vernon, Eliza Ambler [Mrs. Edward] Carrington provides one reason as to why Martha Washington was so agreeable, "the extensive knowledge she has gained in this general intercourse with persons from all parts of the world has made her a most interesting companion, & having a vastly retentive memory, she presents an entire history of half a century."³² With the constant influx of visitors, the hostess had to firmly manage the servants and staff. In a letter to a family friend, she inquired of the availability of a good cook, sternly but politely explaining "The person we brought from thence is totally inadequate to the purpose for which he was employed. He possesses, it is true, some valuable properties, for I believe he is thoroughly honest, sober and carefull, is obliging in the extreme, but he knows nothing of cooking - arranging a table - or servants."³³

When not in Martha or George Washington's care, guests had to occupy and entertain themselves. Many of the visitors' accounts do not detail activities at the mansion, simply their impressions of the estate and its owners. In 1798, Polish traveler, Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz stayed for over ten days, which afforded him the time to

³¹ Edmund Pendleton to _____. September 1774. *The Letters and Papers of Edmund Pendleton: 1734-1803*. 2 volumes. Ed. by David John Mays. (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1967). 1:98.

³² Mrs. Edward Carrington. "A Visit to Mount Vernon—A Letter of Mrs. Edward Carrington to her Sister, Mrs. George Fisher." *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Second Series, Vol. 18. No. 2 (April, 1938). 201. See Also: Jean B. Lee, ed. *Experiencing Mount Vernon: Eyewitness Accounts, 1784-1865*. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006). 88-93.

³³ Martha Washington to Mrs. Elizabeth Powel. May 1, 1797. *Worthy Partner*. 301.



carefully record many details of the property.³⁴ He described the long, woody road to the house and his brief meeting with the Washingtons before dinner. Niemcewicz detailed the entry hall that lead to the piazza and contains the key to the Bastille; the parlor with various paintings including Charles Wilson Peale's early military portrait of Washington; the new salon with the white marble chimneypiece and bas-reliefs; another parlor with Nelly Custis's harpsichord; the dining room, first-floor bedroom and library; and the open porticos that look out "on perhaps the most beautiful view in the world."³⁵ He then depicted the gardens and surrounding nature in an informative, but inflated style.

Not all visitors were impressed by Washington's "country residence," as Frenchman Claude Blanchard called it.³⁶ Italian traveler, Luigi Castiglioni liked Mount Vernon, but illustrated it in simplistic terms such as "undistinguished," "delightful," and "charming," much like how one would describe a dollhouse.³⁷ Pierre-Etienne Duponceau, aide-de-camp to General Frederick Steuben during the Revolutionary War, recorded the Baron's impression of Mount Vernon, "The external appearance of the mansion did not strike the Baron very favourably 'if' said he 'Washington were not a better general than he was an architect the affairs of America would be in a very bad

³⁴ The following is summarized from: Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz. "Acute Observations: From Domestic Pursuits to Concern for the Nation." *Experiencing Mount Vernon*. 69-88.

³⁵ Ibid 72.

³⁶ Gilbert Chinard, ed. *George Washington as the French Knew Him*. (New York: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1940). 67.

³⁷ Luigi Castiglioni. *Viaggio: Travels in the United States of North America 1785-87*. Translated and edited by Antonio Pace. (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1983). 113.



condition.”³⁸ These Europeans were used to the extraordinarily grand estates of their aristocracy and in comparison, the Virginia plantation understandably pales.

These impressions of Mount Vernon were probably so abundant because exploring the property was the only activity one could do alone. Often the visitor would walk around the land by himself, and view the scenery or the working hands at the farms. In 1799, Joshua Brookes, a young English businessman, with Samuel Campbell and Robert Campbell, noted, “We amused ourselves with viewing negroes at work at the back of the house in leveling the ground.”³⁹ If visitors stayed for an extended period of time or were particularly close to Washington, he escorted them around and gave them a tour. In 1787, Samuel Powel (the mayor of Philadelphia from 1775-1776 and 1789-1790) and his wife Elizabeth stayed at Mount Vernon and one day, “After Breakfast I rode with the General over several of his Farms. Mrs. Washington & Mrs. Powel accompanied us to the Mill.”⁴⁰ Washington then discussed his crops and farm with Powel. New Englander Elkanah Watson expressed an interest to Washington in American canals. As a result when he was leaving he changed his route: “At his [Washington’s] suggestion I proceeded up the southern shore of the river, twenty-two miles from Alexandria.”⁴¹ Washington would not have traveled that far off his

³⁸ Gilbert Chinard, ed. *George Washington as the French Knew Him*. 18.

³⁹ Joshua Brookes. “A Dinner at Mount Vernon.” *New York Historical Society Quarterly*. Vol. 31. No. 2. (April 1947). 72-85.

⁴⁰ Samuel Powel. “A Model for the Nation.” *Experiencing Mount Vernon*. 52.

⁴¹ Elkanah Watson. “Two of the Richest Days of My Life.” *Experiencing Mount Vernon*. 25.



property to show a guest around, but his advice illustrates an invested interest in his visitors.

George Washington Parke Custis explained another way that a visitor could pass time: “if there were guests, and it was seldom otherwise, books and papers were offered for their amusement.”⁴² Washington had an extensive library and subscribed to numerous newspapers and although guests did not spend time in Washington’s study it probable that he would share what he was reading and learning.

Before becoming a household name during the Revolutionary War, Washington had a bit more free time not only because of fewer guests, but also because he did not have as much correspondence. During this time Washington enjoyed fishing and fox-hunting. He rarely went fox-hunting alone, therefore guests during this period would hunt with him and then enjoy dinner at the mansion. In 1768, Washington recorded that he and his guests went fox-hunting forty times – around five times per month, with the exception of late May, June, and July when he was harvesting his wheat crop.⁴³ His regular hunting companions were Capt. Thomas Posey, Lund Washington, Robert Alexander, Col. William Fairfax, and Lawrence Washington. By 1785, Washington did not have the time to hunt anymore. He returned from the Revolutionary War to find that his farms had not been maintained to his standards and he immersed himself in rehabilitating them. During the entire year he went fox-hunting only seven times.

⁴² George Washington Parke Custis. Recollections and Private Memoirs. 6.

⁴³ The Diaries of George Washington. 1:30-118.



These diary entries were more descriptive and lengthy than those from 1768, when fox-hunting was a daily occurrence. Perhaps Washington took pleasure in detailing the hunts and was trying to make the most of the time he had left to hunt. Early guests at Mount Vernon enjoyed more personal time with Washington pursuing an activity that he enjoyed.

When Washington could not spend an entire day with his visitors because of work and routine, the only time that someone could have to converse with him was at dinner. It is difficult to determine whether dinner parties at Mount Vernon could be labeled extravagant or not. The Washingtons ate much earlier than Americans today, and as the major meal of the day, it was fitting that they served multiple proteins and numerous side dishes. Eliza Ambler Carrington notes her enjoyment of a venison stew courtesy of the “young squire Custis.”⁴⁴ Guest Amariah Frost, a New England magistrate, listed the menu for a dinner in June 1797 in his diary, “small roasted pigg, boiled leg of lamb, roasted fowles, beef, peas, lettice, cucumbers, artichokes...puddings, tarts, etc.”⁴⁵ In the winter, the food was slightly different because of the seasonal availability of the Mount Vernon gardens. Joshua Brookes listed, “leg of boiled pork,” “goose,” “roast beef, round cold boiled beef, mutton chops, hommony, cabbage, potatoes, pickles, fried tripe, onions...mince pies, tarts, cheese...two kinds of nuts,

⁴⁴ Mrs. Edward Carrington. “A Visit to Mount Vernon.” 200.

⁴⁵ Amariah Frost. “A Day at Mount Vernon, in 1797.” Ed. by Hamilton B. Staples. (Worcester, 1879). Transcribed by Library at the Mount Vernon Ladies Association.



apples, raisins.”⁴⁶ During Duponceau and Steuben’s visit, Duponceau noted that “the table was abundantly served, but without profusion.”⁴⁷ At the dinner table, Duponceau tasted a new food, “I saw there for the first time *preserved strawberries*...those were large and beautiful, and I indulged in eating a few of them. I have been fond of them ever since.”⁴⁸

Conversation was the highlight of a dinner party at Mount Vernon, not the food, because visitors went there to meet the Washingtons. Generally, the discussion at the table centered on the Revolutionary War, current engineering projects, advantages of the Potomac, agriculture, and changing seasons at Mount Vernon. Amariah Frost noted, “He spoke of the improvements made in the United states, especially in building bridges,” “We spoke of several officers of the late army,” “of the public buildings in the city...also the improvements at the Falls on the Potomac,” and “some other conversation passed in the interim respecting the season.”⁴⁹ Joshua Brookes noted Martha Washington’s conversation, “[she] enquired for news, said she was no politician but liked to read the newspapers.”⁵⁰ Similarly, Scotsman Robert Hunter remarked on Martha Washington’s memory of the war, “It’s astonishing with what raptures Mrs. Washington spoke about the discipline of the army...what a pleasure she took in the

⁴⁶ Joshua Brookes. “A Dinner at Mount Vernon.”

⁴⁷ Gilbert Chinard, ed. George Washington as the French Knew Him. 19.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Amariah Frost. “A Day at Mount Vernon, in 1797.”

⁵⁰ Joshua Brookes. “A Dinner at Mount Vernon.”



sound of fifes and drums.”⁵¹ Elkanah Watson recorded, “much of the conversation had reference to the interior country, and to the opening of the navigation of the Potomac, by canals and locks...His mind appeared to be deeply absorbed by that object.”⁵² When Olney Winsor, a Rhode Islander, visited in 1788 they discussed ratification of the new Constitution by Rhode Island.⁵³ And thus, guests were entertained at dinner by the memories of Martha Washington and current events from the mind of George Washington.

People did not stop visiting Mount Vernon when George and Martha were away, either during the war or the presidency. In traveling through North America, Irishman Isaac Weld, noticed, “a person is kept at the house during General Washington’s absence, whose sole business it is to attend to strangers.”⁵⁴ Washington had a number of managers at Mount Vernon whom he corresponded with to monitor his estate. In November of 1775, Washington urged one, Lund Washington, “let the Hospitality of the House, with respect to the Poor, be kept up.”⁵⁵ Washington’s letters to his managers were very business-like because that was what he cared about. Martha was the constant hostess and therefore her letters reveal more about hospitality during the

⁵¹ Robert Hunter. “The First Man in the World.” *Experiencing Mount Vernon*. 34.

⁵² Elkanah Watson. “Two of the Richest Days of My Life.” *Experiencing Mount Vernon*. 23.

⁵³ Olney Winsor. “Dinner and Talk of the New Constitution.” *Experiencing Mount Vernon*. 55.

⁵⁴ Isaac Weld. *Travels Through the States of North America, and the Provinces of Upper and Lower Canada, during the years 1795, 1796, and 1797*. 2nd Edition. (London: Printed for John Stockdale, Piccadilly, 1799). 1:95.

⁵⁵ George Washington to Lund Washington. November 26, 1775. *The Papers of George Washington, Revolutionary Series*. 18 volumes to date. edited by W.W. Abbot and Dorothy Twohig. (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1987-2008). 2:432.



years of the Washingtons' absence. While in Philadelphia as First Lady, Martha wrote to Fanny Bassett Washington, "the President seemed a good deal surprised – at the quantity of wine that you have given out, as it never was his intention to give wine or goe to any Expence to entertain people that came to Mount Vernon out of curiosity to see the place."⁵⁶ Martha continues on, instructing Fanny to keep rum out for visitors, not the wine. It was through these letters to the people they left in charge that George and Martha Washington tried to serve guests at Mount Vernon in their absence.

It would be too severe to say that the quantity of visitors burdened the Washingtons, but the constant need for hospitality was a bit of a strain. At the close of the Revolutionary War, Washington was excited to be "free from the bustle of a camp & the busy scenes of public life."⁵⁷ He continued, "I am retiring within myself; & shall be able to view the solitary walk, & treat the paths of private life with heartfelt satisfaction."⁵⁸ Washington was not able to retire from public life, not only because he would later serve as the first president of the United States, but also because he rarely had an evening alone. In July of 1785, he noted in his diary, "dined with only Mrs. Washington which I believe is the first instance of it since my retirement from public life."⁵⁹ Martha Washington shared similar feelings with Lucy Flucker [Mrs. Henry]

⁵⁶ Martha Washington to Fanny Bassett Washington. November 30, 1794. Worthy Partner. 281.

⁵⁷ George Washington to Lafayette. February 1, 1784. The Papers of George Washington, Confederation Series. 1:87.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Diary entry for July 1, 1785. The Diaries of George Washington.



Knox in May of 1797 when returning home from Philadelphia, “We are so penurious with our enjoyment that we are loath to share it with any one but dear friends, yet almost every day some stranger claims a portion of it, and we cannot refuse.”⁶⁰ As the Washingtons aged, it became even harder to keep up with their guests. In August of 1797, Washington asked his nephew for help, “As both your Aunt and I are in the decline of life, and regular in our habits, especially in our hour of rising & going to bed, I require some person (fit & Proper) to ease me of the trouble of entertaining company.”⁶¹ It is sad to think of the aging couple that just wanted to retire from the public. It is clear that in their older years, the constant guests had become a real burden and they had to seek help. However, when they had been better able to host visitors, the Washingtons probably adjusted to their public lifestyles and embraced them.

Thus, Mount Vernon and the Washingtons welcomed thousands of family members, friends, acquaintances, and strangers. The Mount Vernon Ladies Association has restored the estate to what it was at the time of George Washington’s death so that visitors can continue to share what he cared so much about. Today, almost a million “guests” visit annually.

⁶⁰ Martha Washington to Lucy Flucker Knox. May 1797. Worthy Partner. 303.

⁶¹ George Washington to Lawrence Lewis, August 4, 1797. The Papers of George Washington, Retirement Series. 1:288.



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