

Washington's "Little Amusement": The Gardens of Mount Vernon By Amy Sedivi

The estate and gardens of Mount Vernon, George Washington's "little amusement" as the first president would call it, are rich in both history and natural beauty. The estate was first granted to John Washington, the general's great-grandfather, in 1674. As years passed, the land was inherited by various members of the Washington family. In 1743, George's half-brother Lawrence Washington took control of the estate, named Hunting Creek at the time, and built a small mansion on the property. Additionally, Lawrence dubbed the estate "Mount Vernon" as an honor to the revered Admiral Edward Vernon.¹ George acquired the lease on the Mount Vernon property after the death of Lawrence in 1754 and officially inherited the estate after the death of Lawrence's widow in 1761. Once George came into possession of the property, he began to transform the land into a "gentleman's country seat"; it became an environment truly fit for the first president of the United States of America.²

Washington spoke fondly of its location on the shore of the Potomac River of Virginia. In a 1793 letter, Washington wrote the following:

No estate in United America is more pleasantly situated than this. It lies in a high, dry and healthy Country 300 miles by water from the Sea,... on one of the finest Rivers in the world... It is situated on a latitude between the extremes of heat and cold, and is the same distance by land and water, with good roads and the best navigation [to and] from the Federal City, Alexandria and George town; distant from the first twelve, from the second nine, and from the last sixteen miles.³

The estate, which was 2,126 acres at the time it was inherited by Washington, grew to about 8,000 acres by the time of Washington's death in 1799. Over these years he expanded both the mansion and the

¹ Benson J. Lossing. *George Washington's Mount Vernon: Or, Mount Vernon and Its Associations, Historical, Biographical, and Pictorial*. [New York: Gramercy, 2001], 42.

² Charles C. Wall. *Mount Vernon: a Handbook*. [Mount Vernon, VA: Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union, 1985], 16.

³ *Ibid.*, 11.

gardens. Indeed, Washington was his own landscape architect for the property.⁴ He formulated a plan for the property and went so far as to pinpoint “the exact position and name of every tree to be planted.”⁵

In his plan, Washington divided the area surrounding the mansion into a variety of different garden spaces. The most notable gardens include the bowling green and mansion courtyard, the upper garden, the lower garden, the greenhouse, the deer park, and the forested area surrounding the central gardens. This wilderness, which comprises the majority of the overall property, contains a variety of trees, some of them imports given to Washington by family and friends. Washington’s nephew, George Augustine, brought back mahogany seeds from the West Indies, while William Blake of Charleston gifted Washington with seeds of the palmetto tree.⁶ In a study done by Elizabeth Forston Wells and Rebecca Louise Brown, it was discovered that 270 species of vascular plants exist in the forest of Mount Vernon.⁷

While the forested area was left in a primarily natural state, the other gardens were distinctly formal. These gardens were separated from the surrounding environment by a ha-ha wall, meant to keep out the deer that roamed Washington’s deer park for “picturesque effect,” according to Edward Savage in *Landscape of Slavery: the Plantation in American Art*.⁸ The bowling green and courtyard act as the centerpiece of the formal gardens. Both spaces are symmetrical lawns that open up the broad expanse leading up to the mansion. The bowling green is bordered by the upper garden in the east and the lower garden in the west. The lower garden, also called the “kitchen garden,” was primarily used to grow fruits, vegetables, and herbs for the consumption of the Washington family and guests. It was terraced in two levels and slopes to the south for maximum exposure to the sun. The plots were divided into large squares and consisted of a variety of plants including artichokes, basil, cabbage, okra, peas, potatoes,

⁴ Elizabeth Kellam De Forest. *The Gardens & Grounds at Mount Vernon*. [Mount Vernon, Virginia: The Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union, 1982], 1.

⁵ Lossing, *George Washington’s Mount Vernon*, 156.

⁶ De Forest, *The Gardens & Grounds at Mount Vernon*, 27.

⁷ Wells, Elizabeth Forston and Rebecca Louise Brown. “An Annotated Checklist of the Vascular Plants in the Forest at Historic Mount Vernon, Virginia: A Legacy from the Past.” *Castanea* vol. 65, no. 4 (December, 2000): 245.

⁸ Angela D. Mack, and Stephen G. Hoffius. *Landscape of Slavery: the Plantation in American Art*. [Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 2008], 98.

sage, spinach, currants, figs, grapes, plums, quince, and berries. Espaliered fruit trees bearing apples, apricots, cherries, nectarines, peaches, and pears lined the walls of the lower garden. Generally, the lower garden was typical of kitchen gardens in the period.⁹

In the upper garden, vegetables were grown amongst flowers. Washington himself noted in his writings many flowers that were planted. Some of these include amaranth, crown imperial, everlasting pea, and larkspur. Due to the more decorative nature of the upper garden, Washington was able to experiment with a variety of landscaping techniques. In 1796, Benjamin Latrobe visited Mount Vernon and observed a parterre in the upper garden, trimmed in the shape of a fleur-de-lis. These were likely executed by the German gardeners Johan Christian Ehlers and Johan Lotz, who Washington hired to work on the gardens while he was out of town tending to presidential duties.¹⁰ A greenhouse was built adjacent to the upper garden in 1787. Its purpose was to house exotic plants that were unable to survive Virginia winters. In the summer, these plants were placed in pots and placed outdoors. Some of these plants included aloe, banana, hibiscus, lemon, lime, pomegranate, palm, and orange. These exotic plants in the greenhouse, as well as plants in his nearby botanical garden and vineyard, catered to Washington's love of gardening and experimentation. Due to poor soil conditions, Washington also experimented with fertilizers and crops. He designed six and ten year crop rotation systems, as opposed to the three year system utilized by most farmers. Over the course of his life, he experimented with at least 60 different crops.¹¹

In 1858, over 50 years after Washington's death, the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association purchased Mount Vernon from John A. Washington Jr., who inherited the estate. Since that time, the Association has worked to preserve and restore the landscape. The estate has since become a tourist destination complete with orientation center, restaurants, galleries, theaters, and gift shops. Visitors are

⁹ De Forest, *The Gardens & Grounds at Mount Vernon*, 72.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹¹ Wall, *Mount Vernon: A Handbook*, 20.

able to tour both the house and the surrounding gardens, many of which are restored to appear as they would have in Washington's time. Most recently, the upper garden was excavated in 2005 in order to create a more accurate representation of the garden designed by Washington. Restoration is estimated for completion in 2011.¹² Indeed, the attention to detail involved in the restoration of Mount Vernon has allowed visitors to walk through the gardens and appreciate the same environment that America's first president both designed and enjoyed.

¹² "George Washington's Mount Vernon Estate and Gardens." Accessed November 25, 2010. <http://www.mountvernon.org>.

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