

Distilling the Future: Reconstructing Washington's Distillery

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Abstract: Seventy years ago the Commonwealth of Virginia uncovered Washington's Distillery with the intention of rebuilding the structure. Social and political pressure halted the project. Today, the current excavation has a similar goal. This paper explores the pressures inherent in conducting an excavation for reconstruction purposes as well as plans for the completed reconstruction. While Mount Vernon is intent on interpreting an 18th-century whiskey distillery, have the pressures that halted the project in 1933 subsided enough to implement these ambitious plans?

Visitors to the distillery excavation greet the anticipated reconstruction with great enthusiasm. Most visitors ask: "Will you have free samples?" The many policy geeks in the DC area question: "Won't you need a license for that?" From the site's many neighbors: "Will we be able to purchase bourbon on the way home?" Almost everyone wants to know when the transformation will happen, probably partly because the excavation's been going on longer than my youngest son's been alive. The papers in this session do a good job justifying why careful excavation in conjunction with extensive historical research is always warranted when reconstruction is the ultimate goal of a project. The site is, by Mount Vernon standards, large, the industrial nature different for archaeologists who have spent years excavating domestic plantation structures and landscape features, the lack of excavated or historical precedent presented us with a steep learning curve, and the knowledge that the final outcome will be a reconstruction

– which will not only hide or destroy the surviving authentic fabric, but put our hypotheses of layout and production on display.

The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association has embraced reconstruction as a presentation policy since the earliest restorations in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. With a goal of interpreting the plantation as it was in 1799 the year of Washington's death, reconstructions of missing buildings (coach house, green house / slave quarters, repository for dung) and landscape features (orchard, ha-has) fill in missing gaps at the site. In addition to the distillery, reconstruction is proposed for a blacksmith shop, and extensive work along the lanes flanking the Mansion are planned within the next several years.

Reconstructions were begun, and continue, as a way of replacing missing elements. With 15 18th-century buildings, the reconstruction of these lost buildings and landscape elements rounds out the plantation. Mount Vernon does not undertake reconstructions lightly, as the sixty-year debate about rebuilding the blacksmith shop attests, and the level of documentation and evidence supporting the existing reconstructions is quite extraordinary.

Mount Vernon provides minimal interpretation about the process of research and discovery, which guides the restoration or reconstruction on the property. Our reconstructions are minimally interpreted as such, and their development is not always conveyed on interpretive signs and left up to docents to communicate if asked.

Three-dimensional reconstructions then, especially when combined with minimal interpretation of their origins, present a very authoritarian view of the

past, where all structures and features, whether newly constructed, heavily restored, or containing substantial amounts of authentic fabric, are given the same meaning and significance by the public. The visitor has no means to evaluate evidence, nor is the public provided with the tools to understand conflicting evidence, much less that during any reconstruction project numerous decisions are made of disparate evidence to create the snapshot we view at our historic sites. The past at historic sites is further controlled by the fact that three-dimensional reconstructions create a static environment. Because of time and expense, physical reconstructions rarely evolve as research and interpretations change. Once constructed, structures tend to become real, and their features are often mistakenly viewed as authentic, or at least typical or representative of the time period.

Archaeologists understand that structures and sites are not static and their history is integral to understanding the past that they represent and interpret. Over the past two decades, anthropologists have increasingly looked to material culture as a means to provide a deeper view of social analysis – that objects do not merely provide a setting for human action; they are integral to this action. As Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall (1999:169-170) state, “as people and objects gather time, movement and change, they are constantly transformed, and these transformations of person and object are tied up with each other.” They use a biographical approach to “understand the way objects become invested with meaning through the social interactions they are caught up in. These meanings change and are renegotiated through the life of an object...they often have the

capability of accumulating histories, so that the present significance of an object derives from the persons and events to which it is connected.” When this approach is applied to historic sites and structures, through an examination of the history of a site, or its biography, one is able to see the interaction between people and places. This interplay influences and transforms through the values by which different groups impose upon a location or upon different parts of a location.

While this session focuses on Washington’s distillery, this distillery was, and is, part of a larger landscape – which during the 18th century included an 8000-acre plantation. As Christensen detailed, the Commonwealth purchased the property in 1932 as Virginia’s contribution to Washington’s memory during the national celebration of the bicentennial of his birth. This purchase and the subsequent reconstruction of the mill and miller’s cottage truncated the site into a 6.5 acre tract that probably included sites of a cooperage, support buildings for milling, coopering and distilling, and possibly slave quarters, although the locations of these are not presently known. A review of the mill and distillery’s biographies elucidates why their stories are so unequal, as well as how attitudes and values toward these two processes have shaped the recreation of each site through time.

The original gristmill was constructed in 1770, early in Washington’s economic and cultural realignment from tobacco to grain. In 1790, it was renovated and outfitted with inventor Oliver Evans’s new system of automating milling. The distillery, as we have heard, was constructed during Washington’s

retirement and only operated three years under his management. While Washington was neither a miller nor distiller, he was familiar with milling and during the 1760s he conducted an experiment with his enslaved miller to ascertain why an earlier mill was not more productive.

“Here also, I tried what time the Mill requird to grind a Bushel of Corn and to my Surprize found She was within 5 Minutes of an hour about. This old Anthony attributed to the low head of Water (but Whether it was so or not I cant say—her Works all decayd and out of Order wch. I rather take to be the cause)” (Jackson and Twohig 1976:1:264).

He routinely expressed wonder and bewilderment at how his distillery operated, and expressed anger and frustration when the distillery’s organizer, James Anderson threatened to leave.

“I had, as he has been informed, no intention of parting with *him*; especially as he has run me into a very considerable expence (contrary I may say to my intention, or wishes) in erecting a Distillery which I shall not know what well to do with” GW to William Fitzhugh May 30, 1798.

“I have had no other concern with the distillery than to provide what was asked” GW to Anderson, September 16, 1798

So during his life, the two operations, though in close proximity and interrelated, were viewed quite differently and possessed separate significances to Washington.

Upon Washington’s death in 1799, Lawrence and Nelly Custis Lewis, Washington’s nephew and step-granddaughter inherited this portion of Mount Vernon. With the subsequent departure of the Anderson family, the property was offered for rent. It is clear from the advertisement, that the distillery was the more lucrative of the two structures. It was fully described with its five stills, boiler, hog

sheds and cow pens; the mill, on the other hand, could be put in working order with some repairs. Lewis called upon the grand history of the mill as its main selling point “she has manufactured large quantities of Flour and may easily be made to do it again” (*Alexandria Daily Advertiser* 1804).

Only one tenant is currently known to have worked the property over the next decade. James Douglass, an Alexandria merchant, submitted a bill to Lewis, mainly for material to restore the gristmill. The distillery did not need major renovations, because of the relatively simple process utilized in the structure. Douglass’s published an advertisement in 1808 offering “liquor made at Maj. Lewis’s distillery near Mount Vernon” implying that in less than nine years the association with Washington had already begun to wane (Miller:1991:112).

This advertisement is the last documentary reference to the distillery. Lewis’s renewal of the site’s insurance policy in 1815 (Mutual Assurance Society of Virginia) does not list this structure, although the gristmill and miller’s cottage are still insured. It is possible the distillery was still standing but was valued less than \$100, the threshold to be insured by the Mutual Assurance Society, but more likely the robbing of the walls and foundation had begun, signaling the demise of Washington’s distillery.

The decline of the distillery is not presently understood and it seems too early for the subsequent change which distilling would undergo a decade later. Historian William Rorabaugh (1979:187) summarizes the first three decades of the nineteenth century as the apex of American distilling and consumption of liquor. During this period there was an increase in numbers of distilleries, while

advances in distilling technology and overall consumption of distilled spirits increased at unprecedented rates. The temperance movement and the subsequent decline of alcoholic consumption gained strength in the late 1820s, fostering the end of the ubiquity of the farmer-distiller and the merchant-distiller. Distilled spirits survived this nineteenth century decline but the social reaction against them cultivated a new industrialization moving production away from the grain producers.

There is some archaeological evidence that the structure burned, and a catastrophic event fits well with the quick decline of what was a healthy profitable endeavor just a few years before. Adversely, the gristmill continued to stand becoming a romantic presence on the nineteenth century landscape and by mid-century recaptured its association with Washington. This transformation can be traced through a review of two nineteenth century maps.

Maintenance of the mill ceased during Lewis's life or shortly after his death in 1839. Upon purchasing the property in 1846 a group of Quakers found repairs of \$2000 too expensive to operate the "wheat burrs and one pair of country rollers" still contained in the "large stone mill" (Muir 1943:45). A twentieth-century history of the Mount Vernon area describes how a Quaker girl recorded the end of the gristmill "Geo. Washington's mill fell down in 1850 (2 years after we moved to Va.)" (Muir 1943:60) and oral history details how the sandstone walls were taken away to build Quaker houses in the years prior to the Civil War. Likewise, the miller's cottage was part of the Quaker world, adapted as their first Meeting House. The Quaker ownership of the property during the Temperance

Movement facilitated the erasure of the distillery while romanticizing the presence of the gristmill and George Washington's association with this important structure.

During the latter half of the nineteenth century the property reverted to its agricultural roots until the Commonwealth acquired the farmland and dilapidated barns in Jan. 1932. Local memory of the site had not faded; the ruins of the miller's cottage were still visible. The State's 1930s investigation of the property discovered the complex's rich history and plans for the site included not only reconstructions of the mill and miller's cottage but reconstructions of the distillery, as well as malt house, coopers' shop, and cart barn -- which never materialized. While the distillery was uncovered and photographed, it is unlikely if the foundations of any other structures were discovered. They were not mentioned in the state's report (Burson 1932) and an undated proposal for funding is vague on specifics about these auxiliary structures.

The failure of the Commonwealth to reconstruct the distillery during the 1932 / 33 development can only be speculated upon, but an editorial published in San Antonio, TX hints at the negative publicity the proposed distillery reconstruction fostered. William Carson, head of the Virginia State Conservation and Development Commission the agency reconstructing the property, denied leaking a story to the Associated Press about the distillery. In a letter published in the Texas paper, Carson wrote about the mill property "legend says that on the same tract of land stood the Washington stillhouse, but Mrs. Underwood, the widow of the Honorable Oscar Underwood, states that the stillhouse was on her

property, some half mile distant” (Public Opinion 1936:21). The Texas publication twisted this fallacy into a denial of Washington as a distiller calling it “another infamous lie sent over the country by an element who would drag George Washington’s name in the mire” (Ibid 20). Of course prohibition (which was not repealed until 1933) and the depression undoubtedly contributed to this vehement public opinion causing a premature end to the project. The association of Washington and whiskey was too controversial for the time. It seems Virginia lost interest in the mill as well and the structure was first offered to Mount Vernon in the mid 1930s and not opened on a regular basis for more than a decade.

Today, with the impending reconstruction scheduled to open in just a few years, the association of the first president and whiskey, while not completely accepted by the public (we have received a number of angry calls), is at least being understood within a wider context and there seems to be a greater appreciation for diversification of products and entrepreneurial drive inherent in the distillery’s story. Yet in their very construction, all reconstructions are exercises in research and evidence, weighing these to create a contemporary interpretation.

To generate the plans, furnishings, and interpretive outline necessary to bring this business to life, historical architects, archaeologists, distillers, and historians are synthesizing the data pertaining to Washington’s distillery and its place in the larger American setting. Over the last year, the details of the 18th century construction reports and the archaeological discoveries were reviewed.

While there are no glaring contradictions within the evidence, there are a number of questions that will be answered at best through inference and implication.

The large stone still house, is not difficult to envision, and our restoration masons probably could have built a large sandstone building early in the project. It took longer to realize that the structure was probably asymmetrical, with features such as doors and windows positioned for functional rather than aesthetic purposes. A quick reconstruction would have undoubtedly reflected a domestic plantation craft outbuilding, modeled upon extant structures at Mount Vernon with its inherent symmetry.

Because the structure was constructed for the purpose of distilling, and distilling at an industrial level, all the features were probably related to some function within the process. One debate over the last several months has centered on the rubble floor that might have housed the 50 mash tubs. The architectural consultants, versed in the domestic architecture of the Chesapeake, do not think this uneven plane, constructed with a variety of materials, was a work surface. It simply fails to meet the finish expected at a Washington site. If it were exposed they would like it to be a wood storage area, if it is a work surface they prefer to see it covered with a wooden floor. It abuts a brick paving and both surfaces are flush, implying if the stone had a wood floor it would have been higher than the brick surface.

Answers to that question rest with an upcoming study of the historic topography around the distillery and from the still house to the miller's cottage. Because the floor levels within the building were dependent upon the ability to

move water in overhead troughs from the mill race, and later from a well thought to be next to the miller's cottage, understanding the exterior of the building will provide better comprehension of the maximum height of floors, both masonry and wooden within the building. It is known from a series of topographic maps drafted during the 1932 development that portions of the property's landscape were altered drastically, while archaeological survey discovered other areas seem little changed from their 18th century height.

The building's exterior is also important for a broader interpretation of distilling. Historical records indicate the exteriors of distilleries were as full of activity and as highly industrialized and busy as their interiors. Mount Vernon's sources indicate that 180' of cow sheds and extensive pig sheds with over 100' of troughs housed almost 200 of these animals in cedar enclosures with wooden floors, roofs, and an unlimited supply of slop for food.

Survey and mitigation at the site have narrowed the possible location for the myriad of associated structures -- sheds, drainage ditches, slop coolers, the malt house, malt kiln, cooperage, and other unknown features -- to the east where excavation will continue in the future. The project should strive to reconstruct Washington's distillery in totality. Without transforming the bucolic landscape of the park, the true nature of the distillery, which was so large in scale and scope, cannot be conveyed. The site should reflect the industrial nature of its components and focus as much interpretation upon the landscape in which they sit, as it does the five gleaming copper pot stills working inside.

For that matter, with the reconstruction of the distillery, Mount Vernon has a unique opportunity to expand its interpretation of slavery into an industrial sphere. As Christensen noted, the operating gristmill and distillery could be interpreted primarily as an African American site. The interaction of hired white managers and enslaved workers could present an engaging story for the plantation. Presently, the reconstructed miller's cottage, home to the white miller's family and their servants is not interpreted at all. The interpretation in the mill is process oriented, focusing on the machinery and the end of the grain story, rather than the three individuals who operated the enterprise. Early indications are that the distillery will be interpreted in much the same manner as the mill.

By presenting this tangible reconstructed past to the visitor, sites such as Mount Vernon's gristmill and distillery can begin interpretation farther along. Visitors are not required to imagine construction elements, ponder evidence, or fill in missing gaps in structure, function, or furnishings. By presenting so much in such an easily digested manner, we can therefore begin farther into the story, or present more complex issues for the visitor. The question then becomes are we using our reconstructions to their full advantage?

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