

PRIMARY SOURCE
CURATING THE SLAVE QUARTERS

***Washington's Kitchen, Mount Vernon* by Eastman Johnson, 1864**

Source Type: Painting

Courtesy of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association



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The Old Plantation attributed to John Rose, 1785-1795
Source Type: Painting
Courtesy of the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum



PRIMARY SOURCE
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East Front of Mount Vernon by Edward Savage, 1787-1792

Source Type: Painting

Courtesy of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association



BACKGROUND INFORMATION: This colonoware bowl is probably a milk pan, or a shallow, straightsided dish used for cooling the milk and separating cream. Archaeologists believe that colonoware was made by Native Americans and African Americans in forms that sometimes mimicked their English counterparts, such as this milk pan. After the cow was milked into a bucket, the milk was brought back to the dairy and poured into a milk pan and left for a day or two to cool, allowing the milk to settle and the cream to rise. In the colonial period, dairies served as structures that housed, cooled, and protected the milk collected from cows. Primarily women, both enslaved and free, operated dairies, contributing towards a successful plantation

Milk Pan

Source Type: Archaeological Object

Coarse Earthenware, 115.00mm x 90.00mm

Place of Origin- United States

Courtesy of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association



BACKGROUND INFORMATION: These bones of the now extinct passenger pigeon remind us that large flocks were once a common site in Chesapeake forests and on Chesapeake tables. While all segments of the colonial population consumed wild game birds, elites would have served family and guests multiple large and elaborate courses offering a variety of meats, fish, and game birds. The enslaved community living and working at Mount Vernon also found time for hunting and supplemented their rations with wild game. Slaves, in their free time at night and on Sundays, trapped and shot wild fowl in nearby forests. Pigeon would have provided a valuable nutritional supplement and a bit of diversity to rations of corn, fish, and occasionally meat.

Pigeon Bones

Source Type: Archaeological Object

Bone, 76.20mm x 127.00mm

Place of Origin- United States

Courtesy of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association



BACKGROUND INFORMATION: Lead shot are small balls of lead used as projectiles for pistols, rifles, or muskets. Lead shot and firearms speak to the ways in which food was procured, plantations and lands were defended, and power was maintained. Additionally, shot was manufactured and sold in different sizes correlating to the size of target. Smaller shot was used for hunting birds, while larger shot, such as this one, was used for hunting deer.

Shot, Round

Source Type: Object, archeology

Lead, 17.90mm x 17.94.00mm

Place of Origin- England

Courtesy of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association



BACKGROUND INFORMATION: This clay object is the bowl of a tobacco pipe missing its stem. Smoking was a common practice in which everyone from young children to grown women and men participated. Clay tobacco pipes were fragile, but inexpensive, and when they inevitably broke, their fragments were discarded in trash pits. Based on its design, archaeologists have determined this pipe was manufactured in England and imported to America.

Tobacco Pipe

Source Type: Archaeological Object

Earthenware, 5.92 mm x 9.88 mm

Place of Origin- England

Courtesy of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association



BACKGROUND INFORMATION: While George Washington was away from Mount Vernon, his farm manager sent weekly accounts to Washington reporting on the status of Mount Vernon, the farm, and the enslaved people who lived there.

Farm Report, Weeks of April 7 and 14, 1792

Source Type: Farm Report

Courtesy of Mount Vernon Ladies' Association

- 1 ...a hired carpenter and slave spent six days each on “putting up the births in new Qu[arte]r” and
- 2 “planning plank for the Qur Births,” while one of the bricklayers was “laying brick foundation for
- 3 the sills of the births new Qur.” The following week, one of the hired carpenters was occupied
- 4 another five days “putting up the berth.”

BACKGROUND INFORMATION: Polish visitor, Julien Ursyn Niemcewicz was fascinated with American slavery and wrote extensive comments on the enslaved population at Mount Vernon since slavery was not practiced in Poland.

Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz, Mount Vernon, June 4, 1798

Source Type: Book

Courtesy of Julien Ursyn Niemcewicz. Under Their Vine and Fig Tree: Travels Through America in 1797-1799, 1805, edited and translated by Metchie J. E. Budka (Elizabeth, NJ: Grassman Publishing Company, 1965), 100-101

1 Blacks. We entered one of the huts of the Blacks, for one can not [sic] call them by the name of
2 houses. They are more miserable than the most miserable of the cottages of our peasants. The
3 husband and wife sleep on a mean pallet, the children on the ground; a very bad fireplace, some
4 utensils for cooking, but in the middle of this poverty some cups and a teapot. A boy of 15 was lying
5 on the ground, sick, and in terrible convulsions. The Gl. [General] had sent to Alexandria to fetch a
6 doctor. A very small garden planted with vegetables was close by, with 5 or 6 hens, each one leading
7 ten to fifteen chickens. It is the only comfort that is permitted them; for they may not keep either
8 ducks, geese, or pigs. They sell the poultry in Alexandria and procure for themselves a few
9 amenities. They allot them each *one pack* [peck], one gallon [sic] of maize per week; this makes one
10 quart a day, and half as much for the children, with 20 herrings each per month. At harvest time
11 those who work in the fields have salt meat; in addition, a jacket and a pair of homespun breeches
12 per year. Not counting women and children the Gl. [General] has 300 Negroes of whom a large
13 number belong to Mrs. Washington. Mr. Anderson [the farm manager] told me that there are only a
14 hundred who work in the fields. They work all week, not having a single day for themselves except
15 for holidays. One sees by that that the condition of our peasants is infinitely happier. The mullatoes
16 [sic] are ordinarily chosen for servants. According to the laws of Virginia the child follows the
17 condition of the mother; the son or daughter of a mullato woman and a white is a slave and the issue
18 through the daughter, although white, are still slaves. Gl. Washington treats his slaves far more
19 humanely than do his fellow citizens of Virginia. Most of these gentlemen give to their Blacks only
20 bread, water and blows.

21 Either from habit, or from natural humor disposed to gaiety, I have never seen the Blacks sad. Last
22 Sunday there were about thirty divided into two groups and playing at prisoner's base. There were
23 jumps and gambols as if they had rested all week. I noticed that all spoke very good English. Why

24 then do the Blacks of the French colonies never speak a good French; rather make a jargon of their
25 own? The reason for it is perhaps that the American masters speak and communicate with them
26 more often than the French who depend entirely for the management of their farms on their overseers
27 who are also black.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION: George Washington's nephew, George Augustine Washington, managed Mount Vernon while Washington was President. George Augustine Washington frequently wrote to George Washington with updates about Mount Vernon, the farms, and the enslaved community.

George Augustine Washington to George Washington, April 8-9, 1792

Source Type: Letter

Courtesy of www.founders.archives.gov

1 ...The New Quarter will I have no doubt be fully adequate to accomodate conveniently all the
2 Negro's that You would wish or find necessary to be kept at the Mansion House for untill they are all
3 brought together and under proper regulations it is in vain to attempt or at least to protect
4 improvements.
5 I have been promised to have a skillful well digger sent to me that I may have his opinion on the
6 situation for a well and if his reasons are plausible and such as I think can be relied on and favor the
7 probability of coming at water in any reasonable distance—the situation opposite the center of the
8 Green House will certainly be much preferable to any other...

Hercules

Source Type: Biography

Courtesy of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, www.mountvernon.org/digital-encyclopedia

Hercules, a member of the Mount Vernon enslaved community, became widely admired for his culinary skills displayed after George Washington's first retirement following the American Revolution.

Washington appreciated Hercules' skills in the kitchen so much that he brought him from Mount Vernon to Philadelphia to live and work in the presidential household. Hercules, however, later ran away, one of the few instances of a member of Mount Vernon's enslaved community successfully escaping during Washington's lifetime.

Hercules first appears in the historic record for the Mount Vernon Estate in George Washington's list of tithables (persons for whom taxes had to be paid) in 1770. Previous to his arrival at Mount Vernon, Hercules worked as a ferryman for Washington's neighbor John Posey. In 1767, Hercules was mortgaged to Washington and became the ferryman at the Mansion House Farm for the Washingtons. Since slaves were first listed in tithable lists at age sixteen, Hercules was likely born sometime in or around 1754.¹ Hercules was married to Alice, a Custis family dower slave owned by Martha Washington. The couple had three children during their marriage: Richmond (1777), Evey (1782), and Delia (1785).² Although it is not known exactly when Hercules started working as a cook at Mount Vernon, the 1786 Mount Vernon slave census lists him as the chief cook at the Mansion House.³

Hercules was one of nine slaves brought by George Washington to Philadelphia in 1790 to work in the President's House. Hercules' cooking was very much loved in the Washington household, and was "familiarily termed Uncle Harkless," according to Washington's step-grandson George Washington Parke Custis.⁴ Custis described Hercules as "a celebrated artiste . . . as highly accomplished a proficient in the culinary art as could be found in the United States."⁵

Due to his culinary prowess, Hercules was able to bring his son Richmond, to Philadelphia. He was also given other special privileges not entitled to most of Washington's slaves. According to Custis, Hercules accrued a salary of "one to two hundred dollars a year," by selling leftovers, known as slops, from the presidential kitchen. Hercules was a "celebrated dandy," in the words of Custis, and the chef kept an equally meticulous kitchen: "Under his iron discipline, wo[e] to his underlings if speck or spot could be discovered on the tables or dressers, or if the utensils did not shine like polished silver."⁶

Different accounts provide varying reasons for Hercules' decision to escape to freedom. In *The Private Affairs of George Washington*, Stephen Decatur Jr., the American naval hero and a descendent of Washington's secretary Tobias Lear, described Hercules as being so enamored by Philadelphia that when Washington left to return to Mount Vernon in 1797, Hercules chose to run away. Decatur notes that "although diligent inquiries were made for him, he was never apprehended."⁷

However, other records indicate that Hercules escaped in early 1797, soon after being made a regular laborer at Mount Vernon instead of his usual chef duties. The Washingtons often returned their slaves to Mount Vernon from Philadelphia to circumvent a Pennsylvania law that allowed slaves to claim freedom after residing in the state for a minimum of six months. Weekly reports from Mount Vernon indicated that Hercules and other male house servants were put to work with the bricklayers and gardeners in early 1797.⁸ Hercules was most likely not needed in the kitchen at the time, due to a lack of visitors to Mount Vernon while George and Martha Washington lived in Philadelphia.⁹

Washington was angered and confused by the decision to run away, believing that Hercules lived a privileged life, having even received three bottles of rum from Martha to "bury his wife" in September of

1787.¹⁰ On March 10, 1797, Washington expressed to Tobias Lear that he wanted Hercules to be found and returned to Mount Vernon, as soon as possible.¹¹ Washington was so distressed by the absence of the family chef that he even wrote to Major George Lewis on November 13, 1797, about buying a slave in Fredericksburg who was reputed to be an excellent chef. Washington stated that while he "had resolved never to become the master of another slave by purchase," because of Hercules' absence, "this resolution I fear I must break."¹²

Washington's last will and testament, written in July 1799 before his death that December, provided for the eventual emancipation, care, and education of his slaves, following the death of Martha Washington. However, he had no legal control over whether the Custis family dower slaves would gain their freedom. As a result, Hercules' wife and children remained enslaved, even after Martha Washington's death in May 1802.

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Notes:

1. "Memorandum List of Tithables, 14 June 1771," Founders Online, National Archives. Source: The Papers of George Washington, Colonial Series, vol. 8, 24 June 1767?–25 December 1771, ed. W. W. Abbot and Dorothy Twohig. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993, pp. 479–480.
2. Louis-Philippe, *Diary of My Travels in America*, translation by Stephen Becker (New York: Delacorte Press, 1977), p. 32; "1786 Mount Vernon Slave Census," *Diaries of George Washington*, vol. 4, Donald Jackson and Dorothy Twohig, eds., (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press), pp. 277-83.
3. "1786 Mount Vernon Slave Census," *Diaries of George Washington*, vol. 4, Donald Jackson and Dorothy Twohig, eds., (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press), pp. 277-83.
4. George Washington Parke Custis, *Recollections and Private Memoirs of the Life and Character of Washington*, ed. Benson J. Lossing (New York, 1860), 422.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Stephen Decatur, Jr., *Private Affairs of George Washington* (Cambridge, MA: The Riverside Press, 1933), p. 296.
8. See Weekly Reports for "January 7, 14, 20, and 28, 1797, and February 11 and 25, 1797," in *Mount Vernon Farm Accounts, January 7-September 10, 1797* (bound Photostat, Fred W. Smith National Library for the Study of George Washington at Mount Vernon); and "Weekly Report for February 18, 1797," in *Mount Vernon Weekly Reports, January 10, 1795- March 18, 1797* (bound photostat, Fred W. Smith National Library).
9. *Dining with the Washingtons: Historic Recipes, Entertaining, and Hospitality from Mount Vernon*, McLeod, Stephen, ed. (Mount Vernon: Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, 2011), 25.
10. Ibid.
11. "From George Washington to Tobias Lear, 10 March 1797," Founders Online, National Archives. Source: The Papers of George Washington, Retirement Series, vol. 1, 4 March 1797?–30 December 1797, ed. W. W. Abbot (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 27–8.
12. Decatur, Jr., 297.

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Custis, George Washington Parke. *Recollections and Private Memoirs of the Life and Character of Washington*. Ed. Benson J. Lossing. New York, 1860.

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Lusane, Clarence. *The Black History of the White House*. San Francisco, CA: City Light Books, 2011.