

# Hidden Lives

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## The Interpretation of the Slave Quarter Sites at Mount Vernon

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## ABSTRACT

Title of Document: **HIDDEN LIVES: THE INTERPRETATION OF THE SLAVE QUARTER SITES AT MOUNT VERNON**

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The restoration and protection of historic places related to minority groups should be an integral part of historic preservation. The subject, however, is contentious, presenting a topic that is difficult to present both accurately and sensitively. The interpretation of slave quarter sites, which are typically located on larger farms and plantations, has long been neglected and flawed. Many challenges exist in terms of how to preserve and interpret sites related to the enslavement of African-Americans. The interpretive plan must be carefully considered so that it presents an honest and unflinching look at the realities of slavery in the United States, while also maintaining an awareness of the sensitive subject matter on display.

This paper will argue that the interpretation of slave quarters, in this case at George Washington's Mount Vernon Estate and Farm, can be achieved while being sensitive to the subject matter and also accurately representing the historical integrity of the place. Case studies of interpretation strategies at slave quarter sites will be

examined, and the specific interpretative strategies for the slave quarter sites at Mount Vernon will be detailed.

Mount Vernon provides an excellent case study for examining the interpretation of minority cultural sites, or specifically, slave quarters, because it consists of two sites, one for house slaves and one for field workers, that both require interpretation. Extensive documentation is available that records the history, restoration and interpretation undertaken at the estate, and debate, from within and outside of the organization, has continued about the proper approach to furnishing and interpreting the slave quarter sites at Mount Vernon. Studying the development of the current interpretation strategies in the Mount Vernon case will aid in identifying a broader interpretation approach for sensitive cultural sites, such as slave quarters.

THE PRESERVATION AND INTERPRETATION OF THE SLAVE QUARTERS  
AT MOUNT VERNON.

By

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## Dedication

This work is dedicated to my parents, who have always supported my interests and endeavors, and who have inspired and encouraged me to pursue what I love. Thank you for listening to me, encouraging my thoughts and allowing me to discover my passion.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Slave quarters can be broadly defined as housing intended for an enslaved population. These sites are often in poor condition and located apart from the main grounds. Therefore, an approach is needed for the interpretation of slave quarters, as in the case of George Washington's Mount Vernon, that is sensitive to the subject matter and also accurately represents the historical integrity of the place. As the home of a significant figure in United States history, and as one of the first historic house museums in the country, Mount Vernon was an appropriate choice for the site of study. In addition, Mount Vernon offers two different slave quarter sites that need interpretation. The Greenhouse Slave Quarters were built for house slaves and the Log Cabin at Pioneer Farm is an example of housing used for field workers. While interpreting two different sites is a challenge, it is not one that is unique to Mount Vernon. Historic house museums across the country share this struggle. By examining the development of the interpretation approach at Mount Vernon, recommendations can be made for new interpretive methods at the estate, which will provide a precedent for other historic house museums to follow.

Case studies of Carter's Grove in Williamsburg, Virginia, Monticello in Charlottesville, Virginia and Sully Plantation in Chantilly, Virginia, will be used to explore various approaches to the interpretation of slave quarter sites. Carter's Grove was a recreated slave village, until the estate and grounds were sold by Colonial Williamsburg, while Sully Plantation has a single interpreted slave cabin and Monticello has slave quarters that are currently only archaeological sites, with no plans to reconstruct. These three sites will provide information on the different

methods that can be used in interpreting slave housing.

Within the Mount Vernon case study, two specific sites will be examined: the Greenhouse Slave Quarters, located directly on the estate, and the log cabin, located at George Washington's Pioneer Farm. These two sites represent very different interpretation needs and approaches. The Greenhouse Slave Quarters were originally built by George Washington in 1792. Subsequent restorations occurred throughout the years, and the slave quarters in their current state represent a reconstruction project which occurred from 1950-1952.<sup>1</sup> The log cabin at George Washington's Pioneer Farm was built over the course of several months in the Spring of 2007 and is not on an original site.<sup>2</sup> The Pioneer Farm is meant to represent one of the four outlying farms that existed as part of Washington's estate at the time of his death in 1799.<sup>3</sup>

Recommendations for a new interpretative strategy for the two slave quarter sites at Mount Vernon will be supported by the above case studies, as well as documents written about the Mount Vernon sites, explaining previous interpretation of the slave quarters and the log cabin.

The architectural styles of slave quarters, as well as how to interpret these sites is an issue that has been discussed by previous researchers but remain less than perfectly understood. With certain sites, such as slave quarters, which are imbued with tension, the questions of what and how to interpret become more complex. At sites that portray difficult subject matter, the challenge is how to present the matter

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<sup>1</sup> Mount Vernon Ladies' Association. "Mount Vernon Annual Report, 1951." (Mount Vernon: Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, 1951). 37.

<sup>2</sup> Dennis Pogue, Interview Held at Mount Vernon. Alexandria, Virginia. October, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Dennis Pogue. "A Proposal to Expand the Interpretation of Slave Life at Mount Vernon." 2001.

sensitively, but also accurately. Considering both the racial tensions and the different interpretive needs that are inherent when pursuing the interpretation of a slave quarter site, current strategies need to be rethought, in order to provide an approach that is both historically accurate, but sensitively portrayed.

Some historic plantations, such as George Washington's Mount Vernon Estate, need to review their current interpretation methods, and design a plan that can be historically accurate and sensitive to both the site location and the subject matter. Considering its importance as a national historic site and as a national symbol, Mount Vernon is a site where the interpretation of its slave quarters can act as a precedent to be followed by historic house museums across the country.

Interpretation is often understood to mean first person re-enactors portraying a character from the past. To clarify what is meant by interpretation, in the context of the slave quarter sites, it is defined as "the facilitation of dialogue between parties using different languages."<sup>4</sup> Interpretation of slave quarters involves facilitating understanding of a different time period and way of life of an oppressed people for the general public of today, and that is why this definition is applicable. Interpretation can be considered to be a method for creating a dialogue between the past and the present, as well as learning how to connect the two, through the lens of today.

Mount Vernon, located southeast of Alexandria, Virginia, was the home of George Washington (fig. 1.1). "Washington's father, Augustine Washington, had bought the plantation, then known as Little Hunting Creek, from his sister, Mildred, and her husband, Roger Gregory, in 1726. The land had been in the Washington

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<sup>4</sup> Dictionary.com. "Interpretation Definition." Accessed March 15, 2010.

family since 1674.”<sup>5</sup> “The plantation eventually passed to Washington's older half-brother, Lawrence, who renamed the property Mount Vernon after his commanding officer, Admiral Edward Vernon of the British Royal Navy.”<sup>6</sup> George Washington inherited the property upon the death of Lawrence's widow in 1761.<sup>7</sup> Washington worked on the property and increased the number of acres on the farm from two thousand to nearly eight thousand acres divided into five farms: Mansion House Farm, Dogue Run Farm, Union Farm, Muddy Hole Farm and River Farm (fig. 1.2). The primary farm, on which Washington lived with his family, was the Mansion House Farm.<sup>8</sup>

Washington sought to create a serene and grand home at Mount Vernon. When Washington inherited the estate, “the farmhouse that is now known as “the Mansion” consisted of four rooms on the first floor, with a central passageway, and three bedrooms on the second.”<sup>9</sup> “He began to rebuild Mount Vernon in 1757. To create a full second floor and a new attic, he raised the roof and in 1760 built two “little houses” on the east side of the house facing the Potomac. In 1774 he began the second phase of construction, which would transform Mount Vernon into one of the larger houses in Virginia.”<sup>10</sup> As it appears today, the house is a “two-story-high rectangular mass, built of wood designed to suggest stone, with an attic story; it is 96

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<sup>5</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica. “Little Hunting Creek Plantation.” <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/344104/Little-Hunting-Creek-Plantation> Accessed January 5, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Presidential Avenue. “George Washington.” <http://www.presidentialavenue.com/gw.cfm> Accessed December 12, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Allan Greenberg. *George Washington, Architect*. (United States: Andreas Papdakis Publisher, 1999), 8.

<sup>8</sup> Mount Vernon. “History of Mount Vernon.” [http://www.mountvernon.org/learn/explore\\_mv/index.cfm/ss/27/](http://www.mountvernon.org/learn/explore_mv/index.cfm/ss/27/) Accessed February 8, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Mount Vernon. “History of Mount Vernon.” [http://www.mountvernon.org/learn/explore\\_mv/index.cfm/ss/27/](http://www.mountvernon.org/learn/explore_mv/index.cfm/ss/27/) Accessed February 8, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Allan Greenberg. *George Washington, Architect*. (United States: Andreas Papdakis Publisher, 1999), 8.

feet long and 47 feet wide, including the 14-foot-wide portico facing the river. At either end are curved hyphens connecting 1 ½ story dependencies to the main house.”<sup>11</sup> The changes that occurred to Mount Vernon demonstrate Washington’s desire to have a home that reflected his newly acquired wealth.

While the enslaved population at Mount Vernon was expected to build their own dwellings on the outlying farms of the estate, they also contributed to the construction of the Mansion additions. Washington was the architect of the changes to Mount Vernon, but he was not often on-site to supervise the construction of the additions to the Mansion. “Washington employed an array of workmen to carry out his projects. These included skilled Mount Vernon slaves who worked as carpenters, painters and brickmakers, as well as hired white craftsmen.”<sup>12</sup> To oversee the skilled slave laborers, Washington often employed skilled white craftsman, including William Sears and Thomas Green. Lund Washington functioned as the Mount Vernon plantation manager. “During the extended period when George Washington was away during the Revolutionary War, his responsibilities increased to include overseeing a variety of construction projects. It was he who was called upon to carry on the second major expansion of the mansion that George Washington had embarked upon just before he was called away to the war in 1775.”<sup>13</sup> Thomas Green served as the primary overseer of the slave carpenters. While a vast majority of Washington’s slaves labored as field workers, a number were trained in building trades and plantation

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<sup>11</sup> Allan Greenberg. *George Washington, Architect*. (United States: Andreas Papdakis Publisher, 1999), 20.

<sup>12</sup> Mount Vernon. “Building Mount Vernon.” [http://www.mountvernon.org/learn/pres\\_arch/index.cfm/pid/703/](http://www.mountvernon.org/learn/pres_arch/index.cfm/pid/703/). Accessed December 4, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Mount Vernon. “Building Mount Vernon.” [http://www.mountvernon.org/learn/pres\\_arch/index.cfm/pid/703/](http://www.mountvernon.org/learn/pres_arch/index.cfm/pid/703/). Accessed December 4, 2009.



crafts. The skilled, enslaved workers at Mount Vernon were also responsible for helping to build the cabins for field workers located at the outlying farms. Thus, many of the cabins that were scattered among the outlying farms shared commonalities in their construction, due to the fact that their construction was often supervised by a skilled, enslaved worker.

In addition to expanding the house, Washington sought to change the exterior without spending a large amount of money. He achieved this through the process of rustication. “The rustication of the Mansion involved replacing the plain wood siding with bevel-edged pine blocks that had been covered with paint and sand.”<sup>14</sup> The boards were then painted white, giving the wood the appearance of stone, a much more costly material. Washington changed the exterior appearance of the east façade of the Mansion by erecting a piazza in 1777.<sup>15</sup>

The layout of Mount Vernon reflected both Washington’s rational and aesthetic viewpoints. The outbuildings, where much of the work occurred, were situated along a north-south axis, following a straight and rational pattern.<sup>16</sup> The work areas, where slaves performed the daily chores of the Mansion, such as cooking, doing laundry, emptying chamber pots and cleaning, were designed to be hidden from the view of a visitor to the estate. For example, Washington concealed the kitchen in one of the hyphens attached to the Mansion, thereby allowing for the symmetrical nature of the estate to be preserved, while also preventing the tasks of food

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<sup>14</sup> Mount Vernon. “History of Mount Vernon.” [http://www.mountvernon.org/learn/explore\\_mv/index.cfm/ss/27/](http://www.mountvernon.org/learn/explore_mv/index.cfm/ss/27/) Accessed October 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Wall and Christine Meadows. “George Washington’s Mount Vernon: Official Guidebook.” (Montreal, Canada: Quebecor, 2001). 30.

<sup>16</sup> Allan Greenberg. *George Washington, Architect*. (United States: Andreas Papdakis Publisher, 1999), 51.

preparation and clean-up from being visible on the grounds. He carefully crafted the entire landscape of Mount Vernon, including the approach to the house and the cohesive appearance of the mansion and the outbuildings (fig. 1.3). “The mansion is the centerpiece of the garden and farms. The main axis from the house to the entrance gate is the reference line around which the estate is organized.”<sup>17</sup> Washington designed every aspect of Mount Vernon, intending for the house to be the “heart of the composition. Together with the surrounding village of support and farm buildings and the gardens, it forms an exceptional expression of the integration of architecture and picturesque gardening.”<sup>18</sup>

Washington also constructed his farms to be laid out in a clear and rational pattern. “Each farm,” writes architectural historian Allan Greenberg, “was transformed into a well-ordered unit with its own barns, sheds, overseers’ houses, slave quarters and a network of roads.”<sup>19</sup> While the layout of the farms was partially a continuation of the aesthetic appearance of Mount Vernon, it was also functional. Washington wanted to situate the farms far enough from the Mansion so that the physical labor would be removed from the view of guests, but keep them close enough so that he could visit the farms to oversee the workers.

The slave quarters at Mount Vernon were used to house the large enslaved population and consisted of a variety of types. “At Mount Vernon these ranged from a substantial brick building that held as many as sixty people in barracks-style

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<sup>17</sup> Allan Greenberg. *George Washington, Architect*. (United States: Andreas Papdakis Publisher, 1999), 49.

<sup>18</sup> Allan Greenberg. *George Washington, Architect*. (United States: Andreas Papdakis Publisher, 1999), 53.

<sup>19</sup> Allan Greenberg. *George Washington, Architect*. (United States: Andreas Papdakis Publisher, 1999), 55.

conditions to small wooden cabins that might shelter only a half-dozen occupants.”<sup>20</sup>

The architectural styles reflected the different needs of the house slaves compared to the field workers, but also demonstrated Washington’s need and desire for certain aesthetic appearances close to the Mansion.

“After Washington’s death in 1799, Martha Washington, his widow, lived on the estate until her passing in 1802.”<sup>21</sup> Since the Washingtons had no children of their own, they divided the estate and grounds to various relatives. George Washington left Mount Vernon and the majority of its land to his nephew, Bushrod Washington. The estate subsequently passed through various members of the Washington family, many of whom lacked the means to maintain the property. John Augustine Washington, the last Washington ancestor to own the property, made several unsuccessful attempts to restore the Mansion, which had fallen into disrepair. Lacking the funding needed for the restoration, he eventually offered the Mansion for sale in 1848.<sup>22</sup> “There had been unsuccessful efforts to convince the federal government to purchase the crumbling Mount Vernon.”<sup>23</sup> In 1858, the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union, under the direction of Ann Pamela Cunningham, (fig. 1.4) purchased the estate, with the intent of restoring Washington’s home.<sup>24</sup> “The Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association worked to raise funds for the purchase of the estate and in 1860, became full owners of the mansion and a portion of the estate grounds. The final purchase price of the

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<sup>20</sup> Dennis J. Pogue. “The Domestic Architecture of Slavery at George Washington’s Mount Vernon.” *Winterthur Portfolio*, Volume 37, Number 1, 1992. 4.

<sup>21</sup> Mount Vernon. “History of Mount Vernon.”  
[http://www.mountvernon.org/learn/explore\\_mv/index.cfm/ss/27/](http://www.mountvernon.org/learn/explore_mv/index.cfm/ss/27/)

<sup>22</sup> Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association. “Nomination to the World Heritage List.”  
<http://www.mountvernon.org/files/WHL.pdf> 58.

<sup>23</sup> Patricia West. *Domesticating History*, “Inventing a House Undivided.” (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999). 6.

<sup>24</sup> Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association. “Mount Vernon Annual Report, 1951.” (Mount Vernon: Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association, 1951). 35.

estate was two hundred thousand dollars.”<sup>25</sup>

Subsequently, Mount Vernon underwent several restorations to repair damage that had occurred through neglect and the elements (fig. 1.5). “The first restoration of the Greenhouse Slave Quarters, completed by the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association, occurred in 1896.”<sup>26</sup> By 1950 the reconstruction of the Greenhouse Complex, including the slave quarters became a primary focus. Continuous preservation efforts still occur at the Mount Vernon Estate in order to combat the effects of weather and the hundreds of thousands of visitors who come to the site each year.<sup>27</sup>

While Mount Vernon is recognized as a historic site at the national level, the importance of preserving the slave quarters that are a part of the estate has often been overlooked. The architecture of the slave dwellings at Mount Vernon reveal the life of Washington, as well as the hundreds of people who labored for him. The history of slave architecture and the slave quarter sites at Mount Vernon must be understood, in order to develop a new preservation and interpretation plan.

In Chapter 2, the history of slave quarter architecture will be explored, which provides a frame of reference for the types of architectural styles used for slave dwellings, as well as the construction and design of the slave quarter sites at Mount Vernon. In Chapter 3, the two slave quarter sites at Mount Vernon, the Greenhouse Slave Quarters and the Log Cabin at the Pioneer Farm, are examined in terms of their history, construction and interpretation, in order to provide a background on the sites and their current interpretation strategies. In Chapter 4, three historic sites are used as

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<sup>25</sup> Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association. “Mount Vernon Annual Report, 1951.” (Mount Vernon: Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association, 1951). 35.

<sup>26</sup> Esther White. Interview Held at Mount Vernon. Alexandria, Virginia. October, 2009.

<sup>27</sup> Oehrlein and Associates Architects. “Condition Assessment of Greenhouse Slave Quarters.” Virginia: July, 1992. 46-47.

case studies for the exploration of other interpretive strategies currently implemented for slave quarter sites. These strategies are studied in order to provide references for new recommendations to the interpretation currently used at Mount Vernon. In Chapter 5, recommendations for changes to the current interpretation for the sites at Mount Vernon is introduced, drawing upon the histories and current strategies of the two sites, as well as referencing ideas drawn from the case studies examined in Chapter 4. Chapter 6 summarizes the study of the sites at Mount Vernon, as well as reiterating ideas for a new interpretation plan.



**Fig. 1.1** Lauren Knight, *Mount Vernon*, March 15, 2010. Photograph. Alexandria, Virginia.

**Fig. 1.2.** George Washington, *Survey Map of Mount Vernon and Five Farms*, 1793. Map, 37 x 52 cm. Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division, Washington, D.C.

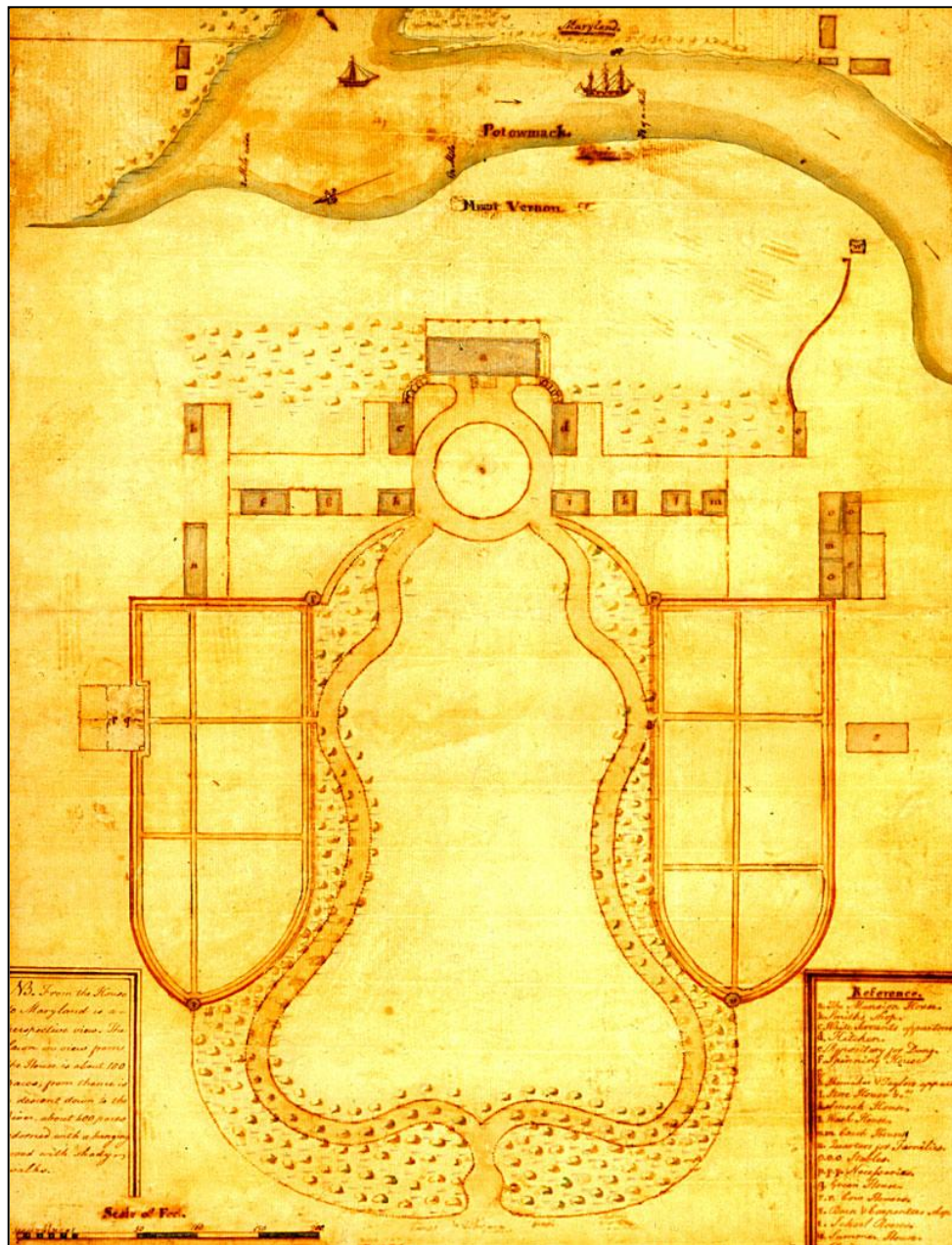


Fig 1.3. Samuel Vaughan, *Plan of Mount Vernon*, 1787. Map, 32 x 16 ¼ in. Mount Vernon Library. Alexandria, Virginia.





**Fig. 1.4. *Ann Pamela Cunningham*, Philadelphia, 1866. Photograph. Mount Vernon Library. Alexandria, Virginia.**



**Fig. 1.5. *Mount Vernon, East Facade*, 1860. Mount Vernon Library. Alexandria, Virginia.**



## Chapter 2: History of Slave Quarter Architecture

The design and construction of slave quarters in the United States from the 1600's until the 1860's represents a diverse approach to the plantation landscape, varying both with region and era. "The architecture of slave quarters evolved as the needs of the plantation owners and their slaves changed over the years."<sup>28</sup> During much of the seventeenth century, "slaves either were quartered in their owners' houses or slept in the lofts of nearby kitchens, sheds, and barns rather than in buildings expressly designated as slave residences."<sup>29</sup> The reason for this was due to the fact that slaves in the seventeenth century were often treated as indentured servants. A higher level of racial mixing and social intimacy existed between the owners and slaves in the seventeenth century, creating a permeable living environment.<sup>30</sup>

By the end of the seventeenth century, the importation of enslaved workers rose sharply, and the divide between master and slave became more clearly defined. Those slaves who functioned solely as field workers were quartered in houses constructed in the fields, as opposed to living close to the main house.<sup>31</sup> "At the beginning of the eighteenth century, as the number of acres on rural estates was increasing, planters began to divide their plantations into manageable portions, or quarters."<sup>32</sup> As a result

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<sup>28</sup> Philip J. Schwarz. *Slavery at the Home of George Washington*. (Charlottesville, Virginia: The University of Virginia Press, 2002). 20.

<sup>29</sup> John Michael Vlach. *Back of the Big House*. (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993) 154.

<sup>30</sup> David Brion Davis. *Slavery in the Colonial Chesapeake*. (Williamsburg, Virginia: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1998). 3-4.

<sup>31</sup> David Brion Davis. *Slavery in the Colonial Chesapeake*. (Williamsburg, Virginia: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1998). 20.

<sup>32</sup> John Michael Vlach. *Back of the Big House*. (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993) 150-152.

of this subdividing, by the mid-eighteenth century, sets of slave cabins became commonplace architectural features of the plantation landscape.

In order to comprehend the construction and design of housing used for home and field slaves, the layout of the plantation landscape must be understood. This layout was defined by the planter and the slaves and their interactions with the landscape and with one another.

The white landscape, or more precisely the great planter's landscape, was both an articulated and a processional one. It was articulated in the sense that it consisted of a network of spaces-rooms in the house, the house itself, outbuildings-that was linked by roads and that functioned as the setting for community interactions that each had their own particular character, but worked together to embody the community as a whole. The formalized layout of a great plantation complex facilitated the operation of this landscape in one form. One set of meanings, that is, was derived from moving through this microlandscape which had the individual planter at its center.<sup>33</sup>

According to architectural historian Dell Upton, "the highly formalized layout of showplace plantations constituted an articulated processional landscape, a spatial system designed to indicate the centrality of the planters and to keep them aloof from any visitors behind a series of physical barriers that simultaneously functioned as social buffers."<sup>34</sup> (fig. 2.1) "The great planter intended that his landscape would be hierarchical, leading to himself at the center. His house was raised above the other buildings and was often set off from the surrounding countryside by a series of barriers or boundaries-fences and terraces. It was tied to the public landscape by

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<sup>33</sup> Dell Upton. "White and Black Landscapes in Eighteenth-Century Virginia." *Material Life in America, 1600-1860*. Edited by Robert Blair St. George. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), 358.

<sup>34</sup> John Michael Vlach. *The Back of the Big House*. (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993) 8.

carefully conceived roads and drives.”<sup>35</sup> Although the layout of the plantation emphasized order, the slave quarters were typically designed for functionality, not appearance, and less consideration was given to their overall aesthetic.

The slaves’ understanding and interpretation of the plantation landscape varied greatly from the planter. “The black landscape had several aspects. Some were reflexive, that is, they consisted of the slaves’ responses as part of the “audience” of a planter’s landscape.”<sup>36</sup> In this type of landscape, slaves were free to move throughout spaces, with little concern for the hierarchical arrangement that was presented for visitors to the plantation. House slaves often moved throughout the Big House by a series of connecting routes that mirrored the private routes that led the planter and his family throughout the house. “Since the meaning of space depends as much on how we got to them as it does on our being in them-on the shifting states of awareness as we pass from one barrier after another-it is evident that in circumventing the formal barriers of the processional entrance, both the private and the slaves’ route undercut the social statement made by the formal approach.”<sup>37</sup>

In order for a plantation to thrive and the slave population to be controlled, planters held a world view that the uncivilized, meaning both the natural and the human, had to be held to a rigid, hierarchical order that was emphasized in the

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<sup>35</sup> Dell Upton. “White and Black Landscapes in Eighteenth-Century Virginia.” *Material Life in America, 1600-1860*. Edited by Robert Blair St. George. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), 358.

<sup>36</sup> Dell Upton. “White and Black Landscapes in Eighteenth-Century Virginia.” *Material Life in America, 1600-1860*. Edited by Robert Blair St. George. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), 360.

<sup>37</sup> Dell Upton. “White and Black Landscapes in Eighteenth-Century Virginia.” *Material Life in America, 1600-1860*. Edited by Robert Blair St. George. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), 360.

architectural design of the plantation itself.<sup>38</sup> Slaves recognized their part in society, and understood that they were housed in small dwellings in order to be controlled and watched. “In the case of many plantation estates, however, the slave quarters were located a relative distance from the main house, which allowed the slaves to create their own landscape, often unseen by the planter.”<sup>39</sup> Many planters chose to keep the quarters intended for field hands out of view of the central estate, in order to create a more pleasing view of the estate, as well as keep with the overall cohesive appearance of the main house and outbuildings.

The landscape created by slaves involved building small gardens, paths through the woods and crafting a permeable sensibility between the inside and the outside.

The surrounding communal work and living spaces that the slaves fashioned for themselves often closely resembled the layout of a West African compound. To privileged contemporary observers the most distinctive features of these ramshackle dwellings—with their earthen floors, wattle-and-daub chimneys, and closely packed residents—was their meanness. Read one way, this juxtaposition of luxury and deprivation underscored the raw power that the slave owners exercised over their bound workers. Read another way, the quarter complexes also revealed elements of choice and continuity salvaged from a very different cultural tradition. Privileged whites might own the land, but their control over the landscape, even in quarters within full view of their great houses, was far more tenuous.<sup>40</sup>

Within the context of slave quarter architecture, there are two distinct types of housing that must be considered: the Big House quarters and the field quarters. The number of slaves who worked within the main house was much smaller than the

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<sup>38</sup> John Michael Vlach. *Back of the Big House*. (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993) 8-9.

<sup>39</sup> John Michael Vlach. *Back of the Big House*. (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993) 22.

<sup>40</sup> Lorena S. Walsh. *From Calabar to Carter's Grove*. (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1997). 20.

number of slaves required in the fields to cultivate the crops. Since the number of house slaves was smaller, the house workers were often located in better-built quarters.<sup>41</sup> An example of this are the quarters for house slaves constructed at Bellamy Mansion in Wilmington, North Carolina (fig. 2.2). These quarters were constructed of brick to blend with the appearance of the Big House, as well as the outbuildings on the central part of the plantation. “Quarters for house slaves were often close to the main house on large plantations, and they were carefully ordered in rows or “streets.” If they were visible from the house, they were arranged on the site and treated on their exteriors with an eye to the visual. Other planters hid them from the eye, and in those cases they were usually plainer, but were nevertheless carefully sited and arranged.”<sup>42</sup>

The architectural style of house slave quarters consisted of several different building styles, which could be modified to fit both the needs of the planter and his slaves. “House quarters consisted of several building types, which could be modified to fit the needs of the planter and his house slaves.”<sup>43</sup> The smallest type consisted of one room, typically square in plan, which would be used to house multiple slaves (fig. 2.3). The second type was a two-room structure, in which a centrally located fireplace and chimney served as separation between the two rooms<sup>44</sup> (fig. 2.4). “The third type of slave quarter consisted of a double-pen house built two stories high, so that the

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<sup>41</sup> John Michael Vlach. *Back of the Big House*. (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993) 30-36.

<sup>42</sup> Dell Upton. “White and Black Landscapes in Eighteenth-Century Virginia.” *Material Life in America, 1600-1860*. Edited by Robert Blair St. George. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), 360.

<sup>43</sup> John Michael Vlach. *Back of the Big House*. (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993) 37.

<sup>44</sup> John Michael Vlach. *Back of the Big House*. (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993) 24.

ground floor might be used as a kitchen, while the second floor would be the bedrooms for the slaves (fig. 2.5).”<sup>45</sup> These three basic designs were often modified according to the needs of the planter, and the number of slaves assigned to work in the house.

The Big House slave quarters were also more likely to have been designed to be cohesive with the overall impression of the estate and the Big House, meaning that higher quality materials would be used in the construction of the house quarters. By blending the appearance of the house slave quarters with the other structures on the estate, but also ensuring that they were subordinate in size to the Big House, the owner emphasized both order and his power over the house workers, both of which were necessary for the continuation of this “peculiar institution.”

The slave quarters for field workers, however, were entirely different in appearance and design from the Big House quarters (fig. 2.6). “The designs conceived of for slave quarters were based on an American architectural tradition that employed square or rectangular room units.”<sup>46</sup> Single-pen, or one-room, cabins formed the core of most field quarters.<sup>47</sup> The field slaves’ quarters were typically square or rectangular boxes with roofs, made of hand-hewn logs. “The walls, often left unpainted, were pierced only by a door and a few square holes for windows, if there were any windows. Dark both inside and out, these buildings would only on rare

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<sup>45</sup> John Michael Vlach. *Back of the Big House*. (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993) 24.

<sup>46</sup> John Michael Vlach. *Back of the Big House*. (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993) 29-30.

<sup>47</sup> John Michael Vlach. *Back of the Big House*. (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993) 152.

occasions be mistaken for anything but slave quarters.”<sup>48</sup> The quarters for the field workers were built for utility, not comfort. The quarters for field slaves were similar in appearance and architectural layout to housing lived in by poor, white planters.

In many respects, the physical characteristics of the quarters—small, flimsy and sparsely furnished—merely reflected the slaves’ character as poor people in Virginia. Their houses were indistinguishable in size, elaboration and quality from those of white “common planters.” But whereas poor whites’ spartan conditions reflected their own lack of economic success, the poverty of slaves on large plantations was the result of the appropriation of their labor for the enrichment of the planter.<sup>49</sup>

The design of field slave housing varied by region, typically reflecting the settlement period of the area. During the eighteenth century in Virginia, it was common for quarters for field slaves to be grouped together near the fields, out of sight of the Big House. Most of these cabins were “small, earthfast structures built of logs standing or lying directly on the ground or erected in postholes, with wooden, clay-daubed chimneys that could be knocked down quickly if they caught on fire.”<sup>50</sup> Whereas in South Carolina, the slave quarters were “With little guidance or knowledge of European building techniques, these dwellings reflected African architectural style. These quarters were typically small rectangular huts built with mud walls and thatched roofs.”<sup>51</sup> The regional differences in field slave quarters likely arose from the difference in settlement periods between the states, as well as

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<sup>48</sup> John Michael Vlach. *Back of the Big House* (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993) 162.

<sup>49</sup> Dell Upton. “White and Black Landscapes in Eighteenth-Century Virginia.” *Material Life in America, 1600-1860*. Edited by Robert Blair St. George. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), 360.

<sup>50</sup> Lorena S. Walsh. *From Calabar to Carter’s Grove*. (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1997). 181.

<sup>51</sup> John Michael Vlach. *Back of the Big House* (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993) 172.

where in Africa the slaves came from, with their knowledge of different construction techniques.

The architecture of field slave quarters also evolved throughout the centuries. As the number of slaves being imported from Africa increased through the eighteenth and into the early nineteenth century, single-family log cabins were replaced by two-unit and hall-and-parlor houses, in order to accommodate the increasing number of laborers. The hall-and-parlor quarters were rectangular buildings that were divided into two rooms, with one room being larger than the other. In these quarters, the rooms were each given a specific function, with the larger room, or the hall, serving as the kitchen and workroom and the smaller room functioning as the bedroom. “The two-unit housing was two single-pen cabins under one roof, with a chimney acting as a barrier between the two units.”<sup>52</sup> These quarters were usually arranged in a symmetrical pattern, in neat rows, as opposed to the more haphazard, log cabin styles that had predominated in the eighteenth century.<sup>53</sup> It is important to note that “even a good, new cabin was of course a tiny, crude log shelter with a dirt floor, wood chimney and unglazed windows.”<sup>54</sup> Part of the shifting attitude in making these slave dwellings more appealing to the eye developed from planters who believed that the log cabins that had been used as quarters were unfitting to the grand appearance of the plantation.

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<sup>52</sup> John Michael Vlach. *Back of the Big House* (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993) 174-175.

<sup>53</sup> John Michael Vlach. *Back of the Big House* (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993) 174-175.

<sup>54</sup> Lorena S. Walsh. *From Calabar to Carter's Grove*. (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1997). 90.



While differences in housing were apparent between the house and field slaves, the architecture of slavery also varied depending upon the needs of the planter. Large plantations often consisted of a mixture of housing for slaves. The decisions of the plantation owner to either choose one form of slave housing, or to combine different types of housing for slaves was influenced by several factors.<sup>55</sup> “The size of the enslaved population and the economic and social position of the master probably were prime determinants, but the demographic makeup of the slave community and the length of time since emigration from Africa also played a role.”<sup>56</sup>

The architecture of field slave quarters may have actually functioned to remind slaves of their homes in Africa, an unintended effect of the oppressive building techniques used by plantation owners.

The traditional building units in much of West and Central Africa frequently measure ten feet by ten feet or less, and many freestanding houses have no openings other than a single doorway. The dark, tight enclosure provides adequate shelter in a tropical environment where most living is done out-of-doors and a house is used mainly for sleeping.<sup>57</sup>

Planters were unaware of the fact that the dwellings they constructed for slaves for economic and hierarchical reasons allowed slaves to recall Africa, and perhaps to find some small measure of comfort in the housing they were afforded.

Additionally, many slaves attempted to make improvements to the exterior and interior of their dwellings. “Former slaves indicate that they would re-plant

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<sup>55</sup> John Michael Vlach. *Back of the Big House* (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993) 163.

<sup>56</sup> Dennis J. Pogue. “The Domestic Architecture of Slavery at George Washington’s Mount Vernon.” *Winterthur Portfolio*, Volume 37, Number 1, 1992. 3

<sup>57</sup> John Michael Vlach. *Back of the Big House* (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993) 165-166.

flowers around their houses, and cultivate gardens.”<sup>58</sup> While the garden served a functional purpose, providing the slaves with vegetables as part of their diet, it also allowed them to re-claim a piece of the plantation landscape as their own.<sup>59</sup> For the interior of their quarters, slaves would often make what furniture they could. “The simple beds, benches, and tables fashioned by slaves during their little bits of free time, together with a few cheap pictures and other trinkets, may not seem like much of an improvement, but within the context of servitude these items represent significant achievements.”<sup>60</sup> These decorative improvements indicate that slaves worked together as a community to furnish whatever comforts they could.

While the architecture of slave quarters varied across regions and time periods, the constant was that the plantation layout was designed to emphasize the power of the planter and the subordinate position of the slaves, through both landscape and architecture. The architecture of slave quarters indicated the lower position of the slaves, as well as the planter’s power over them. Within these rigid confines of a plantation, however, slaves were able to create their own identity in the plantation landscape.

Understanding the context of architectural styles of slave quarters is significant to the study of the two sites at Mount Vernon due to the diverse nature of the architecture of the two buildings. The Greenhouse Slave Quarters were constructed as wings to the pre-existing Greenhouse structure on the grounds, and are

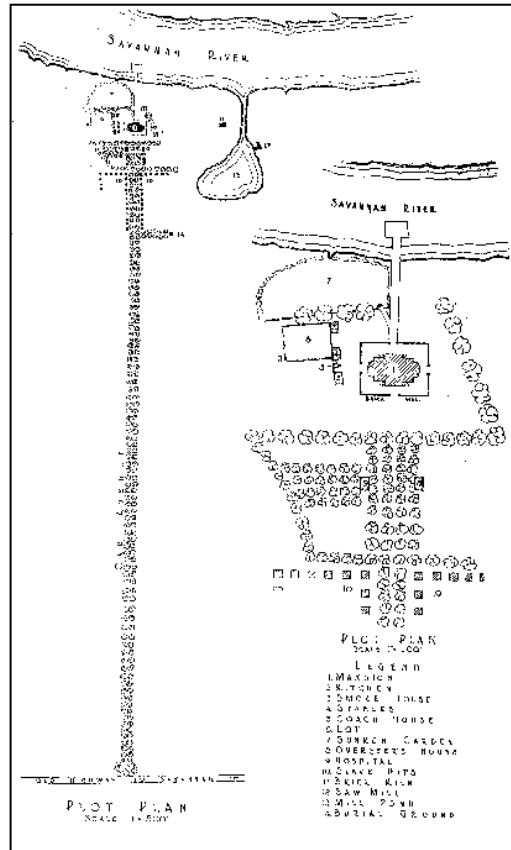
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<sup>58</sup> Dennis J. Pogue. “The Domestic Architecture of Slavery at George Washington’s Mount Vernon.” *Winterthur Portfolio*, Volume 37, Number 1, 1992. 4.

<sup>59</sup> Dennis J. Pogue. “The Domestic Architecture of Slavery at George Washington’s Mount Vernon.” *Winterthur Portfolio*, Volume 37, Number 1, 1992. 4.

<sup>60</sup> John Michael Vlach. *Back of the Big House* (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993) 167.

similar in appearance to the slave quarters located at the Bellamy Mansion in Wilmington, North Carolina (fig.2.2). The floor plan of each wing is a two-room design, and the building is brick, with a wood-shingle roof. The Log Cabin at Pioneer Farm, designed to replicate a field quarter, is a one-room floor plan, built as a single structure, and made of logs, with mud daub chinking. The different architectural styles of the two sites speak not only to the site specific architecture of both dwellings, but the different needs and lifestyles of enslaved field and house workers at Mount Vernon.



**Fig. 2.1. William B. Harper, *The Hermitage Site Plan*. 1936. The Library of Congress, Historic American Buildings Survey Collection, Washington, D.C.**

**Fig. 2.2. *Bellamy Mansion Slave Quarters*, 2009. Photograph. Picasa Web Albums.**

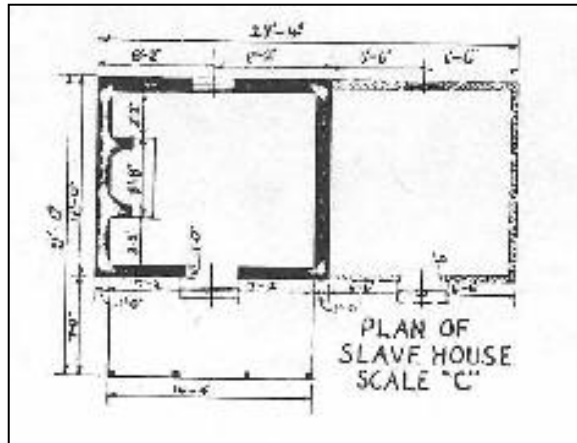


Fig. 2.3. J.L. Irving, *Floor Plan of One Room Slave Quarter at Hurt House*. 1935. The Library of Congress, Historic American Buildings Survey Collection, Washington, D.C.

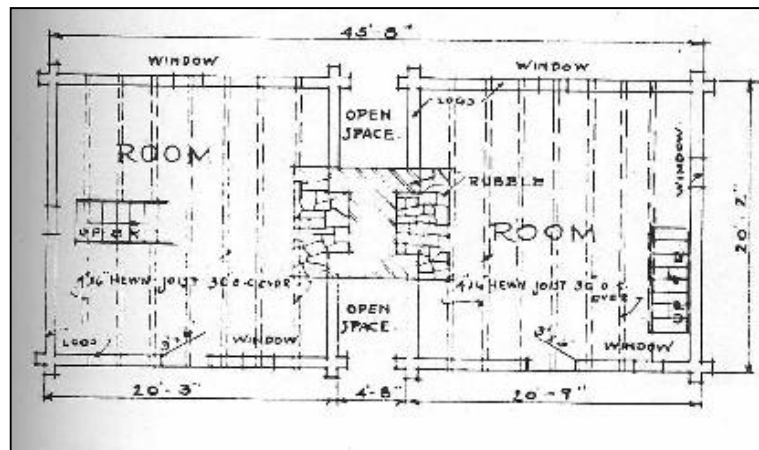
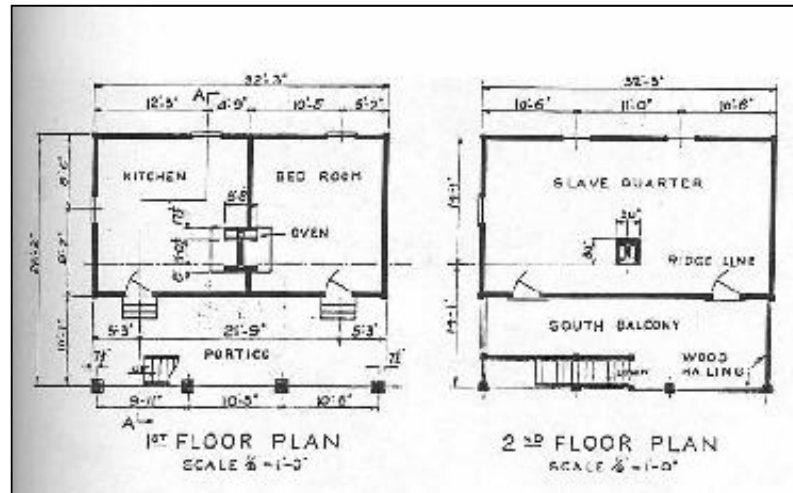


Fig. 2.4. Harry J. Frahn, *Floor Plan of Two-Room Slave Quarters at The Forks of Cypress Plantation*. 1935-36. The Library of Congress, Historic American Buildings Survey Collection, Washington, D.C.



**Fig. 2.5. A. Brandt, *Floor Plan of Double Pen, Two-Story Slave Quarters at Rosemount. 1934-35.* The Library of Congress, Historic American Buildings Survey Collection, Washington, D.C.**

**Fig.2.6. *Rosemont Farm, Field Slave Quarters.* Photograph. Waterford History. Waterford, Virginia.**

## Chapter 3: Slave Quarter Sites at Mount Vernon

As examined in the previous chapter, the architectural styles of slave quarters differ greatly, depending both upon region and site of the dwellings. Additionally, slave dwellings may reflect the needs of the enslaved population of a plantation, which differed between house slaves and field workers. At Mount Vernon, both site location and lifestyle of the enslaved population factor into the history and construction of the two distinct slave dwelling sites.

When George Washington inherited Mount Vernon from his brother, Lawrence, in 1754, the grounds had been carefully constructed to function as a working plantation. “The estate of Lawrence Washington included sixty-two slaves, with approximately forty listed as living at Mount Vernon.”<sup>61</sup> In addition to the mansion and grounds, George Washington inherited twenty-seven of Lawrence’s slaves, with the remainder willed to other family members.

As a result of this arrangement, housing was needed for the numerous slaves that worked on the farms at Mount Vernon. “Washington’s slave holdings grew steadily from the 27 individuals he had acquired. By 1763 Washington paid taxes on 64 individuals; by 1770 he was taxed on 87 slaves; and by 1786 there were 216 slaves at Mount Vernon. Finally, in the year of his death, Washington inventoried his slave population for the last time, listing a total of 316 slaves, 201 of whom were considered fit to work.”<sup>62</sup> Until 1793, a large frame building, known as the House for Families, served as the primary quarters for slaves working in the house and on the

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<sup>61</sup> Dennis J. Pogue. “The Domestic Architecture of Slavery at George Washington’s Mount Vernon.” *Winterthur Portfolio*, Volume 37, Number 1, 1992. 5

<sup>62</sup> Dennis J. Pogue. “The Domestic Architecture of Slavery at George Washington’s Mount Vernon.” *Winterthur Portfolio*, Volume 37, Number 1, 1992. 5

Mansion Farm.<sup>63</sup> The quarters located at the other outlying farms were small log cabins, intended to house the field slaves.<sup>64</sup>

The House for Families is no longer extant and the only surviving pieces of evidence for the appearance of the structure are a painting by Edward Savage, which shows the building in 1792 (fig.3.1) and artifacts collected from archaeological surveys performed from 1984-1991. In the image, the House for Families is circled in red. In Savage's painting, the structure "is depicted as a substantial building, two stories in height, at least six bays in length, and with chimneys in each gable."<sup>65</sup> It is speculated that the building served as housing for enslaved families living on the Mansion Farm.<sup>66</sup> A large number of the Washington slaves had family members living at other plantations across Northern Virginia. "Washington's will indicates that in 1799, of 96 married slaves living on one of the five farms, 36 lived in the same household as their spouse or children, 38 had spouses located on one of the other five farms, while 22 had spouses at neighboring plantations."<sup>67</sup> Many of the slaves who worked in the Mansion were quartered in the House for Families, while the field workers lived in small log cabins, which were located adjacent to the lane, and across from the Greenhouse.<sup>68</sup>

From 1791-1793, Washington undertook construction of a new building to house his increasing slave population. The House for Families was an older wooden

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<sup>63</sup> Frank E. Morse. "Special Report on the Quarters." Mount Vernon Ladies' Association. (Alexandria, Virginia: 1959). 6.

<sup>64</sup> Dennis Pogue, Interview Held at Mount Vernon. Alexandria, Virginia. October, 2009.

<sup>65</sup> Dennis J. Pogue. "The Domestic Architecture of Slavery at George Washington's Mount Vernon." *Winterthur Portfolio*, Volume 37, Number 1, 1992. 7.

<sup>66</sup> Esther White, Interview Held at Mount Vernon. Alexandria, Virginia. October, 2009.

<sup>67</sup> Alderman Library, The University of Virginia. "The Papers of George Washington: The Will of George Washington." <http://gwpapers.virginia.edu/documents/will/slavelist.html> Accessed January 15, 2010.

<sup>68</sup> Dennis Pogue, Interview Held at Mount Vernon. Alexandria, Virginia. October, 2009.



structure, likely built by Lawrence Washington when he owned the property, and it may be that rot or deteriorating conditions led Washington to recognize that new housing was needed for his slaves. “To house the growing number of slaves, two one-story wings were added onto the Greenhouse from 1791-1792.”<sup>69</sup> “Each wing contained two large rooms. All four rooms were identical and each had a single doorway, two windows and a large hearth for cooking and heating the space.”<sup>70</sup> By the beginning of 1793, the additions were completed and occupied.

The design for the Greenhouse Slave Quarters was unique for its time period (fig. 3.2). “By the late eighteenth century, many plantation owners no longer employed single-sex, dormitory-style quarters as their primary housing for enslaved workers.”<sup>71</sup> Single-family log cabins, such as the ones located on the outlying farms at Mount Vernon, became the typical form of slave housing, due to the facts that they were inexpensive to build, didn’t require skilled workers to construct and were relatively easy to move from one location to another. “By contrast, large brick structures like the Mount Vernon slave quarters required a significant financial investment, quality materials, and skilled craftsmen to construct them.”<sup>72</sup> Washington likely chose to create the dormitory-style Greenhouse quarters since many of the slaves that he owned were either single adults, or married adults whose spouses and families lived on nearby plantations. Additionally, “the design of the rooms, and their alignment along North Lane, would allow Washington’s farm manager and overseer

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<sup>69</sup> Dennis Pogue, Interview Held at Mount Vernon. Alexandria, Virginia. October, 2009.

<sup>70</sup> Benjamin Schwantes. “The Mount Vernon Greenhouse Slave Quarters: Reinterpreting an Undocumented Living Space.” Summer 2009.

<sup>71</sup> Dennis J. Pogue. “The Domestic Architecture of Slavery at George Washington’s Mount Vernon.” *Winterthur Portfolio*, Volume 37, Number 1, 1992. 9.

<sup>72</sup> Benjamin Schwantes. “The Mount Vernon Greenhouse Slave Quarters: Reinterpreting an Undocumented Living Space.” Summer 2009.

to monitor the movements and activities of the enslaved residents at the Mansion House Farm more effectively.”<sup>73</sup>

The Greenhouse Slave Quarters were built of brick, laid in an English bond pattern, to blend with the appearance of the Greenhouse structure (fig. 3.3).<sup>74</sup> “Both wings had a gable roof with cedar shingles, and the southern façades of the wings were pierced by two small, three-over-three wood hopper windows.”<sup>75</sup> The slave quarter wings measured 70 by 20 feet, and as they were two separate spaces, it is likely that Washington intended them to function as male and female dormitories. “George Washington’s plantation manager, George A. Washington, noted, “The New Quarter will I have no doubt be fully adequate to accommodate conveniently all the Negroes that You would wish or find necessary to be kept at the Mansion House.”<sup>76</sup> Clearly, the Greenhouse Slave Quarters were intended to function as the primary living space for the majority of unattached slaves that worked on the Mount Vernon Estate.

The Greenhouse Slave Quarters today are a reconstruction of the original quarters that were located on the same site.<sup>77</sup> The original slave quarters burned in 1835, leaving only the foundation and the rear wall of the west wing of the quarters standing (figs. 3.4, 3.5). The estate and grounds were owned by John Augustine Washington in 1835, and following the fire, he attempted to rebuild them. “In the

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<sup>73</sup> Benjamin Schwantes. “The Mount Vernon Greenhouse Slave Quarters: Reinterpreting an Undocumented Living Space.” Summer 2009.

<sup>74</sup> John Milner Associates Inc. “Mount Vernon Estate and Gardens: Cultural Landscape Study, Volume 1: Chapters 1-4.” (Virginia: 2004). 10-11

<sup>75</sup> Oehrlein and Associates Architects. “Condition Assessment of the Greenhouse Slave Quarters.” Oehrlein and Associates Architects: July 1992.

<sup>76</sup> Dennis J. Pogue. “The Domestic Architecture of Slavery at George Washington’s Mount Vernon.” *Winterthur Portfolio*, Volume 37, Number 1, 1992. 11

<sup>77</sup> Esther White, Interview Held at Mount Vernon. Alexandria, Virginia. October, 2009.

earliest years of the Association's stewardship a small greenhouse was erected on the site of the original greenhouse; utility was the immediate motive. At that period limited means and lack of data would have prevented a faithful reconstruction. A few years later the Negro quarters were rebuilt, more nearly along the original lines, but the interiors were adapted to current needs.”<sup>78</sup> When the Mount Vernon Ladies Association, under the direction of Ann Pamela Cunningham, purchased the estate from John Augustine Washington, they began restoration work on the Mansion, outbuildings and grounds immediately in the summer of 1859.<sup>79</sup>

Archaeological excavations, as well as documentary evidence provided the primary means of determining the appearance of the reconstructed Greenhouse slave quarters. In both 1935 and 1941, archaeological excavations were performed at the site, resulting in artifacts being uncovered, including the keystone for the Greenhouse window.<sup>80</sup> “In 1936, Morley Williams was permanently hired by the Association as Director of Research and Restoration, and he subsequently performed extensive archaeological work.”<sup>81</sup> These excavations aided in determining the layout of the quarters, as well as verifying which of Washington’s plans of the building was the final constructed appearance of the additions.

Beginning in late 1949, the reconstruction of George Washington’s Greenhouse, a project that had been planned for years, was initiated. The existing Greenhouse and quarters were razed and archaeological investigations initiated the following year by Walter M. Macomber. The Washington period Greenhouse and quarters were reconstructed in 1950-1952

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<sup>78</sup> Mount Vernon Ladies Association. “Mount Vernon Annual Report, 1951.” E 312.5 .M74. 36

<sup>79</sup> Benjamin Schwantes. “The Mount Vernon Greenhouse Slave Quarters: Reinterpreting an Undocumented Living Space.” Summer 2009.

<sup>80</sup> John Milner Associates, Inc. *Cultural Landscape Study: Mount Vernon Estate and Gardens*. Volume 1, Chapters 1-4. MVLC, E 312.5 .M68, 2001. 202.

<sup>81</sup> John Milner Associates, Inc. *Cultural Landscape Study: Mount Vernon Estate and Gardens*. Volume 1, Chapters 1-4. MVLC, E 312.5 .M68, 2001. 208

based on original floor plans and a nineteenth century drawing of the façade of the structure from an insurance policy.<sup>82</sup>

For the interior layout of the Greenhouse wings, Washington's plan of the building and the archaeological evidence were the primary pieces of evidence.

Washington actually prepared two plans, the important difference between them relating to the number of rooms-either two or three-that each of the wings would accommodate. Archaeological investigations undertaken in 1949 were instrumental in confirming that the two-room plan was the one finally selected, as the foundations of the partition walls were revealed in the appropriate locations. These investigations also confirmed that the central portion of the structure had been divided to include a large south-facing plant room and the two smaller rooms arranged along the north wall, as shown on Washington's plan. No structural remains of any of the fireplaces/chimneys indicated on Washington's plan were found, but the evidence provided by the insurance plans and the other views provided the necessary confirmation for their location.<sup>83</sup>

In addition to the original floor plans, insurance policy and archaeological evidence, the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association utilized several photographs from 1885 that showed a ruin of a rear wall of the west wing of the quarters that survived after the fire, but subsequently had crumbled by 1950, in order to design the appearance of the exterior.<sup>84</sup>

The Greenhouse slave quarters today are little changed from the reconstructed façade from the 1950s. "Historians agree the exterior of the slave quarters accurately depicts the appearance of the building during Washington's lifetime. The interior, however, has been a source of controversy, as the methods for interpreting these

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<sup>82</sup> John Milner Associates, Inc. *Cultural Landscape Study: Mount Vernon Estate and Gardens*. Volume 1, Chapters 1-4. MVLC, E 312.5 .M68, 2001. 237.

<sup>83</sup> Unknown Author. "A Proposal to Restore the Greenhouse Slave Quarters." April 10, 2008. 2.

<sup>84</sup> Dennis Pogue, Interview Held at Mount Vernon. Alexandria, Virginia. October, 2009.

spaces have been called into question.”<sup>85</sup> Archaeologists Mark Bograd and Teresa Singleton argue that “slavery is benignly portrayed at Mount Vernon. Aside from the passive presentation of information through signs, visiting the slave quarters is entirely discretionary and easily missed. Only one-quarter of the living space at the Greenhouse is interpreted as a slave residence; the remaining space houses the museum shop, museum annex and storage space.”<sup>86</sup> Sections of the slave quarters are now used as the museum shop and storage space, which were created in 1968, during a subsequent renovation to the Greenhouse complex.

The interior of the Greenhouse slave quarters presents a challenge to the visitor as well as the museum staff (fig. 3.6). Currently, the interpretation of slave life at the Greenhouse Slave Quarters is not successful in attracting and educating visitors. One wing is open to the public, with one part of the space cordoned off as a gift shop, and the other part set up as housing for a family, rather than a single-sex dormitory. A sign at the site describes the life of Isaac Washington, an enslaved carpenter, and his family, leading visitors to believe that the entire 70 by 20 foot wing was housing for one enslaved family at Mount Vernon, as opposed to housing for at least 20 slaves of the same sex. The furnishings are of a higher quality than most slaves would have been privy to, leading visitors to misunderstand the harsh conditions of slavery. There is no first person re-enactor or any docent at the site to answer questions. While Mount Vernon has recently taken steps to correct this interpretation, by renovating the interior space of the Greenhouse Slave Quarters and

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<sup>85</sup> Dennis Pogue, Interview Held at Mount Vernon. Alexandria, Virginia. October, 2009.

<sup>86</sup> Mark D. Bograd and Theresa A. Singleton. “The Interpretation of Slavery: Mount Vernon, Monticello and Colonial Williamsburg.” (California: AltaMira Press, 1997). 196.

reconfiguring the layout of the space, slavery continues to be deemphasized at the site.

Constructed in 2007, the Slave Cabin located at George Washington's Pioneer Farm is a more recent addition to the Mount Vernon estate.<sup>87</sup> (fig. 3.7). Pioneer Farm is not one of the original farms owned by Washington, although it is on land that was part of the Mount Vernon Estate. Rather, Pioneer Farm is an interpretation of the elements of the four outlying farms that comprised part of Washington's holdings, including Union, River, Dogue Run and Muddy Hole Farms.<sup>88</sup> The Pioneer Farm site was originally opened in 1996 to allow visitors to see the type of agricultural work that would have occurred on Washington's outlying farms.<sup>89</sup> Since slaves performed the manual labor at both the Mansion and the outlying farms, an interpretation of slave life at the Pioneer Farm site was deemed necessary. The reconstruction of a slave cabin at one of Washington's farms utilized several pieces of evidence. No direct archaeological evidence or extant structures from Mount Vernon were used to construct the slave cabin, as those farms that had been part of the estate had been sold off.<sup>90</sup> "The design of the cabin is based primarily on a combination of documentary and graphic information relating to slave housing at Mount Vernon."<sup>91</sup> The curators at Mount Vernon studied Washington's brief accounts of the slave housing at Mount Vernon, as well as visitor accounts of slave life.

There were two general sizes of quarters at the farms, as Washington referred to "the largest kind"-at least some of which were "built for two families, with

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<sup>87</sup> Dennis Pogue, Interview Held at Mount Vernon. Alexandria, Virginia. October, 2009.

<sup>88</sup> Dennis Pogue, Interview Held at Mount Vernon. Alexandria, Virginia. October, 2009.

<sup>89</sup> Dennis Pogue, Interview Held at Mount Vernon. Alexandria, Virginia. October, 2009.

<sup>90</sup> Dennis Pogue, Interview Held at Mount Vernon. Alexandria, Virginia. October, 2009.

<sup>91</sup> Mount Vernon Ladies' Association. "Reconstructing a Slave Cabin at Mount Vernon." [http://www.mountvernon.org/learn/pres\\_arch/index.cfm/pid/938/](http://www.mountvernon.org/learn/pres_arch/index.cfm/pid/938/) Accessed November 2009.

a chimney in the middle”-as well as “the smaller ones or cabins,” that had a single room. The cabins at the outlying farms were made of logs, which was a particularly popular type of construction used for slave dwellings in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. A French visitor to the plantation in 1788 remarked that, “three hundred Negroes live in a number of log houses in different parts” of the estate.<sup>92</sup>

Apart from Washington’s descriptions of the slave cabins, the staff at Mount Vernon also relied upon general knowledge of the appearance and construction of slave cabins, based on other archaeological and historical studies from the region. “Slave cabins at outlying farms typically had wooden chimneys chinked with clay, wooden shutters instead of window glass, and were made of logs daubed with mud. Most cabins housed two families, but smaller cabins housed only one.”<sup>93</sup> Utilizing descriptions of slave housing from different sources, as well as historical precedents for slave cabins allowed for the design of the reconstructed cabin’s appearance.

While descriptions of the slave cabins located at Washington’s farms, as well as knowledge about the general appearance and construction of slave cabins in the eighteenth century, provided evidence for how the slave cabin at Pioneer Farm should appear, the piece of evidence that most informed the reconstructed slave cabin was a photograph that was taken in 1908, which depicted a log cabin that was reportedly located on one of the farms at Mount Vernon (fig. 3.8). “In its overall appearance the structure is similar to any number of log cabins for slaves and freed blacks depicted in mid-nineteenth century images and accounts, and there is nothing about the building that disqualifies it from being 18<sup>th</sup> century in date. Therefore, the structure shown in

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<sup>92</sup> Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association. “Reconstructing a Slave Cabin at Mount Vernon.” [http://www.mountvernon.org/learn/pres\\_arch/index.cfm/pid/938/](http://www.mountvernon.org/learn/pres_arch/index.cfm/pid/938/) Accessed November 2009.

<sup>93</sup> Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association. “Slave Quarters.” [http://www.mountvernon.org/learn/meet\\_george/index.cfm/pid/212/](http://www.mountvernon.org/learn/meet_george/index.cfm/pid/212/) Accessed December 2009.

the photograph was selected to serve as the model for the new cabin.”<sup>94</sup> The curators at Mount Vernon determined that it was best to bring in professionals to design and build the slave cabin, as they wanted the building to be as similar in appearance to the image in the photograph as possible.<sup>95</sup> To determine the size of the building in the photograph, and develop a plan for the cabin that would be reconstructed, Mount Vernon staff digitized the photograph and studied the image in detail.<sup>96</sup> They were able to “determine the approximate size of the building (16 by 14-feet), the dimensions of the logs and of the door and window openings.”<sup>97</sup>

After determining the size of the cabin, staff at Mount Vernon met with contractors to discuss the appropriate manner in which to build the cabin. “It was determined that the cabin would be built directly on site, using modern equipment and tools that could replicate the appearance of the hand construction completed by the slaves who built their own homes in the eighteenth century.”<sup>98</sup> Oak logs were hand-hewn to give a rough appearance, and then stacked using modern construction equipment, to serve as the main components of the cabin. The logs were prepared for chinking by hand, and a mixture of clay and sand was applied in between the logs, along with wooden lath. Nails were used to join the wall logs and secure the floor joists, as well as the rafters and rafter collars.<sup>99</sup> The roof was constructed of pine shingles. The chimney was wooden frame, cut using modern tools, with lath applied

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<sup>94</sup> Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association. “Reconstructing a Slave Cabin at Mount Vernon.” [http://www.mountvernon.org/learn/pres\\_arch/index.cfm/pid/938/](http://www.mountvernon.org/learn/pres_arch/index.cfm/pid/938/) Accessed November 2009.

<sup>95</sup> Dennis Pogue, Interview Held at Mount Vernon. Alexandria, Virginia. October, 2009.

<sup>96</sup> Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association. “Reconstructing a Slave Cabin at Mount Vernon.” [http://www.mountvernon.org/learn/pres\\_arch/index.cfm/pid/938/](http://www.mountvernon.org/learn/pres_arch/index.cfm/pid/938/) Accessed November 2009.

<sup>97</sup> Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association. “Reconstructing a Slave Cabin at Mount Vernon.” [http://www.mountvernon.org/learn/pres\\_arch/index.cfm/pid/938/](http://www.mountvernon.org/learn/pres_arch/index.cfm/pid/938/) Accessed November 2009.

<sup>98</sup> Dennis Pogue, Interview Held at Mount Vernon. Alexandria, Virginia. October, 2009.

<sup>99</sup> Dennis Pogue, Interview Held at Mount Vernon. Alexandria, Virginia. October, 2009.



between the framing components, and finally with wooden logs and chinking applied.<sup>100</sup>

The finished cabin had a compacted dirt floor, with a root cellar, a single window on the front façade, with a wooden shutter, and two doors, one located on the front façade, the other on the rear. The effect created by the reconstructed cabin was of a roughly finished structure, emphasizing the humble appearance of slave housing that was constructed by the field workers in the eighteenth century (figs. 3.9, 3.10).

The interpretation for the Log Cabin site involves a first-person re-enactor representing one of Washington's enslaved field workers during the seasons that the cabin is open from May-October. The re-enactor allows visitors to enter the space and ask questions. In the off seasons, however, the Cabin's doorway is roped off, and a sign is placed inside, explaining what daily life was like for enslaved workers. The interior is furnished with a pallet on the floor for sleeping, several blankets, faux food and tools, both for cooking and working. Based upon field studies, many visitors appear curious to enter the space when it is blocked off, and are inquisitive about slave life at Mount Vernon.

The Greenhouse Slave Quarters and the Log Cabin located at the Pioneer Farm Site are entirely different representations and reconstructions of how slaves would have lived at the Mount Vernon Estate. While one site is used to provide visitors with an understanding of how house workers would have lived, the other site provides information about the life of a field worker. The Greenhouse Slave Quarter should be interpreted in a manner similar to the way in which the slave cabin is

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<sup>100</sup> Dennis Pogue. "Memorandum: Goals and Agenda Items for Slave Cabin Reconstruction." May 29, 2002.

interpreted, with first-person interpretation, and signage that explains the history of the building in order to make the experience of a visitor to the site more interactive.

The location and historical context of the two sites at Mount Vernon are key elements to examining the two dwellings, in terms of a new preservation and interpretation strategy. In order to further develop recommendations for the two sites at Mount Vernon, the interpretation of slave quarters and slave life at Carter's Grove, Monticello and Sully Plantation will be studied in the next chapter.



**Fig. 3.1.** Edward Savage, *West Front of Mount Vernon*. 1793. Painting, Mount Vernon Library, Alexandria, Virginia.



**Fig. 3.2.** Lauren Knight, *Greenhouse Slave Quarters, South Facade*. 2010. Photograph, Alexandria, Virginia.





**Fig. 3.3.** Lauren Knight, *Greenhouse Slave Quarters, North Facade*. 2010. Photograph. Alexandria, Virginia.



**Fig. 3.4** *North Lane Looking East Showing Ruins of the Greenhouse Slave Quarters*. 1860. Photograph. Mount Vernon Library. Alexandria, Virginia



**Fig. 3.5.** *Upper Garden Facing Southeast, Ruins of Rear Wall of Greenhouse Slave Quarters. c. 1889.* Photograph. Mount Vernon Library. Alexandria, Virginia.



**Fig. 3.6.** *Interior of Greenhouse Slave Quarters, East Wing. 1998.* Mount Vernon Library. Alexandria, Virginia.





**Fig. 3.7.** Lauren Knight, *Slave Log Cabin at Pioneer Farm Site*. 2010. Photograph. Alexandria, Virginia.



**Fig. 3.8.** *Log Cabin Purportedly Located at Mount Vernon*. Circa 1908. Photograph. Mount Vernon Library. Alexandria, Virginia.



**Fig 3.9.** Lauren Knight, *Detail of Exterior of Log Cabin, Planks and Chinking*. 2010. Photograph. Alexandria, Virginia.



**Fig 3.10.** Lauren Knight, *Detail of Notching of Corner Post, Exterior of Log Cabin*. 2010. Photograph. Alexandria, Virginia.

## Chapter 4: Interpreting Slave Quarters

Slave quarters, both those located adjacent to the Big House, and those located on outlying farms and fields pose an interpretive challenge. These sites are crucial to interpret as important elements of the plantation landscape, however, they are representative of places of anguish and inhumanity. The issue of how to properly interpret a place of conflicting emotions is the primary challenge concerning slave quarters. The problem becomes more complex when it is considered that there can be no single comprehensive interpretation strategy for slave housing, because of the varied nature of the sites and styles. Some historic sites have attempted to erase evidence of slave quarters, or allowed them to fall into neglect, while others have embraced full interpretation.

In order to create a set of recommendations for an interpretive plan for the two slave quarter sites at Mount Vernon, approaches at other sites should be considered. The exploration of slave life interpretation at Carter's Grove, Monticello and Sully Plantation offers useful elements from interpretive strategies that can lend themselves to the recommendations for a new plan for Mount Vernon.

Carter's Grove, located in Williamsburg, Virginia, is a 750-acre plantation located on the James River (fig. 4.1). The plantation was originally built for Carter Burwell, the grandson of Robert "King" Carter, in 1755. The property passed through generations of the Carter family, until 1969 when the estate became part of the properties owned by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, through a gift from the Rockefeller Foundation. Unlike Monticello, Carter's Grove featured a reconstructed



slave village, based upon archaeological evidence, staffed by costumed interpreters and enhanced by signs (fig. 4.2).

After acquiring the property, the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation began architectural research on slave housing in 1981. In addition, the Foundation also performed full archaeological excavations on the site, resulting in the discovery of household artifacts, as well as post holes of the foundations of former slave cabins and their yard enclosures. “In 1988 and 1989 Foundation craftsmen, using only eighteenth-century technology, built three dwelling units and a barn on the excavated footprints of a mid to late eighteenth-century quarter that likely housed most of the agricultural workers living on the home plantation.”<sup>101</sup> By adhering to traditional building techniques and tools, the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation was able to produce a set of reconstructed dwellings that were as close to the original as possible, without the original buildings remaining.

Through interpretation of the quarters, the visiting public was afforded the opportunity to observe and interact with characters that were representative of the slaves who inhabited the plantation landscape at the site. As is typical at many historic sites, “things to some extent were privileged over people in the initial public interpretation of the slave quarter site.”<sup>102</sup> An important facet of the interpretation at Carter’s Grove was that the museum staff determined it was important to select a particular point in time as the primary interpretive period. “This focus afforded opportunities to compare and contrast strikingly different standards of living among

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<sup>101</sup> Lorena S. Walsh. *From Calabar to Carter’s Grove*. (Virginia: The University of Virginia Press, 1997) xvii.

<sup>102</sup> Lorena S. Walsh. *From Calabar to Carter’s Grove*. (Virginia: The University of Virginia Press, 1997) xvii.

various economic groups.”<sup>103</sup> As a slave quarter site, with regards to preservation and interpretation, Carter’s Grove was a prime example, demonstrating how to successfully integrate reconstructed buildings into a historic site, while maintaining authenticity and the ability to communicate with visitors to the site. Considering that the slave quarters at Mount Vernon were all reconstructions, and that the estate is gradually introducing interpreters to portray first-person characters from the enslaved population at Mount Vernon, it is important to understand the successful plan that was created and implemented for Carter’s Grove. With the study of Carter’s Grove, however, it is important to understand that the plantation closed, due to an inability on the part of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation to keep up the necessary restorations with the funds they received. However, when considering interpretation imparting knowledge to the visiting public is how success is gauged, as opposed to the economics of funding.

Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello, located near Charlottesville, Virginia, is an example of a historic site that has archaeological evidence of slave housing, but no reconstructed quarters. Parallels between Monticello and Mount Vernon are evident: both are sites that were former homes of United States presidents, both were working plantations and both are now nationally recognized historic sites. The preservation of Monticello began when “it was purchased by a private non-profit organization, the Thomas Jefferson Foundation, in 1923 and restored by architects, Fiske Kimball and Milton L. Grigg.”<sup>104</sup> The primary slave quarters located at Monticello, known as Mulberry Row, were a set of seventeen structures, including housing for enslaved

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<sup>103</sup> Lorena S. Walsh. *From Calabar to Carter’s Grove*. (Virginia: The University of Virginia Press, 1997) xvii.

<sup>104</sup> Thomas Jefferson Foundation. “History of Monticello.” [www.monticello.org](http://www.monticello.org)

African-Americans, a smokehouse, a dairy, a stable and wood and ironworking shops.<sup>105</sup> These quarters were similar in layout to the slave quarters that stood opposite the Greenhouse Slave Quarters at Mount Vernon. At the Mount Vernon Estate, log cabins that were used as slave housing stood along Southern Lane.

The slave quarters located at Mulberry Row were log dwellings and therefore none of the structures remained when preservation was begun at Monticello.

Archaeological excavations were performed at the Mulberry Row site in the 1980's, revealing the cabin foundations and the root cellars.<sup>106</sup> "Given these findings, it is interesting to see how slavery figures into interpretation at Monticello. Unlike at Mount Vernon, there are no reconstructed slave cabins at Monticello, and Mulberry Row was un-interpreted until as recently as 1990-an omission perhaps related to the Foundation's reluctance to confront Jefferson's slaveholding past."<sup>107</sup>

There are three primary interpreted areas at Monticello: The Thomas Jefferson Visitor Center, the dependencies that are located adjacent to the Mansion and Mulberry Row. The visitor center was recently opened, and while it does present information on slavery at the estate, the topic is still not thoroughly covered (fig. 4.3). Similar to the new education and visitor center at Mount Vernon, the education and visitor center at Monticello tends to focus on the achievements of Jefferson, both private and public, as well as his architectural legacy in creating Monticello. The visitor center does feature biographies of well-known slaves who labored at the estate, such as Sally Hemmings and Isaac Jefferson, an enslaved blacksmith. In

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<sup>105</sup> Thomas Jefferson Foundation. "History of Monticello." [www.monticello.org](http://www.monticello.org)

<sup>106</sup> Thomas Jefferson Foundation. "History of Monticello." [www.monticello.org](http://www.monticello.org)

<sup>107</sup> Mark D. Bograd and Theresa A. Singleton. "The Interpretation of Slavery: Mount Vernon, Monticello and Colonial Williamsburg." (California: AltaMira Press, 1997). 198.

another section of the Visitor Center, there is a collection titled “Those Who Built Monticello,” and it contains the tools and the stories of the slaves who built the mansion.

The second interpreted area at Monticello is a room located in the dependencies that run alongside and beneath the Mansion. The room is furnished and interpreted as the quarters of Joseph Fossett, an enslaved blacksmith (fig. 4.4). Archaeological artifacts recovered from the site are on display in the room, with signs describing Fossett’s life. The signs used in this interpretation area clearly describe the life of Fossett, as well as how skilled, enslaved workers were employed at Monticello. This area of interpretation is comparable to the interior of the Greenhouse slave quarters at Mount Vernon.

The third interpreted area at Monticello is Mulberry Row, which is the most open and direct display of slavery at the estate (fig. 4.5). The lane is lined by interpretive signs, as well as brick ruins. The foundation of one of the slave cabins, that would have lined the lane during Jefferson’s lifetime, remains. There is a plaque at the foundation, describing the appearance and function of Mulberry Row. This site is along a primary road that visitors cross to reach the Mansion, making this slave quarter site visible on the plantation landscape.

Sully Plantation in Chantilly, Virginia is another example of a historic house museum that features interpreted slave quarters. Sully Plantation is a 1799 estate built by Richard Bland Lee (fig. 4.6). The reconstructed slave quarter at Sully was the product of extensive archaeological research at the site. The cabin does not feature any re-enactment, and there is only a small sign that describes the cabin. The cabin is

furnished similarly to the interpreted quarters at Monticello and Carter's Grove. The fact that the cabin is one of the first features that a visitor encounters upon their walk to the main house makes it easily viewed by most visitors to Sully.

All three of these case studies are integral to crafting new interpretation methods for Mount Vernon. Considering that the three sites approach the issue of interpreting their slave quarters in different ways, according to the needs of the site and the Foundation, it is not feasible to suggest that Mount Vernon adopt one of the plans that are used by one of the other estates. The interpretation strategy used at Monticello is not suitable for Mount Vernon because it is lacking in its exploration of the daily life and work of Jefferson's slaves. The strategy employed by Carter's Grove is an excellent example of preservation and interpretation of slave quarters in a manner that is clear and educational to the visiting public, however, it would prove too costly of a method for a site such as Mount Vernon, which has invested a large sum of money into a new education and visitor center. Sully Plantation's interpretation is of a smaller scale than the interpretation at Mount Vernon, and Sully lacks the funding that Mount Vernon is afforded as a national historical site. Rather than selectively choose one interpretive method from either of these case studies, it is important to examine what lessons can be taken from the sites and applied to the interpretation of the slave quarter sites at Mount Vernon. It is also important to look at the context of the two slave quarters that have been reconstructed at Mount Vernon, and create recommendations for interpretation of these spaces that is achievable, both monetarily and with respect to the sensitivity of the site.

The studies of Monticello, Carter's Grove and Sully Plantation allow for an understanding of varying methods of slave life and slave quarter interpretation methods. Monticello is lacking in its discussion of slavery at the estate, but is similar in location, number of visitors and funding to Mount Vernon. Since Monticello shares similarities to Mount Vernon, ideas of how to improve upon the interpretation strategy at Mount Vernon can be learned by looking at what Monticello has both omitted and included in their interpretation of slavery. While Monticello lacks any reconstructed slave quarters, there are several signs that clearly direct the visitor to Mulberry Row, as well as to the dependencies, featuring the interpreted room. Monticello offers a slave life tour, as does Mount Vernon, but neither is well publicized. Both sites also have new visitor centers, but at Monticello, the discussion of slavery is expanded from looking at several well-known slaves that Jefferson owned, such as Sally Hemmings to describing how slaves helped to build Monticello.

Carter's Grove featured an interpretation method that bears a close physical resemblance to the Log Cabin site at Mount Vernon, although on a larger scale. The village was populated by re-enactors, who performed daily tasks of slave life and interacted with visitors. The slave quarters at Carter's Grove were located on a direct path from the visitor center to the main house, thereby forcing visitors to confront the realities of who labored at the estate. Carter's Grove was designed to provide the visitor with an interactive experience, in which the communal bonds that formed between slaves working on the same plantation were evident. From the construction of the quarters to the furnishings used on the interior to the direct placement of the quarters on a visual and physical path for visitors to the estate, Carter's Grove

embodied interpretation that connected the visitor to the site, and encouraged active participation. With the reconstruction of the slave quarters at Carter's Grove, Colonial Williamsburg sought to provide a picture of slavery that was more honest and realistic for visitors to the estate. While Mount Vernon does not necessarily need to fully recreate a set of slave quarters as Carter's Grove did, the site does provide lessons on how to portray slavery in a realistic, educational and interactive manner for the visiting public.

Sully Plantation features a well-interpreted slave quarter, although on a smaller scale than the sites at Mount Vernon. The reconstructed quarter at Sully presents the harsh realities of slave life, on its walking tour that details how the enslaved population on the plantation lived. While all three sites provide some form of interpretation, elements of each can be applied to recommendations created for Mount Vernon.

**Fig. 4.1. *Carter's Grove Slave Quarters*. The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. Williamsburg, Virginia.**

**Fig. 4.2. *Carter's Grove Slave Quarters*. The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. Williamsburg, Virginia.**



**Fig. 4.3. *The Thomas Jefferson Visitor Center*. Photograph. The Thomas Jefferson Foundation. Charlottesville, Virginia.**

**Fig. 4.4. *Interpreted Slave Quarter at Monticello*. Photograph. The Thomas Jefferson Foundation. Charlottesville, Virginia.**

**Fig. 4.5. *Aerial View of Mulberry Row*. Photograph. The Thomas Jefferson Foundation. Charlottesville, Virginia.**

**Fig. 4.6. *Slave Quarter at Sully Plantation*. Photograph. Sully Historic Site. Chantilly, Virginia.**

## Chapter 5: Interpretation Recommendations for Mount Vernon's Slave Quarters

Through the study of Mount Vernon it is evident that the current interpretation of both sites is lacking. The Greenhouse Slave Quarters, situated close to the Mansion, are stifled by an outdated interpretation strategy. The log cabin site performs better in terms of providing interaction with the visiting public, but its location away from the Mansion makes it less of an attraction, and it is only open for six months out of the year. The primary interpretation problems at Mount Vernon are rooted in the location of both sites and the lack of signs directing visitors to the areas, the use of interpretive signs at the sites that either omit details of the realities of slave life or contain inaccuracies, and a disconnect between the visitor and their interaction with the spaces.

After examining the preservation and interpretation strategies implemented at Carter's Grove, Monticello and Sully Plantation, elements of their strategies may be extracted and used in a new plan for the two sites at Mount Vernon. The recommendations for a new interpretation strategy at Mount Vernon will draw upon the three case studies, as well as reflect the context of the two sites at Mount Vernon and focus on interpretation as a way to connect the past and the present.

The recommendations for changes to the interpretation of the sites at Mount Vernon can be divided into three categories: attraction, interaction and education. Attraction involves both drawing visitors to the sites, as well as informing the public of the location of the two sites, in relation to one another and to the Mansion. Interaction concerns how to connect the visitor to the spaces, and create an experience

that allows visitors to forge a bridge between the past and the present. Education deals with how to provide a visit that imparts knowledge upon the guest, without leaving the experience feeling heavy-handed and dry.

Attracting visitors to the two sites and making the guests aware of the location of the slave quarters is the first issue with interpretation. The Greenhouse Slave Quarters are located a short distance away from the Mansion, but are not visible to most visitors to the estate. A brochure available at the entrance to the grounds indicates the location of the Greenhouse Slave Quarters, but upon entry to the estate, there are few signs directing the visitor to the location of the site. A recommendation to remedy this problem relates to the wait line for tours of the Mansion. Currently, the wait line takes visitors past the Bowling Green, where there is little for a guest to view (fig. 5.1). The black line on the drawing indicates the current wait line for visitors. During the peak visitor months of the summer, wait times for the Mansion can exceed one hour. In order to inform the public of the location of the Greenhouse Slave Quarters, as well as entertain and inform visitors who are waiting in line, the wait line should form along a path that goes directly by the Greenhouse Slave Quarters (fig. 5.2). The black line on the drawing indicates the proposed wait line for visitors that would take them past the slave quarters. If Mount Vernon were to simply change the wait line from running alongside the Bowling Green to running along the South Lane, then visitors would be confronted directly with slavery at Mount Vernon, while waiting to tour the Mansion. This would allow for the public to visit the slave quarters, while waiting in line, and to also be made aware of their location, if they wished to return after touring the Mansion. Introducing the subject of slavery before

the Mansion tour would provide a context for who helped to build the Mansion, as well as who toiled behind its walls.

The second recommendation for how to attract guests to the two sites lies in improving the directional signs. All three sites examined as case studies featured clear signs, indicating the direction of the slave quarters at the estates. At Mount Vernon, there is currently only one small sign directing visitors toward the Greenhouse Slave Quarters, and two signs for the Log Cabin site leading along the path to the Pioneer Farm. While Mount Vernon should maintain small signs, because they are less intrusive than larger directional signage, there must be more signs placed along the Bowling Green and the path to the Pioneer Farm. Since most visitors access the Mansion tour via a path that runs alongside the Bowling Green, the Greenhouse Slave Quarters would benefit from more signs indicating their location. Since the Log Cabin is located some distance away from the Mansion, which serves as the main attraction on the grounds, there should be a greater number of signs located along the North Lane, leading to the trail that takes visitors to the Pioneer Farm site. In addition, there should be a sign for both the direction of the Greenhouse Slave Quarters and the Log Cabin site located outside of the kitchen, which is the building that all visitors exit from, after touring the Mansion.

The third recommendation for attracting visitors to the sites lies in creating a slave life walking tour brochure that is available to all guests upon entering the visitor center. Monticello and Sully Plantation offer walking tours focused on slavery at the plantations, but neither of these is available in a brochure format, where visitors are able to take a tour on their own and at their own pace. While Mount Vernon does

currently have a slave life walking tour, it is led by a guide and is only offered daily at 2 pm. If Mount Vernon were to create a walking tour that highlighted sites on the grounds that connected to an African-American presence at the plantation, then visitors who wished to take the tour could do so according to their own time and pace. This would allow for a greater number of visitors to see different sites connected to slavery at Mount Vernon, as well as relate the sites to one another. The walking tour could cover the Greenhouse Slave Quarters, the House for Families site, the work in the Mansion that was performed by house slaves, the kitchen, the carriage house, the blacksmith shop, the slave memorial and burial ground, and the Log Cabin at Pioneer Farm (fig. 5.3). By incorporating all of these sites, the visitor would be able to see the connection between each site at Mount Vernon. Through the use of a slave life walking tour, Mount Vernon could tap into the niche market of heritage tourism. While not all visitors to the estate would share an interest in viewing the presence of slavery at Mount Vernon, or in taking a walking tour, those who are interested specifically in the study of slavery and slave life at a plantation in the 1700's would be likely to take the tour.

The second category of recommendations is interaction. This concerns how to unite the visitor to the space that they are viewing, as well as how to connect the presentation of the life of an eighteenth century slave to a twentieth century visitor's context of understanding slave life and slavery. The first recommendation for how to make the two sites an interactive space lies in having re-enactors at both sites, year-round (fig. 5.4). Through the use of re-enactors, visitors can interact and dialogue with characters from the past. Creating this visual and physical connection will result

in a greater understanding of the realities of slave life. Many people are visual learners, so hearing and seeing someone has a greater impact than reading about slavery. This type of interaction also allows visitors to gain a greater understanding of the space.

The second recommendation for how to foster interaction at the two sites is to not rope off any of the space. While the objects on display at both sites were likely reproductions, by blocking off the space with a rope, a disconnect is created between the visitors and the space. This disconnect leads to an impersonal experience, which allows visitors to remain removed from the emotional impact of the subject of slavery. Instead, the re-enactor inside the space can be responsible for ensuring that visitors do not touch the more costly reproductions. When the Log Cabin site is opened to the public from May-October, visitors are allowed to enter fully into the space and the re-enactor ensures that nothing is handled improperly by the visitors. This technique has been successful at the Log Cabin and based upon site visits, has encouraged visitors to enter the space, ask questions and active participate in learning about slavery at the estate. This same method should be applied to the Greenhouse Slave Quarters.

The third recommendation for creating interaction and active participation in learning about slavery at Mount Vernon should be to have hands-on activities for visitors at the two sites. These activities could range from helping to prepare food in the Greenhouse Slave Quarters to tending the garden located at the Log Cabin site. By offering simple, hands-on activities, children and adults can become involved in the two sites, and be both entertained and educated. Through performing some of the

tasks that both house and field slaves would have been tasked with, visitors will gain a clear understanding of the realities of slavery, as well as the differences between house and field workers.

The last category for recommendations is education. This focuses on how to impart knowledge to the visiting public, without presenting the information in a way that is uninteresting or too heavy-handed for the casual visitor. The first recommendation on how to better educate visitors to the two sites is to improve the interpretive signs. The current sign at the Greenhouse Slave Quarters describes the life of an enslaved family at the estate, leading many visitors to believe that an entire wing would have functioned as living space for one family on the estate (fig. 5.5). To correct these assumptions, a new sign, detailing the history, reconstruction and interpretation of the quarters needs to be designed. By providing a clear and thorough description of the quarters, there will be less confusion about their appearance.

The second recommendation for providing education to the public is to implement African-American Heritage Days. Mount Vernon already features Fall Harvest Family Days that showcase traditional farming techniques and encourage visitor participation in activities, such as eighteenth-century style dancing, horse-drawn wagon rides and cooking demonstrations. To expand upon this idea, Mount Vernon could implement a day specifically aimed toward showcasing the types of work and leisure activities performed by the enslaved population on the plantation. The heritage day could feature cooking demonstrations of traditional African-American dishes and traditional music and dance.



If Mount Vernon were to implement the above eight recommendations for how to improve upon the interpretation of the Greenhouse Slave Quarters and the Log Cabin, visitors to the estate and the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association would benefit (fig. 5.6). By attracting visitors to the two slave quarter sites at Mount Vernon, more of the estate would be visible to guests and the Association could see an increase in the number of visitors to the estate, as well as seeing an increasing number of repeat visitors, who are interested in parts of the history of the plantation that are less explored, such as slave life. Through creating an interactive experience, visitors will have a richer understanding of slavery at Mount Vernon, as well as forging a stronger connection to the estate, thereby possibly increasing the number of donations each year. Finally, by introducing more educational tools, Mount Vernon can connect to the section of the visiting public that is interested in heritage tourism and understanding the realities of slave life. Through the implementation of these recommendations, Mount Vernon could become a site that sets a precedent for interpretation of slave quarter sites that could be followed by other house museums across the United States.



Fig. 5.1. The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association. *Mount Vernon Visitor's Brochure*. Brochure Drawing. Alexandria, Virginia.

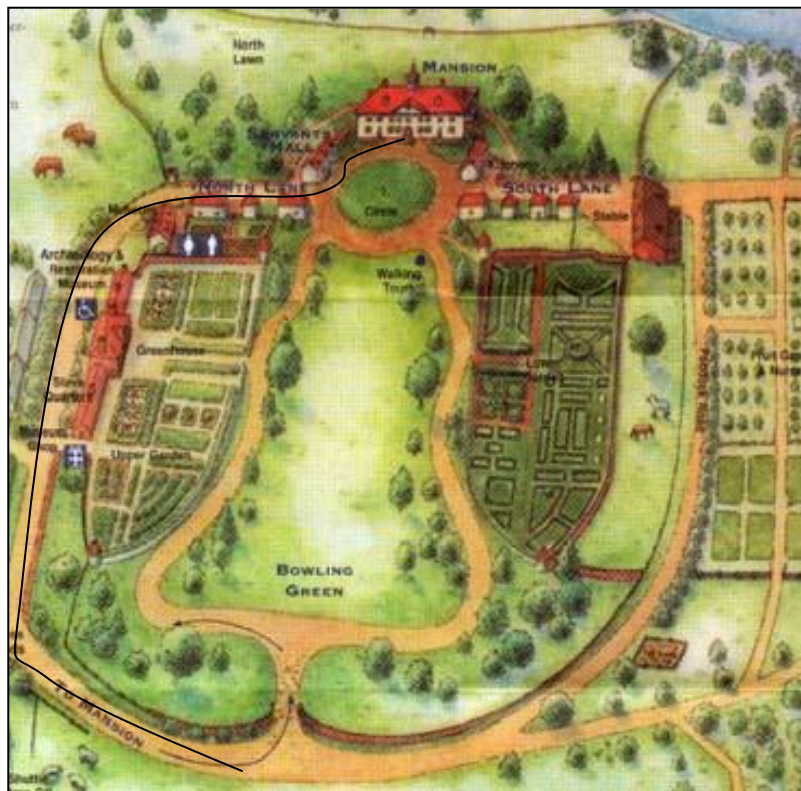
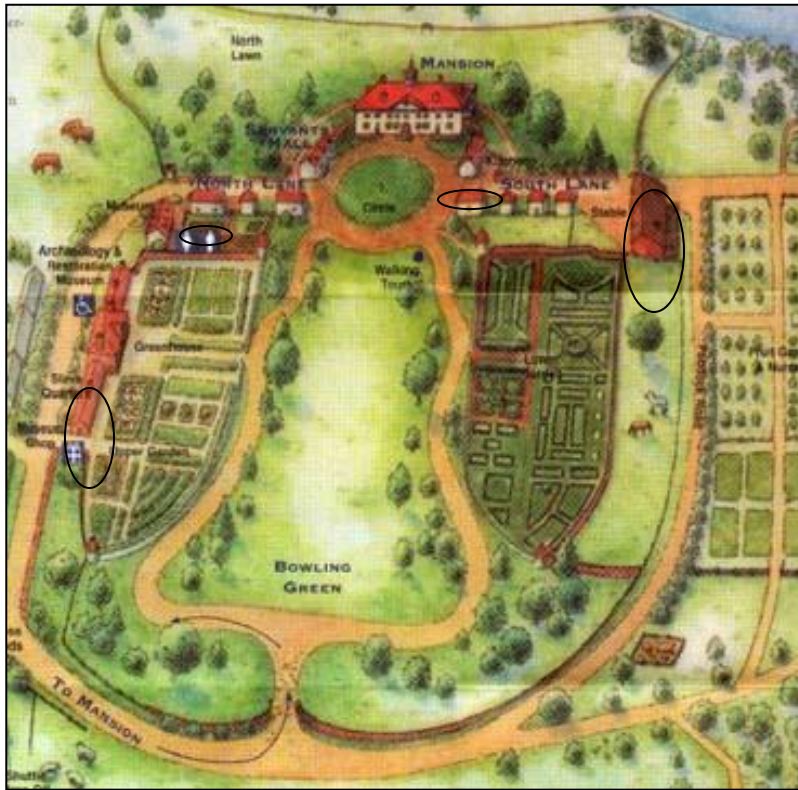


Fig. 5.2. The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association. *Mount Vernon Visitor's Brochure*. Brochure Drawing. Alexandria, Virginia.



**Fig. 5.3.** The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association. *Mount Vernon Visitor's Brochure*. Brochure Drawing. Alexandria, Virginia.

**Fig. 5.4.** *Re-Enactors at Carter's Grove*. Photograph. The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. Williamsburg, Virginia.

**Fig. 5.5. *Interpretive Sign at Greenhouse Slave Quarters.* Photograph. Alexandria, Virginia.**



**Fig. 5.6. Lauren Knight. *Interior of Log Cabin.* 2010. Photograph. Alexandria, Virginia.**

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

Mount Vernon is a culturally, historically and socially significant estate, with two reconstructed slave quarter sites. The inherent difficulties that arise with sensitive subject matter are magnified at a nationally recognized site, such as Mount Vernon. The preservation of slave quarter sites has long been neglected and overlooked, and their interpretation often flawed. At Mount Vernon, the current interpretation is lacking. The typical visitor to Mount Vernon remains relatively uneducated about slave life at the plantation and both sites are located away from the central attraction at the estate, the Mansion. In order for Mount Vernon to successfully integrate slave life and the slave dwellings into the understanding of the estate, there is a need for new forms of interpretation.

Interpretation is about providing knowledge to the visiting public, as well as forging a connection between the past and the present. In order for interpretation to perform those tasks, it is important to remember that visitors to historic sites have a different historic context for framing their understanding of the site. Interpretation fails when it doesn't work to bridge the gap between the past and the present.

In order to connect the past and the present, and allow the twentieth century visitor to frame their understanding of slavery at Mount Vernon within a historic context, the recommendations outlined in Chapter 5 need to be implemented into the interpretation strategy used at Mount Vernon. The recommendations can be divided into the three categories presented in Chapter 5 of attraction, interaction and education. Those three categories apply to methods of how to connect the visiting public to slave quarter sites. The eight recommendations suggested to improve the



interpretation at Mount Vernon are relatively inexpensive to implement at the site. The recommendations for attracting visitors to the sites, to summarize, include changing the current path of the wait line, so that it goes directly by the Greenhouse Slave Quarters, therefore making visitors more aware of the location of the quarters, placing more directional signs throughout the estate, that indicate the location of both sites and creating a walking tour brochure, that would be available to visitors upon entrance to the grounds, so that a guest is able to tour sites on the plantation, at their own pace, that were a part of the slave landscape. The recommendations for creating an interactive experience for visitors to the estate are to employ year-round re-enactors at both sites, in order to encourage guests to ask questions and interact with a character from the past, remove the ropes that prevent visitors from entering into the space, so that a guest is fully immersed in the sites and to present hands-on activities for visitors, in order to encourage active participation and learning. The last set of recommendations for educating the public involves improving the interpretive signs located at the sites, so that the signs present a more comprehensive description of the history, reconstruction and interpretation of the sites and to have several African-American heritage days throughout the year, which would encourage families to come to the estate, as well as provide some basic education about daily slave life at Mount Vernon.

The interpretation of slave quarters is a complex issue, since it involves presenting a cultural history and heritage that is difficult to display both accurately and historically. In order to do this, historic sites must tackle the issue directly, and present the realities of the past. It is a disservice to the history of slavery to gloss over

the past, or present a family-friendly version of slave life. History is an interpretive construct that is constantly changing, and which reflects the questions and context of understanding modern culture, while also seeking to make the past relevant. Historic house museums in particular have been recognized as sites rooted in traditional values. To continue to be relevant, historic house museums need to provide a depiction of the past that is more inclusive and honest. To do this, the history of slavery must be presented, both accurately and realistically, while maintaining sensitivity to the subject.

Mount Vernon, as the home of a significant figure in United States history, has a unique position in the world of house museums. Interpretation at Mount Vernon could be used as a precedent to be followed by other museums across the country, as well as serve to attract a greater number of visitors with an interest in slavery and slave life to the estate. Attracting, interacting and educating are useful tools for the heritage tourism market, which focuses on presenting the cultural and physical landscapes of a site. Mount Vernon could benefit from connecting with the heritage tourism market, which would focus on the plantation's physical landscape, as well as the cultural landscape of slavery. Through the connection of the two, Mount Vernon would be able to appeal to a larger audience.

The interaction of preservation and interpretation should not be overlooked when considering changes to the interpretive strategy at Mount Vernon. When people typically think about preservation, they often consider saving buildings or significant sites, however, preservation is a part of interpretation, since interpretation is about saving and representing cultural heritage to the public. A structure, such as a slave

quarter, is not only representative of an architectural legacy, but also represents a cultural landscape. The architecture of the structure, the ways in which the interior and exterior spaces are used, as well as the interaction between the site and the surrounding grounds informs the history of the place.

When determining the best interpretive method for slave quarters, the architecture, spatial arrangement of the interior and the delineation between outside and inside space are all factors that must be considered. At Mount Vernon, the refined architecture of the Greenhouse Slave Quarters as compared to the rough architecture of the Log Cabin informs the visitor of the different statuses of house slaves and field workers. This different status level then correlates to the furnishings available to the enslaved workers who would have populated the two spaces, as well as the spatial arrangements of the interiors. The Greenhouse Slave Quarters were orderly in their spatial arrangement, with higher-quality furnishings that would likely have been cast-offs from the Mansion, while the Log Cabin's interior is less spatially refined. Since the Log Cabin contains the possessions of one family, there is less control over the placement of objects and furnishings, as they would have been shared among the family members. Additionally at both sites, the separation between indoor and outdoor space is different. At the Greenhouse Slave Quarters, there is a stricter emphasis on the inside belonging to the civilized world and the outside being a part of the uncivilized. The inside of the Greenhouse Slave Quarters is arranged similarly to a room in the Mansion, with beds separate from eating and cooking space. The inside of the quarters is for sleeping, eating, leisure time, and chores, while the outside is merely a path to the Mansion. Conversely, at the Log Cabin site, the indoor and



outdoor space is more permeable. There is less emphasis on delineating the difference between inside and outside. The Log Cabin itself is more exposed to the elements and was located on farmland, which would have been considered uncivilized terrain. As a result, chores were performed both indoors and out. Cooking, bathing, gardening and eating were less ritualized, in terms of space, and would have been performed both inside the cabin and outside, on the small plot of land on which the cabin would have been situated. While these elements of spatial arrangement, architectural hierarchy and delineation between indoor space and outdoor space describe the physical landscape, they also inform the cultural landscape.

As a result of the physical elements of the landscape, the cultural connections at the two sites would have been different. House slaves were afforded less privacy, as their quarters were located near the Mansion, therefore creating a need for the slaves to have housing where their private life could be screened from Washington's view. The slaves located on any of the outlying farms, however, were less under Washington's watchful eye, and therefore had the luxury of allowing aspects of their private lives to be part of the outdoor environment. The communal aspect of living was also stronger at cabins located on the plantation's farms, where the slaves were more dependent on one another for necessary items. Slaves working at the Mansion were less likely to interact directly with one another throughout the day, as they performed chores, fostering fewer community connections. These aspects of the cultural landscape are informed by the physical landscape that was created by the planter. Slaves who labored at the house lived in the controlled, white landscape, while field slaves were a part of the natural, black landscape. This tension, between

the natural and the man-made, or the black landscape and the white landscape, was an inherent part of plantation life, but one that is not often explored at the sites that best exemplify the tension between the two worlds.

The interpretation of the slave quarters at Mount Vernon is challenging, when considering all the issues that are present at the site. As the home of Washington, Mount Vernon has become a monument to his person, but the real complexity and interest of the site lies in the tensions inherent between the world that Washington created, and the world created by his slaves. Mount Vernon needs to allow for an interpretation plan that will emphasize the differences between the two sites, as well as the separation between the natural and the built environment. Mount Vernon must change the focus of the site from deifying Washington, to a depiction of Washington's world and the world of his slaves, with equal representation. In order to remain relevant, and continue to be one of the premier historic house museums in the country, it is imperative that Mount Vernon re-evaluate its interpretation plan for both of its slave quarter sites and consider the recommendations outlined to improve its current interpretation. Mount Vernon has a chance to improve upon its interpretation methods, by following the recommendations, and create a plan that is representative of the cultural and physical landscapes of the sites, while also depicting the reality of slave life and maintaining sensitivity to the subject of slavery.

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