

George Washington, Slavery, and Contemporary America

Tessa Owen
March 16, 2017

"Our histories tend to discuss American slavery so impartially, that in the end nobody seems to have done wrong and everybody was right. Slavery appears to have been thrust upon unwilling helpless America, while the South was blameless in becoming its center." -W.E.B. DuBois
(1962:714)

Introduction

The deification of America's founding fathers was a slow process. It occurred over time through embellishments and omissions, with generations of school children learning fictitious stories about cherry trees and wooden teeth, until we arrived at the versions of the founding fathers that we know today. In many cases, idealized versions of the founding fathers have replaced reality and we often forget the one thing that many of them had in common: they bought, sold, and owned human beings. They were deeply immersed in the institution of slavery which, consequently, is built into the framework of America. The most prominent founding father, George Washington, was a prodigious slaveholder. Washington's accomplishments cannot be diminished, but his role in the institution of slavery cannot, and should not, be divorced from them; in order to have a productive discussion about slavery and its connection to modern racial injustices in America, George Washington's culpability must be made apparent. I will discuss how George Washington's status as an American icon is maintained, how slavery is portrayed at Mount Vernon, and how archaeologists can contribute to the discussion.

The persecution of Black Americans did not end when slavery did; their subjugation has persisted, only changing in name and appearance. By exploiting a loophole in the Thirteenth Amendment which abolished slavery "except as punishment for crime" (Library of Congress), the United States continues to benefit from the unpaid labor of Black Americans. The criminal justice system has been modified to frame Black "criminality" as a serious and pressing problem, while Black men are overrepresented as criminals in popular culture and the media (DuVernay 2016). A specific focus on the fictitious threat of violence to White women flagrantly disregards the fact that, historically, Black women are a great deal more likely to be victimized in cases of interracial rape. As it became less normalized to engage in open, violent hostility towards Black Americans,

laws were passed to ensure the denial of their human rights and their permanent status as second class citizens. Segregation, Jim Crow Laws, and the mass incarceration of Black men and women are all post-emancipation forms of Black bondage; the legacy of slavery manifests itself today in Black Americans' struggle to be recognized as legitimate human beings. Racial hierarchy and the mythology of black criminality stem from the institution of slavery, which is deeply ingrained in America's collective conscious and reaffirmed by the veneration of slaveholders such as George Washington.

George Washington first became a slaveholder in 1743 at the age of eleven when his father passed away and willed him ten human souls (Mount Vernon). His human property increased throughout his lifetime through purchases at the auction block and, most drastically, at the time of his marriage to Martha Dandridge Curtis in 1757. Upon the death of her first husband, Daniel Parke Curtis, the new Mrs. Washington inherited eighty-four captive people. Although George Washington profited from their unpaid labor throughout his life, the enslaved people that Martha Washington brought to the marriage did not technically belong to him. These individuals had been the property of the late Mr. Curtis, which made them "dower slaves"; this meant that they would be passed down to Curtis's heirs upon Martha Washington's death.

By 1789 Washington was the "largest slave owner in Fairfax County," and by 1799 he owned 317 slaves, including 143 children (Morgan 2000:281-82). Most of Washington's human property lived, worked, and died at Mount Vernon. Located on the banks of the Potomac in Virginia, Mount Vernon consisted of over 2,000 acres when George Washington inherited it in 1754; by the 1790s it had increased to almost 8,000 acres (Morgan 2000:280). Five farms are located at Mount Vernon: Muddy Hole, Dogue, River, Union, and the largest, Mansion House Farm. Mount Vernon was originally a tobacco plantation but when tobacco crops proved

unsuccessful, Washington turned to cultivating food and grains (Mount Vernon). The farm was run and maintained almost entirely by captive people, with some white overseers and paid servants also present. Captive people worked in a variety of positions, including housekeepers, cooks, farm laborers, child caretakers, and George and Martha Washington's personal "body servants."

Normalization of Slavery

Maintaining that all elite men owned slaves at the time serves to normalize slavery and racial hierarchy while limiting slaveholder's culpability. During George Washington's lifetime there were many elite men who emancipated the captive people they owned or chose not to own human beings at all. Benjamin Franklin, for example, owned slaves as a young man but later became an outspoken abolitionist who advocated for the emancipation and education of captive people (National Archives). John Jay, Thomas Paine, John Adams, Alexander Crummell, and John Laurens are just a few other examples of prominent men who did not own slaves; defending the normalcy of slavery has never been an adequate rationalization. Additionally, organizations in New York and Pennsylvania, such as the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, the New York Manumission Society, and the African society, all existed during Washington's time and presented strong opposition to the institution of slavery.

For much of his presidency, Washington lived in Philadelphia, a city that was quickly moving away from slavery and towards abolition. In Philadelphia, there were numerous organizations that fought for emancipation and assisted slaves in escaping subjugation. Quakers opposed slavery on religious grounds, and were very active in Philadelphia during Washington's stay there. This opposition is perhaps part of the reason why Washington acted in secret when trying to retain his human property in Pennsylvania. So as to avoid a state law that would require him to free any captive person who resided in the state for more than a period of six months, he

rotated his slaves back to Mount Vernon within that window of time. When making these arrangements, he vowed to deceive the public if necessary and wrote in a letter “I request that these [arrangements] and this advise may be known to none but yourself and Mrs. Washington” (Armstrong 2017). He also made every attempt to shield his captive people from the knowledge of their rights in Pennsylvania, as he said it would make them “insolent in the State of Slavery” (Armstrong 2017).

When a captive person belonging to Washington’s did escape, he was met with opposition from other prominent men while trying to recapture her. For example, Thomas Whipple, Portsmouth’s customs officer, disregarded the president’s orders to recapture the escaped Ona Judge. Washington wanted to recapture Judge through “swift and discreet” methods, because “the president knew that if he pursued the fugitive...he might have a public relations problem” (Armstrong 2017). He gave Whipple suggestions on how to recapture her, some of which were brazen violations the law. Lucky for Judge, Whipple recognized the immorality of slavery and had emancipated his own captives years earlier. After speaking with Judge and failing to persuade her to return to Washington on her own, Whipple abandoned the effort and advised Washington to do the same. He also urged the president to emancipate his slaves.

Unsatisfied with this, Washington asked his longtime friend, Senator John Langdon, to help him recapture the escaped Ona Judge. Similar to Whipple, however, Langdon had already emancipated his slaves and was unwilling to become seriously involved in the effort. Although Thomas Whipple and John Langdon did not consider themselves abolitionists, their actions regarding their own human property and in dealing with Ona Judge stand out in stark contrast against Washington’s. The brutality and immorality of slavery was clearly understood; suggesting that Washington’s conduct regarding slavery was a consequence of the time is incorrect.

Framing slavery as an issue of social class rather than an issue of race is inaccurate and further undermines the role that slavery has played in the formation of modern racial inequalities. Arguing that slavery was common of *elite* men detracts from this issue. While slavery has existed in numerous societies throughout history, American slavery is unique in that one's status as slave or a free person depended entirely on the color of their skin. No matter how poor they might be, White men, women, and children were never in danger of becoming someone's property. Denying the principal role that race plays in inequity is a tactic that continues to be employed today, as amply evidenced by the Black Lives Matter movement. When others disparage the Black Lives Matter movement by claiming "all lives matter," they are denying the fact that race plays a prominent role in modern injustices. Race is a crucial factor in determining if an individual will be targeted or killed by a police officer. "If we jump too quickly to the universal formulation, 'all lives matter,' then we miss the fact that black people have not yet been included in the idea of 'all lives' " (Victor 2016)

Washington's Treatment of His Captives

Accounts vary on how well Washington treated his human property. With the constant threats of separation from one's family, physical punishment, and the auction block, Washington ensured compliance and obedience from most of the captive people he enslaved. Although it is often said that Washington was opposed to separating families or selling captive people, he was not unwilling to do so to those he perceived as being insubordinate. Records show that he sold captive people as far away as the West Indies, and once sold a human being for "a quantity of wine" (Armstrong 2017).

Most captive people owned by Washington lived in detached structures that were hot in the summer and cold in the winter. They were given only enough food to prevent starvation; there

is evidence of Washington's captives exploiting wild vegetation and sometimes stealing livestock to supplement their allotted food rations. There was little protection for women and children, who were often the most vulnerable. The threat of rape and sexual assault was always present, and sometimes even benefitted Washington. "The business of slavery received every new enslaved baby with open arms, no matter what the circumstances of conception" (Armstrong 2017). I am not insinuating that Washington encouraged these kinds of crimes, but he surely did not prevent them.

Sickness was also a very real issue for the enslaved people at Mount Vernon, as they had virtually no access to healthcare and were rarely granted time off to recover if they did become sick. Washington detested those he perceived to be lazy, and was inclined to dole out punishments if he thought a slave was malingering. In an exchange between Washington and his estate master, Anthony Whiting, concerning a disobedient slave in 1793, "Whiting wrote that he 'gave...a very good Whipping' and plans for continued physical violence were made clear when he stated that he was 'determined to lower her Spirit or skin her Back.' Washington responded to Whiting, stating, 'And if she, or any other – of the Servants, will not do their duty by fair means – or are impertinent, correction (as the only alternative) must be administered'" (Armstrong 2017). Of course, no matter how well Washington treated his human property, the very nature of slavery is a grievous violation of an individual's human rights. Unquestionably, freedom is preferable to enslavement under any circumstances.

Emancipation in Washington's Will

George Washington died at his home in Mount Vernon on December 14th, 1799, after a short-lived illness. In his will, he ordered that all of the captive people he owned, 124 of the 277 at Mount Vernon, be emancipated upon Martha Washington's death. The other 153 captive people

were dower slaves, belonging to Martha Washington's late husband's estate, which meant that George Washington had no control over their fate. Although Washington stipulated that his human property should be released after Martha Washington's death, Mrs. Washington emancipated them in 1801 after a suspicious house fire. She recognized the fact that 124 captive people's freedom depended upon her death, and she reasonably feared for her safety.

It is commonly held that as his life progressed, Washington privately expressed unease with the institution of slavery – both economically and morally – though he never denounced the system publically. This final act is often touted as a redemptive action- Washington's great sacrifice and brave statement. However, his behavior throughout his life notably conflicted with his evolving attitude regarding slavery. Realistically, his private sentiments mattered little, as he only acted on them in his will and actively contributed to the institution of slavery during his lifetime.

While Washington's will emancipation is often emphasized when discussing his relationship to slavery, I suggest that this deed be more closely examined and put into context. For one, Washington profited from the unpaid labor of those he enslaved throughout his entire life. From the age of eleven when he first inherited captive people from his father, to the age of sixty-seven when he died, he relied on captive peoples' labor in his daily life and businesses. That is fifty-six years of buying, selling, owning, and profiting from the compulsory labor of enslaved human beings. Additionally, he guaranteed in his will that Martha Washington would not suffer from a lack of slave labor; he only intended for his human property to be freed after his wife no longer had use for them. Furthermore, Washington had no heirs to whom he could bequeath his human property. He is not believed to have fathered any children, legitimate or otherwise, during his lifetime. He suffered from a bout of smallpox as a teenager which likely rendered him infertile

(Mount Vernon). Based on the fact that Washington did not free his slaves immediately following his death, but only upon his wife's death, it is unlikely that he would have emancipated his human property if he had any heirs to impart them to.

Lastly, many of the writings he produced later on in life demonstrated his changing views towards slavery. He understood of the brutal nature and immorality of slavery, and expressed a desire for manumission in the future. While many point to this as a reason why Washington is less blameworthy than others, it increases his culpability, not reduces it. He understood the cruelty that he inflicted on his captive people, yet he continued to take advantage of their suffering. I am not suggesting that Washington's final act was not appropriate. Certainly, freeing the people he had enslaved was better than the alternative – their continued servitude or the auction block. I do, however, maintain that it does not erase his contribution to slavery throughout his lifetime or negate its lasting effects.

How is Slavery Portrayed at Mount Vernon?

Opened to the public for the first time in 1860, Mount Vernon continues to be one of the most popular historic sites in America. It operates 365 days a year and sees an average of one million visitors in that time (Mount Vernon.). The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, those who own and maintain the historical plantation, take responsibility for “educat[ing] visitors and people throughout the world about the life and legacies of George Washington, so that his example of character and leadership will continue to inform and inspire future generations” (Mount Vernon). Although Mount Vernon functioned almost exclusively on slave labor, representation of slavery at Mount Vernon today is “incomplete, inaccurate, and at times absent altogether” (McGill 2005:1).

Some effort is made to inform visitors of the history of slavery at Mount Vernon. A “slave tour” is offered seasonally and a special exhibition on slavery is currently taking place (“Lives Bound Together: Slavery at George Washington’s Mount Vernon”), but most of the effort is put towards limiting Washington’s culpability and maintaining his status as an American icon. Certainly, one can find the three rationalizations discussed above strewn across the Mount Vernon website and in the literature they provide. In the effort to portray Washington in a favorable light, misrepresentations and half-truths are abundant. For example, a video provided for the current exhibition on slavery states that “Washington was the only founding father to release his slaves in his will” (Mount Vernon). While this is true, they do not disclose the fact that there were founding fathers who released their human property during their lifetime or never owned slaves at all. Additionally, the exhibition discusses two acts that Washington signed into law relating to slavery: the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 and the Slave Trade Act of 1794. The former made it easier for slaveholders to cross state lines and recapture their escaped human property, and the latter restricted participation in slave trade by American vessels. The website fully explains the one that puts Washington in a favorable light (the Slave Trade Act), while decisively ignoring the one that highlights his disdain for escaped slaves (the Fugitive Slave Act). Misleading language is also prevalent in representations of slavery at Mount Vernon. Captive people are often referred to as “workers,” “laborers,” or “servants,” which subtly downplays the reality of Washington owning human beings. “Overall, the audio tour presents slavery as a low-status occupation rather than an oppressive social system” (McGill 2005:33).

Despite the fact that over 90% of the population at Mount Vernon consisted of captive people during Washington’s lifetime, visitors can easily avoid the topic of slavery if they so chose. One has to seek out a special tour to learn about the enslaved population of Mount Vernon, and

exhibitions highlighting slavery, such as the one currently on display, are not permanent fixtures. The overwhelming majority of visitors, employees, and tour guides at Mount Vernon are White, including those that conduct the slave tour. Attractions are geared towards a White audience, and employees are generally unable to provide information about slavery beyond the most basic facts (McGill 2005:29). In a survey conducted at Mount Vernon in 2005, one researcher found that most visitors agreed that “slaves at Mount Vernon were comfortable and self-fulfilled,” “the presentation of slave life at Mount Vernon is historically accurate,” and that “George Washington lived and ruled in a manner that was a model for future American Presidents” (McGill 2005:41-44). One hundred percent of White participants agreed with the last statement.

How Can Archaeologists Contribute to the Discussion?

As a discipline, archaeology is uniquely positioned to contribute to the discussion of race and slavery in America. Most of what we know about slavery today comes from plantation records and sources that reflect the views of White landowners and abolitionists. Generally, first hand accounts of slavery and histories written by Black Americans are perceived to be interpretive, while histories written by White Americans are seen as factual (McGill 2005:12). Archaeologists possess the tools to investigate the truth of slavery in America and have the power to construct alternative narratives.

At Mount Vernon, little is known about the cemetery that exists just southwest of Washington’s New Tomb, where dozens of captive people were buried in unmarked graves. Despite having been a meticulous record keeper, George Washington never recorded information pertaining to the cemetery during his lifetime. The graveyard has been mentioned twice by visitors, once in 1833 and again in 1838. The only known depiction of the cemetery can be found on a stylized map of Mount Vernon, which shows twelve graves in a “Negro Burying Ground” (Mount

Vernon). Finally, in 1928, the Mount Vernon Ladies' Society placed a marker on the site, which was replaced by a more visible memorial in the 1980s.

In 2014 an archaeological survey was launched at the cemetery. The project has been titled "Forgotten No Longer," and is intended to be a multi-year undertaking. Their goals are to delineate the boundaries of the cemetery, identify the number of individuals interred there, and determine the spatial layout (Mount Vernon). Archaeologists will not, however, be excavating human remains. "Answers to these questions could provide insight into the lives of the enslaved community that lived on Washington's estate...[and] better protect and preserve the sacred space" (Mount Vernon). Moving forward, projects like these can serve as a form of restorative justice by helping to heal past injustices and provide alternative narratives.

Conclusion

American slavery was not an event, but a historical process. Modern racial injustices and mythology about Black criminality stem from the institution of slavery. Our founding fathers constructed socioeconomic and legal systems that have tangible repercussions for minorities in the present. While slavery is not the single story of Black Americans, its legacy is present throughout every time period of the United States, manifesting today in the mass incarceration of Black men and women and the struggle to be seen as human.

American children are taught about the founding fathers' great accomplishments, but rarely hear the truth about their roles in slavery. Many are surprised to find out that George Washington even owned slaves, let alone that he owned over three hundred at one time. We are taught to revere George Washington and the other founding fathers, and not to question their status as American icons. If the topic is broached, we are quickly reassured that all men owned captive people at the time, Washington his captives well, and he emancipated them in his will.

These traditional rationalizations are largely inaccurate and inadequate; we can only begin to understand modern racial inequality and provide restorative justice when his (and other founding fathers') support of the institution of slavery is made visible. Archaeologists will play a crucial role in this effort going forward. It is imperative that we become less concerned with propping up a false image of America's founding fathers, and more concerned with the human rights of Black men and women in America.

Bibliography

“Benjamin Franklin Petitions Congress.” *Archives*.

<https://www.archives.gov/legislative/features/franklin>. Accessed 21 Feb 2017. Web.

Dir. DuVernay, Ava

2016. “13th.” *Kandoo Films*. Netflix. 11 Mar 2017.

DuBois, W.E.B.

1962. *Black Reconstruction in America: An essay toward the history of the part which Black folk played in the attempt to reconstruct democracy in America, 1860-1880*. New York .

Dunbar, Erica Armstrong

2017 *Never caught: the Washingtons' relentless pursuit of their runaway slave, Ona Judge*. 37 Ink/Atria, New York.

“Farm Structure.” *Mount Vernon*. <http://www.mountvernon.org/digital-encyclopedia/article/farm-structure/>. Accessed 20 Feb 2017. Web.

“Forgotten No Longer: Archaeology of the Slave Cemetery at George Washington’s Mount Vernon.” *Mount Vernon*.

<http://mountvernon.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapJournal/index.html?appid=3ca8ba42c90a41d39df64b9cd4f25f58>. Accessed 04 Feb 2017. Web.

George Washington's Mount Vernon. "Archaeological Survey at Mount Vernon,"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DJDUi0Q3iEs>. YouTube. YouTube, 12 Nov 2015.

Web. 01 Feb 2017.

McGill, Keeley Aurelia

2005 *The Presentation of Slavery at Mount Vernon: Power, Privilege, and Historical Truth*. University of Maryland, College Park.

Mellon, M. Taylor

1934 Early American views on Negro slavery: from the letters and papers of the founders of the republic. Meador Publishing Company, Boston.

Morgan, Kenneth

2000 *George Washington and the Problem of Slavery*. *Journal of American Studies* 34.2: 279-301. Web.

"Mount Vernon." *Digital Archaeological Archive of Comparative Slavery*,

<http://www.daacs.org/plantations/mount-vernon/#home>. Accessed 03 Feb 2017. Web.

"Slavery." Mount Vernon Midden, <http://mountvernonmidden.org/data/themes?pS=slavery>.

Accessed 06 Feb 2017. Web.

"Ten Facts About Washington & Slavery." *Mount Vernon*. [http://www.mountvernon.org/george-](http://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/slavery/ten-facts-about-washington-slavery)

[washington/slavery/ten-facts-about-washington-slavery](http://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/slavery/ten-facts-about-washington-slavery). Accessed 20 Feb 2017. Web.

Victor, Daniel

2016. "Why 'All Lives Matter' Is Such a Perilous Phrase. *NYTimes*. 15 July 2016.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/16/us/all-lives-matter-black-lives-matter.html>

“13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.” The Library of Congress. Accessed 07 Mar 2017.

<https://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/ourdocs/13thamendment.html>